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“Addressing Wicked Problems in Marginal Policy Fields: Collaborative Governance and Innovation in Youth Policy”

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Abstract

The capacity of public policies to address wicked problems depends on them fostering innovation in both ideational terms and in practice. The public policy literature highlights the importance of policy subsystems in shaping the conditions for policy innovation. However, while collaborative and networked governance has been shown to facilitate innovation, less attention has been paid to how leadership within policy subsystems and their composition influence ideational change, especially in marginal policy domains. This paper addresses that gap by examining youth policy in Catalonia: a paradigmatic case of a wicked problem that is not a high priority for the administration. Despite a history of practical innovation (e.g. cross-sectoral collaboration and participatory methods), youth policy has struggled to achieve ideational renewal. By comparing four local youth policies, we explore how subsystem dynamics condition innovation and ask to what extent their composition and leadership shape innovation in a marginal policy field.

Key words: Policy innovation; collaborative governance; youth policy; wicked problems; Spain.

Introduction

Wicked problems are public policy issues that, due to their complexity, cannot be addressed effectively through established mechanisms and conventional policy frameworks. Youth policy represents a paradigmatic case of a wicked problem: it is characterised by multidimensionality, a cross-sectoral nature, constant change, and the instability of its target population (Rittel and Webber, 1973). In addition to these features, youth policy as a public policy domain faces a further challenge: its marginal position as a political priority and within the public administration structure.

Although wicked problems and policy domain marginality are distinct issues, they share a need for policy innovation. Only by using innovative approaches can public policies tackle the complex, unresolved problems that elude traditional strategies. Similarly, only innovation can bolster the status of policies that are marginal for the administration, helping them gain relevance and weight in the broader political agenda (Geyer and Rihani, 2010; Crosby et al., 2017; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

Youth policies have historically promoted innovation, particularly in their practical dimension: they have fostered transversal approaches, the participation of beneficiaries, and the involvement of third-sector actors (Nico and Taru, 2018)). However, despite innovation on the practical level, they have struggled to overcome their marginal status. Moreover, their capacity for ideational innovation has proved weaker (Torfing et al., 2020a), raising questions about their transformative potential. Specifically, in the case of youth policy in Catalonia (Spain), there has been a persistent inability to move beyond the dichotomy between transition to adulthood policies (focused on employment, education, and housing) and affirmative policies (focused on recognition, participation, and identity), leading to limited conceptual renewal.

The existing literature has emphasised the importance of how policy subsystems are configured (Howlett, 2002) in explaining the adoption of innovative public policies. In particular, networked and collaborative governance arrangements have been shown to foster innovation (Cordoncillo and Borrell, 2025). However, something that has not been sufficiently analysed, especially in the case of marginal public policy and administration domains, is the relevance of internal leadership within policy subsystems, and the role of specific public actors in promoting ideational change.

To help fill this gap, this paper aims to explain to what extent the composition and leadership of a policy subsystem influence its capacity for innovation in public policy. To do so, it focuses on the case of youth policy in Catalonia, where there has been a sustained commitment to strategic planning. By carrying out an in-depth qualitative analysis of four policy case studies in two towns in Catalonia, the paper shows how innovation is promoted in both practical and ideational terms. Understanding how collaboration within the policy subsystem can be conducive to policy innovation is

particularly relevant in the field of youth policy, given its marginal status as a public policy issue and the need for innovative solutions to wicked problems.

The role of policy networks for policy innovation

Societal problems have become increasingly complex in recent decades. The need for innovative approaches to policy-making has attracted concerted research efforts ever since Rittel and Webber defined as ‘wicked’ the ill-defined problems that cannot be fully solved since they are dependent on ‘elusive potential judgement for resolution’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973:106). The nature of such problems requires a comprehensive and cross-sectoral perspective in order to interpret and address them (Brugué et al., 2015; Geyer and Rihani, 2010), thus challenging the capacity of the prevailing public intervention strategies and tools. The drive for fragmentation and specialisation ingrained in the structure and operation of public organisations (Crosby et al., 2017; Torfing et al., 2020b), their standardised procedures, and their traditional sectoral approaches make them inadequate for understanding and handling wicked problems.

In this context, the public management reforms that promoted a shift from ‘traditional public administration’ to ‘new public management’ in the late 20th century focused on organisational and procedural innovations, as well as the factors hindering or promoting them (Hood, 1991; Van de Ven et al., 2008). However, these efforts did not specifically address policy innovation (Fung and Wright, 2003; Torfing, 2016). Following Cordoncillo and Borrell (2025), the literature suggesting a causal relationship between policy innovation and multi-actor collaboration dates from the 1990s, when collaborative governance had not yet been defined as a research concept (Roberts and Bradley, 1991; Roberts and King, 1996; Borins, 1998). As they point out, the two terms united under the concept of ‘collaborative innovation’, which emphasises ‘harnessing the resources and creativity of external actors and communities’ (Sorensen and Torfing, 2011; Crosby et al., 2017; Torfing, 2020a). Along these lines, proposals for a paradigm shift in public management argued that policy innovation would require a multi-actor, cross-sectoral, and collaborative approach to policymaking, under labels such as ‘networked governance’ (Hartley, 2005), ‘collaborative governance’ (Emerson et al., 2012; Ansell and Torfing, 2014) or ‘New Public Governance’ (Bingham et al., 2005; Osborne, 2006).

However, the nature, composition and dynamics of collaboration arrangements are likely to be conditioned by existing policy subsystems that monopolise decision-making in specific policy domains. A policy subsystem is a “definable institutional structure, responsible for policy-making, together with formal arrangements and informal relations that influence participation in the venues where decisions are made” (Barzelay, 2001, based on Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Following Howlett’s (2002) assumption that

‘networks matter’, the study of policy-making has increasingly focused on how the structure of policy subsystems influences policy change. Policy change is expected to depend upon the articulation of ideas and interests throughout the policy process, and this articulation differs among types of policy subsystems, which in Howlett’s (2002) terms, can be closed, resistant, contested, and open. In this classification, aspects such as the subsystem’s receptiveness to new ideas and actors or whether it reflects the community in question or not all bear explanatory weight for understanding the type (paradigmatic or incremental) and speed (fast or slow) of policy change. Howlett (2002) also relates subsystem configurations to the propensity for specific types of changes in policy outputs (goals, programme specifications, instrument types, and instrument components).

Policy change does not necessarily involve innovation, but is a precondition for it. Innovation is a complex, multidimensional concept, since it might affect the process of collaboration as well as the problem it intends to address (Torfing et al., 2016). In this sense, Torfing identifies seven types of innovation (namely: product, service, process, organisational, governance, policy, and discourse innovation). He aggregates these into three broader categories: service, organisational, and policy innovation (Torfing, 2016). Nevertheless, the disruptive potential of innovation increases when it affects ideation, that is, the theoretical frames that can define problems (Peters, 2018). Following Baumgartner and Jones’s model of policy shifts (1993), if the image of an issue changes, this may lead to modifications of the policy domain structure, which may question the policy subsystem that monopolises the decision-making in a particular policy field and apply pressure to modify it (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). A change in the composition and decision-making dynamics of the policy subsystem will likely lead to a policy shift.

Therefore, when the literature on ‘networked’ or ‘collaborative’ governance argues for the need to overcome the culture of fragmentation in order to design innovative approaches to tackling ‘wicked problems’ (Torfing, 2016; Bason, 2018), it assumes that changing the policy subsystem will lead to policy innovation. This change involves a shift towards cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration. While cross-sectoral design refers to collaboration between public organisations or units in the same organisation or in different ones, multi-actor collaboration involves the participation of non-public actors at different stages of the policy design process or in certain related activities (Cordoncillo and Borrell, 2025). Thus, the combination of the two features may lead to a wide range of collaborative arrangements, where collaboration is understood as ‘a temporal process through which a plurality of actors work together in an organised way to transform problems and opportunities into joint solutions that rest on provisional agreements that are formed despite the persistence of various forms of dissent’ (Torfing, 2016:64).

However, Cordoncillo and Borrell's (2025) research provides empirical evidence that the innovative potential of cross-sectoral and multi-actor arrangements, that is, different combinations of actors participating in policy-making, largely depends on their composition. The results of their study confirm that policy design processes involving several actors – whether public or not – are more likely to result in policy innovation than those involving a single specialised public actor. However, cross-sectoral collaboration within the public sector also seems very promising for policy innovation, even without the participation of non-public actors in the policy design process. Nevertheless, when non-public actors are involved – in particular, third-sector organisations – the innovative potential of policy outputs increases significantly.

This article contributes to this debate by exploring how the capacity to address 'wicked problems', especially in weak or marginal policy domains, are influenced not only by the composition, but also by the leadership and ideational efforts within policy subsystems and collaborative arrangements. In doing so, we focus on youth policy, a paradigmatic case of a wicked problem field situated at the periphery of political and administrative priorities.

Youth policy: tackling a wicked problem in a weak policy domain

Youth policy constitutes a specific domain within public policy that systematically engages with wicked issues. The problems and needs addressed by youth policies are typically transversal, complex, and dynamic in nature. As such, they cannot be effectively tackled through purely technical or standardised measures (Verhoest et al. 2014; Bianchi et al. 2017). Youth policies do not belong to a single policy sector but instead encompass all areas that affect this life stage. Consequently, they are inherently cross-cutting, and designed to respond to a broad spectrum of social, economic, and cultural challenges. Indeed, Williamson (1997) suggests that youth policies extend well beyond what administrations typically identify as "policy in the youth field". The changing nature of this life stage further increases its complexity, requiring both policies and interventions to be as flexible as possible. Youth policies must therefore respond simultaneously to enduring structural factors – linked to broader economic and social frameworks – and to more localised, circumstantial, or rapidly changing dynamics. This duality produces high levels of fragmentation and a strong need for coordination across policy domains and institutional actors (Verhoest, 2014).

In addition to their intrinsic complexity, youth policies suffer from having a marginal position within political agendas and, consequently, within institutional and administrative structures. Public policy research consistently highlights the residual nature of youth-oriented measures. For instance, welfare state expenditure patterns, although they vary across countries, are systematically biased toward older populations

(Bay and Pedersen, 2021; Lynch, 2006). Moreover, institutional analyses reveal that youth policy structures often occupy a peripheral position within governance systems, which limits their cross-sectoral influence and their capacity to shape decisions that directly affect young people's lives (Nico, 2015).

Given these conditions, youth policies face a dual challenge that calls for innovation: first, they must address the inherent complexity of wicked problems; second, they must overcome their peripheral position within political and institutional structures so that they can make a meaningful impact. To meet these challenges, both the academic and the policy literature on youth policy emphasise the importance of adopting cross-sectoral and multi-actor strategies (Bianchi et al., 2017; Nico and Taru, 2018).

The marginal position of youth policies is particularly evident in Mediterranean countries. Comparative analyses show that Mediterranean welfare regimes devote less attention and resources to youth than to other age groups through social spending, programmes, and policies (Chevalier, 2016; Riekhoff, 2021). In Spain, Marí-Klose (2012) documents how mention of young people has progressively disappeared from electoral platforms, political priorities, and government agendas, with older generations taking on more importance.

The case of local youth policies in Catalonia illustrates this dynamic particularly well. In the late 1990s, the Government of Catalonia (youth policy is a regional competency) launched the 2000-2010 National Youth Plan (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2000), strongly oriented toward local administrations. The plan sought to promote intersectoral and interinstitutional collaboration, as well as the participation of social actors and young people themselves in public policymaking. The project was innovative in terms of service design, processes, organisation, and governance, and marked the first strategic plan of its kind in Catalonia. The plan has since been periodically revised, and has maintained its commitment to fostering and strengthening networked governance both vertically (across levels of administration) and horizontally (across departments), as well as through partnerships with social actors. These efforts have consolidated collaborative practices, albeit with varying levels of intensity and success (Brugué, 2019; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2018).

Therefore, youth policy governance in Catalonia has followed a clear and continuous innovation strategy at the level of practice. However, the ideational or discursive dimension of innovation within youth policy has remained underdeveloped. One of the main conceptual gaps in Spanish youth policy lies in the difference between transition to adulthood policies and affirmative or expressive policies. In the field of transitions to adulthood, Spain fits into what Walther (2006) defines as a sub-protective model – a welfare system characterised by long and precarious youth transitions, where public

policies play only a marginal role. Within this context, the youth policy discourse in Spain has oscillated between promoting policies that are oriented to young people's transition to adulthood – facilitating educational trajectories, labour market entry, and access to housing – and the potential to orienting policies toward more attainable goals that are related to youth expression, such as culture, leisure, and civic participation (Soler and Comas, 2015).

Beyond any theoretical debates, it is the difficulty of implementing transition to adulthood policies within such a residual welfare framework that has led local youth services to prioritise affirmative policies, for which they can set more realistic objectives aligned with their resources and competences. Fabra and Comas (2019) demonstrate that, at the municipal level, youth services operate most autonomously from external funding or institutional support in areas such as culture, educational leisure, sport, participation, and associations. In contrast, transition to adulthood policies – which require greater financial resources and coordination – remain largely dependent on initiatives managed by higher administrative levels or other departments within the same municipal government.

The following sections analyse four local youth policies in Catalonia to explore the extent to which the composition and leadership of the policy subsystem affect its capacity for innovation in public policy. In this way, the paper provides two main contributions to the literature. First, it adds to the debate on the role of network governance in fostering innovation by highlighting the importance of both the composition and the leadership of the policy subsystem. Second, it adds to the literature on youth policy by showing how collaborative governance is conducive to ideational innovation that transcends the traditional split between affirmative and transition to adulthood policies.

Methods, data, and case selection

This paper was developed within the framework of the Back in Town project (2023-2025), funded by the European Commission under the call SOCPL-2022-IND-REL, which aimed to study the role of social partners and policy makers in facilitating the social inclusion of young people (15-34 years old) in an urban context. The object of research was youth policies in small and medium-sized towns, which tend to have fewer resources for social policies and therefore provide an interesting setting to explore the role of policy networks in responding to wicked problems.

Accordingly, four policy case studies were conducted in two similar towns in the autonomous community of Catalonia in Spain: Mataró and Terrassa. Both towns are located in the metropolitan region of Barcelona, and have similar institutional frameworks and socio-economic characteristics, as well as a close relationship with

Barcelona. They are well connected to the city, and many inhabitants commute there to study or work. Terrassa has 225,000 inhabitants, and is located in the county of Vallès Occidental, north-west of Barcelona. Mataró is a smaller seaside town, with about 128,000 inhabitants, and is located in the county of Maresme, north-east of Barcelona. The proportion of young people is roughly the same in both towns: around 22% of their populations are between 15 and 34 years old. Despite their industrial pasts, both are gradually specialising in services. In 2023, 78.3% of employment in Terrassa was in the service sector against 13.7% in manufacturing, whereas in Mataró the shift to the service economy has been even more pronounced, with 86.7% of employment in services against 9.1% in manufacturing. In 2022, the gross average income per capita in Terrassa (€18,684) and Mataró (€17,469) was below the regional average in Catalonia (19,140€),ⁱ but in line with the Spanish average (€17,207).ⁱⁱ

The four policy case studies were selected following a most-similar systems design, which helps explain the causes of an outcome with reference to variations in the main conditions in otherwise similar contexts (Anckar, 2008). The policies provide diversity in both the explanans (the collaborative dimensions of the policy subsystem) and explanandum (the degree of policy innovation at the ideational level and at the level of practice). The Youth District and Sports in the Neighbourhoods policies (both in Terrassa) are hybrid policies that combine elements of a typical transition to adulthood policy with affirmative elements. The 0830X–Urban Energy policy (Mataró) is a case of an affirmative policy, and the Office for Vocational Training policy (Mataró) is a case of a transition to adulthood policy.

To operationalise the relevant dimensions of collaboration within the policy subsystem as well as the policy innovation outcomes, we follow the logic proposed by Torfing et al. (2020a). Accordingly, policy innovation is conceived both at an ideational level, which captures the extent to which new ideas are incorporated and problems redefined, and at the level of practice, which reflects the way in which the form and content of service delivery is transformed. In turn, to operationalise collaborative arrangements within the policy subsystem, we consider four dimensions. First, the breadth of collaboration in terms of the cross-sectoral collaboration among public administration departments or multi-actor collaboration between public administration and non-public actors. Second, the scope of collaboration, with reference to the number of phases in which actor collaboration occurs, from problem definition to design and implementation. A third dimension corresponds to the depth of collaboration, which reflects the extent to which the quality of interactions is deeper or more superficial. Finally, the collaborative leadership dimension is operationalised by borrowing the typology proposed by Provan and Kenis (2008) which identifies three forms of network governance: lead organisation-governed networks, whereby all activities and decisions are coordinated by a single central organisation, shared participant-governed networks, in which there is shared

collective self-governance, and network administrative organisation, through which a separate administrative entity is specifically set up to govern the network and its activities (Provan and Kenis, 2008).

Applying this analytical framework to the field of youth policy requires classifying what constitutes policy innovation in this particular domain. In this regard, we conceive policy innovation at the ideational level to be when the differentiation between transition to adulthood policies and affirmative policies (Soler Masó and Comas Arnau, 2015) is transcended through the combination of both elements. We conceive policy innovation at the level of practice to be when cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration efforts are consolidated in service delivery (Brugué, 2019; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2018). Table 1 below provides the conceptual framework to analyse the four policy case studies.

For the data collection, several grey documents were revised, such as the local youth policy plans that towns in Catalonia are obliged to draft regularly. Additionally, 13 semi-structured interviews were held with key informants involved in the development and implementation of youth policies in the two towns (the list of interviews is available in the appendix). The interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and were carried out online through the Microsoft Teams platform, recorded on video and transcribed using HappyScribe software. A thematic analysis of the interviews and documents was conducted with the aim of assessing the extent to which the different dimensions of the policy subsystems relate to innovation in youth policy.

Policy innovation and collaborative governance in four local youth policies

The following policy case studies illustrate how the towns of Terrassa and Mataró have sought to address the wicked problems affecting young people through innovative solutions and collaborative governance. As synthesised in Table 2, the four policies combine different degrees of innovation and different collaborative features within the policy subsystem. Whereas Youth District (Terrassa) and Sports in the Neighbourhoods (Terrassa) are conceived as hybrid policies that combine elements of a typical transition to adulthood policy with affirmative elements, the 0830X–Urban Energy policy (Mataró) is a case of affirmative policy, and the Office for Vocational Training (Mataró) is a case of a transition to adulthood policy. The remainder of the section explains how differences in innovative outcomes appear to be associated with different collaboration dynamics.

Youth District

Youth District (*Districte Jove*) is a socio-educational project that offers support and guidance to 12 to 25 year-olds in various spheres of their lives, with the goal of fostering autonomy and social participation through decentralised actions. The policy is promoted

and financed by the Terrassa Town Council Youth Service. The project was first implemented in 1998, and its current structure and organisation have been in place since 2011. The management of the project is outsourced, and selected via open tender. The programme is currently being managed by the Incoop, SCCL cooperative, an organisation that is involved in several projects throughout Catalunya. The budget currently assigned to the project is €341,190 per year for a two-year contract, with the possibility of an additional two-year renewal.

The project operates via a network of five venues (Youth Districts) that are distributed across the town to provide meeting points and creative platforms for young people to put together and stage social and cultural events (*Espai Trobada*). They also offer guidance on education, health, legal, professional and social needs to individuals and groups (*Espai Impuls*). The service delivery operates not only within the doors of the Youth Districts, but also in other public spaces, with the staff aiming to offer long-term support to young people in their personal trajectories and to help them avoid the risk of social exclusion. This intervention approach distinguishes the *Districte Jove* from other types of advisory programmes run by the Youth Service.

Since the programme benefits from the institutional muscle of being led by the Youth Service, it is not critically dependent on any other institutions. Even so, the Youth Service reports that collaboration does take place with other municipal services and programmes (interview 6). One example is a joint initiative: a girls' football tournament organised in collaboration with the Employment Service and its Sports in the neighbourhoods programme. Further collaboration between the Youth Service and other relevant actors takes place outside the policy itself at the Technical Youth Roundtables. Spread across the town, these roundtables help optimise resources, transfer information and develop joint approaches to diagnosis and intervention. Municipal staff working on *Districte Jove* take advantage of these platforms to identify potentially vulnerable individuals and to refer participants to other services and programmes.

This policy introduces some innovation at the ideational level by bringing together the traditional affirmative and transition to adulthood logics under a hybrid approach that combines cultural initiatives and counselling sessions related to different personal and professional needs. At the level of practice, the decentralised service provision across the town and an open setting intervention approach also constitute a form of innovation since they open up the Youth Service to the territory.

Sports in the Neighbourhoods

The Sports in the Neighbourhoods project (*Esport als Barris*) is part of a wider occupational programme called Work in the Neighbourhoods (*Treball als Barris*), and was

established with the goal of developing the skills of 16 to 25 year-olds to help them navigate the labour market. It does so by combining sports with professional guidance workshops, and focuses on the vulnerable neighbourhoods of District 2 (Ca n'Anglada, Montserrat, Torre-Sana, Vilardell) and District 4 (La Maurina). Its parent programme, Work in the Neighbourhoods, has a wider scope and aims to improve the professional skills and employability of the neighbourhood residents, to strengthen collaboration with businesses in order to get more vulnerable people into employment, and to improve communication between local organisations with the goal of fostering economic and social cohesion in the area. The policy is promoted and managed by the Employment Service of the Municipality of Terrassa and financed by the Public Employment Service of Catalonia. The project was first implemented in 2019 and is currently being run for the fourth time. The budget assigned to the project in 2023 was €100,445.

The social component of the programme entails participants coming together twice a week in sports practice sessions in each of the districts, and a monthly session at local sports clubs. At the end of each session, there is a group discussion, to talk about general life skills that can be improved through sports practice. The employment component of the programme includes short professional guidance workshops, visits to companies, and referrals to other municipal services. The programmes can be accessed by young people who contact the municipal employment service directly or are referred to it by other municipal services, educational centres or the third sector.

The lead actor in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the policy is the local Employment Service. However, it is heavily dependent on other municipal services, youth associations, education centres, and the third sector in order to identify potential participants and to improve its operationalisation. According to the Employment Service, the interaction with education centres and the third sector is in the form of information exchange and organisation of informative sessions, which allows people who would benefit from this programme to be identified (interview 2). In addition, the Employment Service also adopts an open setting intervention approach to introduce young people to the programme. Furthermore, collaboration with the private sector and businesses is central for the employment component of the programme and is facilitated by the fact that this policy has been designed as part of the broader parent programme called Work in the Neighbourhoods. Lastly, the Technical Youth Roundtables also provide a parallel venue to improve implementation by promoting dialogue between public and non-public actors.

In this way, Sports in the Neighbourhoods allows for considerable innovation both at the ideational level and at the level of practice. The former is reflected in the way sports practice complement the occupational workshops, and the latter in the decentralised service provision.

0830X–Urban Energy

The 0830X–Urban Energy project (*0830X–Energia Urbana*) is a co-creative workshop for young people, centred on urban culture and hip-hop. It was set up to promote the active involvement of young people in the public life of the town and to build an inclusive and collaborative space for cultural creation. The project is promoted by the youth programmes division of the Citizen Equality and Diversity Service of the Mataró Town Council, while several synergies have been created during its implementation between different groups of young people, associations, cooperatives and municipal services. The project was first implemented in 2021 and is currently ongoing. The budget assigned to the project in 2024 was €17,043. The project has received funding from different institutions, including Barcelona provincial council, the regional government of Catalonia and the European Union Regional Development Fund.

While the central actor in designing, implementing and evaluating the policy is the local Citizen Equality and Diversity Service, the network administrative organisation governance logic is central to this policy, and established the 0830X Youth Commission. It is open to young people and youth associations and its mandate is to offer an annual programme of cultural workshops, to organise the annual block party event, and to share resources related to artistic and urban culture. As part of this effort, several joint projects have sprung up between municipal services, public and private education centres, artistic cooperatives and youth associations; these have enabled different artistic activities to be organised in different facilities across the town.

The innovative participatory model followed in the design and implementation of the policy has been highlighted by different actors. For the Citizen Equality and Diversity Service, this model is not only a tool to ensure effective and successful policies, but also an inspiration to reform the participatory model of the town, particularly given that youth associations and young individuals are not very involved in the Municipal Youth Council (interview 1). In turn, the interviewee from the SFL Battles youth association, which organises rap battles and is actively involved in the 0830X Commission, acknowledges the importance of this participatory approach in providing a space for young people to build their own projects and voice their own ideas, and also as a platform to identify the social problems that affect young people (interview 10). However, in terms of its ideational dimension, the policy is not innovative in the sense of its affirmative logic not being its exclusive focus.

Office for Vocational Training

The Office for Vocational Training (*Secretaria Tècnica de la Formació Professional*) is a programme that promotes vocational education in Mataró. The policy is promoted and financed by the Education Service of Mataró Town Council, with a budget of around €15,000 per year. The creation of the Office in 2016 was closely tied to the 2018-2022 Mataró Youth Plan being drafted: the *Pla Jove x Mataró*. It is conceived as a tool to help tackle unemployment and create quality employment, including through the professional training of young people. Therefore, the policy goes beyond merely targeting young people, and instead aims to promote operational efficiency in the governance of vocational training, to make it more attractive, and to revise the offer this type of training. The activities of the Office for Vocational Training include supporting the development of local strategic youth plans, being involved in the workings of the Council of Vocational Education (*Consell de la Formació Professional*), and the promotion of local vocational training events.

Despite being under the leadership of the Education Service, the success of the programmes relies on shared participatory governance through the Council of Vocational Education. Indeed, many of the activities in the programmes stem from the themed commissions of the council (vocational training planning commission, occupational training commission, guidance commission, company internships commission, adult education commission, and from the ongoing efforts to create a youth commissioner). According to the Education Service, a broad range of actors collaborate within the council, from municipal services, education centres, and the third sector, to trade unions, employers' organisations, and political parties (interview 3). At the same time, the Education Service argues that the council has not managed to include young people in its discussions, and will seek to collect their input in other ways (interview 3).

Policy innovation in this case is reflected in the consolidation of a more cross-sectoral service delivery. The creation of an integrated virtual campus that provides information on the educational services offered across town council services (*Mataró Orienta*) constitutes an example of innovation at the level of practice.

Comparative analysis of the links between collaborative governance and youth policy innovation

The four policy case studies are illustrative of the way in which town councils deploy youth policy to respond to the wicked problems affecting young people. These policies can be affirmative policies aimed at supporting youth voices, policies supporting their transition to adulthood through education, work and housing, or innovative combinations of both forms. Conversely, they can promote cross-sectoral engagement of public administration departments as well as multi-actor collaboration beyond the public sector. These case studies also reflect the policy trajectory of Catalonia-wide and

municipal youth plans since the late 1990s, which have sought to promote and consolidate institutional collaboration. At the same time, the analysis of the current local strategic youth plans suggests that the town councils are more orientated towards expression policies than transition to adulthood policies, which illustrates the difficulty of implementing transition to adulthood policies within a residual welfare framework (Fabra and Comas, 2019).

All the case studies follow a cross-sectoral and multi-actor approach to policy implementation, albeit with some differences in terms of the balance between public and non-public actors. The Youth District project relies less on other actors than the other projects, while the Office for Vocational Training has the broadest level of collaboration; Sports in the Neighbourhoods and 0830X–Urban Energy fall somewhere in between. The breath of collaboration is mirrored in the type of collaborative leadership. At one end of the spectrum are the lead organisation models of the Youth District and Sports in the Neighbourhoods projects, in which a central public administration organisation is solely responsible for decision-making and implementation. At the other end of the spectrum is the network administrative organisation logic of 0830X–Urban Energy, and the shared participatory governance of the Office for Vocational Training. In these cases, decision-making and implementation are dependent on actors who are external to the organisation that manages the project: the 0830X Commission and the Council of Professional Education, respectively. Finally, across policy case studies, active and close collaboration between different actors is something that is pursued. For instance, the Educational Service acknowledges that “it is impossible to do anything in terms of training, orientation or labour market inclusion in one service without taking into account the other two services [Youth Service and Occupational Service]” (Interview 3). In the case of Terrassa, the project is further enabled via the network of Technical Youth Roundtables; this facilitates the optimisation of resources, the transfer of information and joint approaches to diagnosis and intervention (Interview 2 and 6).

Turning to the innovative outcomes, the ideational component is clearly less developed than its practical dimension. Again, at the level of practice, all policies seek innovative service delivery methods by leveraging cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration. The Youth District and Sports in the Neighbourhoods projects are those that express greater innovation at the level of practice, following a decentralised implementation across the area, an open setting intervention logic, and in the case of Sports in the Neighbourhoods, the policy is integrated into a broader occupational programme for adults. 0830X–Urban Energy also follows a decentralised implementation logic and fosters a participatory approach where young people themselves help implement the initiatives. Lastly, the Office for Vocational Training has led to an integrated model of service provision across municipal departments. However, innovation at the ideational level, which we define as when the traditional differentiation between transition to adulthood policies and

affirmative policies is transcended, is relatively limited. Only the Youth District and the Sports in the Neighbourhoods projects use combined logics to address wicked problems that affect young people.

In light of the above, it is possible to identify some characteristics of the policy subsystem that are conducive to policy innovation. In particular, innovation at an ideational level appears to be associated with a form of governance that is centred around a lead organisation, but in which deep collaboration with a broad set of actors is also pursued. In this way, the lead organisation provides resources and efficient decision-making, while allowing new ideas to be incorporated through deep collaboration. The cases of the Youth District and the Sports in the Neighbourhoods projects fall within this type of governance. The central role of the Occupational Service in allowing for ideational innovation is particularly illustrative in this regard. While the service is “very powerful” (interview 3), there are not many resources directed specifically at occupational policies for young people, since youth policies are not highly prioritised at the local level (Interview 1). In this way, one of the advantages of Sports in the Neighbourhoods is that it leverages the resources of the broader Work in the Neighbourhoods occupational programme financed by the Public Employment Service of Catalonia; at the same time it adapts to each neighbourhood’s needs rather than following very strict budget rules, thus being flexible enough to improve how it is implemented year after year and enabling ideational innovation through collaboration with different local actors (Interview 2). In turn, in contexts with more shared governance structures, such as 0830X–Urban Energy and the Office for Vocational Training, policy innovation is more centred around leveraging cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration through integrated service delivery, rather than aiming at transcending the divide between transition to adulthood and affirmative policies.

Conclusions

Exploring the extent of innovation in youth policy is particularly relevant given the multidimensional nature of issues affecting young people and the marginal position these policies occupy within the public administration. The four policy case studies illustrate how town councils are responding through multisectoral strategic planning and innovative policy design and implementation. At the same time, they reveal how certain forms of collaboration within the policy subsystem can be more conducive to ample extensive innovation, both at the ideational level and at the level of practice. Namely, that policy subsystems governed by a central lead-organisation but that ensure cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration are more conducive to extensive forms of public policy innovation capable of addressing wicked problems. In marginal policy domains, such as that of youth policy, the involvement of powerful actors within the public administration can facilitate innovation.

Through an empirical analysis of youth policy at the local level, the paper contributes to the debates on the role of networks for policy innovation. By complementing arguments about the importance of collaborative governance for innovative outcomes (Cordoncillo et al., 2025; Torfing, 2016; Torfing et al., 2020a), the paper shows the key role of leadership. While the breadth of collaboration within the policy subsystem is important for innovation, it is insufficient for achieving extensive ideational innovation in the field of youth policy. Indeed, all the case studies examined ensure broad cross-sectoral and multi-actor collaboration. However, this can only help consolidate innovation at the level of practice, through integrated forms of service delivery, decentralised implementation across the territory, or the participation of young people themselves in the implementation.

In turn, the paper also adds to the extant literature on youth policy through the lens of network governance. While previous analyses have identified that affirmative policies have been prioritised over transition to adulthood policies (Soler and Comas, 2015; Fabra and Comas, 2015) and have underlined the importance of cross-sectoral and multi-actor strategies to overcome the marginal position of youth policy (Bianchi et al., 2017; Nico and Taru, 2018), the current paper illustrates how different dimensions of collaboration within the policy subsystem can support policy innovation. In particular, it demonstrates the importance of broad collaboration under the management of a central lead organisation in the town, which is capable of channelling resources and coordinating efforts effectively. Future research could further examine issues mentioned in this paper, such as how or whether organisational culture and budgeting (management, size, stability) influence the strength and sustainability of cross-sectoral collaboration.

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Figures and tables

Policy subsystem structure	
Breadth of collaboration	Cross-sectoral public; multi-actor public and non-public
Scope of collaboration	Agenda setting; design; implementation
Depth of collaboration	Superficial; deep
Collaborative leadership	Lead organisation-governed network; participant-governed network; network administrative organisation
Policy innovation	
Ideational level	Extensive or limited
Level of practice	Extensive or limited

Table 1. Conceptual framework adapted from Torfing et al. (2020a) and Provan and Kenis (2008).

Cases	Youth District		Sports in the Neighbourhoods		0830X-Urban Energy		Office for Vocational Training	
Policy subsystem structure								
	Cross-sectoral	Multi-actor	Cross-sectoral	Multi-actor	Cross-sectoral	Multi-actor	Cross-sectoral	Multi-actor
Breadth of collaboration	Youth Service; employment Service	Third sector	Employment Service; council services	Third sector; education centres; businesses; youth associations	Citizen Equality and Diversity Service; municipal services	Third sector; education centres; youth associations	Education Service; other municipal services	Third sector; education centres; businesses; trade unions; employer organisations; political parties
	Implementation phase		Implementation phase		Implementation phase		Implementation phase	
Scope of collaboration	Organisation of activities; identification of participants		Planning of initiatives; identification of participants		Planning of initiatives		Planning of initiatives; identification of policy needs	
	Deep		Deep		Deep		Deep	
Depth of collaboration	Within policy; parallel roundtables		Within policy; parallel roundtables		Within policy; 0830X Commission		Council of Professional Education	
	Lead organisation		Lead organisation		Network administrative organization		Participant governed	
Collaborative leadership	Youth Service		Employment Service		Citizen Equality and Diversity Service; 0830X Commission		Education Service; Council of Professional Education	
Policy innovation								
	Yes		Yes		No		No	
Ideational level	Hybrid policy: affirmative and transition		Hybrid policy: affirmative and transition to adulthood		Affirmative policy		Transition to adulthood policy	
	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Level of Practice	Decentralisation; intervention in open setting		Decentralisation; intervention in open setting; integration into parent programme		Decentralisation; youth participation		Integration of service delivery	

Table 2. Collaborative dimensions of the policy subsystem and policy innovation.

Supplementary Materials (Not for Publication)

List of interviews

Interview 1: Ayuntamiento de Mataró - Servicio de Igualdad y Diversidad Ciudadana. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 04-03-24.

Interview 2: Ayuntamiento de Terrassa - Servicio de Ocupación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 09-07-24.

Interview 3: Ayuntamiento de Mataró - Servei d'Educación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 10-07-24.

Interview 4: CCOO de Catalunya - Federación de Educación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. 26-07-24.

Interview 5: Servei Públic d'Ocupació de Catalunya - Oficina de Treball de Terrassa; Servei Públic d'Ocupació de Catalunya - Oficina de Treball de Mataró; Servei Públic d'Ocupació de Catalunya. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 30-07-24.

Interview 6: Ayuntamiento de Terrassa - Servicio de Juventud. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 30-07-24.

Interview 7: Ayuntamiento de Mataró - Servicio de Ocupación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 31-07-24.

Interview 8: Ayuntamiento de Mataró - Servicio de Ocupación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 10-09-24

Interview 9: CCOO de Catalunya - Unión Intercomarcal del Vallès Occidental y la Catalunya Central; CCOO de Catalunya - Federación de Educación. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 19-09-24

Interview 10: SFL Battles. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 24-09-24

Interview 11: CCOO de Catalunya - Unión Intercomarcal del Vallès Oriental - Maresme - Osona. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 24-09-24

Interview 12: Agència Catalana de la Joventut. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 15-10-24

Interview 13: Consell de Joves de Terrassa. Platform: Microsoft Teams. Date: 13-12-24

ⁱ Source: Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya. Revisió estadística 2024 [Renta familiar disponible bruta per habitant]. Data retrieved on 29.11.2025.

ⁱⁱ Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística. Atlas de distribución de renta de los hogares. Serie 2015-2023 [Renta bruta media por persona]. Data retrieved on 29.11.2025.