Azerbaijani youth in transition: Is the state youth policy effective enough?

Anar Valiyev and Abbas Babayev

Abstract
This article analyzes the role of the state youth policy of Azerbaijan in supporting young people through their transition from school to work, which is one of the stages when young people can be in particularly fragile situation if not provided with necessary opportunities. The reason for studying the case of Azerbaijan is a considerable share of youth Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET youth) among the country’s youth community. The NEET indicator is considered as a comprehensive indicator within the post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda to measure youth exclusion and marginalization. The findings of this research demonstrate that while the government assumes a broad responsibility to provide youth with education and employment opportunities to support their transition, these intentions have not been translated into real actions. An alarming situation of the country’s youth population is at risk of further exacerbation due to poor understanding of local realities by such global advocates for youth development as United Nations. We discuss this considering the flaws in the operationalization and localization of the concept of the “youth participation” promoted by the United Nations to advance youth interests.

Keywords
Azerbaijani youth, post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, school-to-work transition of young people, United Nations, youth employment, youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET), youth participation, youth policy

Introduction
A significant share of the world’s population today is the youth, defined by the United Nations (UN) as people aged between 15 and 24 years (UN, 2018b, p. 4). This cohort represents both opportunities and challenges for governments around the globe. On the one hand, it has been acknowledged globally that equipped with necessary opportunities to harness their energy and knowledge, young people can contribute to the development of their communities and act as active agents of positive change (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018, p. 6). On the other hand, when young people face economic and social challenges and consequent marginalization and exclusion, they can be a serious source for instability and disruptions (Urdal, 2012; see also Al-Shammari & Willoughby, 2019; Azeng & Yogo, 2013; UN, 2018a, p. 56; The World Bank, 2014, p. 2).

Azerbaijan is one of the countries where youth issues have a special place in the government’s agenda. The young people, defined, according to the national legislation, as individuals between 14 and 29 years of age, comprise 25.8% of the country’s population (“The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Youth Policy,” 2002, p. 1; “The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan,” 2020). Since the early years of independence, the government has established an institutional framework for the implementation of the youth policy by creating the Ministry of Youth and Sport (The Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2006). In the following years, the national law on youth policy was adopted, and a policy framework was created with the adoption of regular State Programs on youth. These identify the government’s
Azerbaijan is 4.8 million people), around 1.4 million people with only secondary education (the total workforce in Azerbaijan is 4.8 million people), around 1.4 million people are aged 15–34 years (Valiyev, 2020, p. 20). This is of severe concern as these people encounter considerable problems in accessing decent employment opportunities and are very likely to end up in low-paid, poor-quality jobs mostly in the informal economy (UN, 2018a, p. 56). In this context, it should come as no surprise that compared to other countries with a similar gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, Azerbaijan is one of those countries with the highest percentage of 15- to 25-year-olds not in employment, education, or training (Asian Development Bank, 2019; see also European Youth Forum, 2018). According to "The National Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2030" (2018), the level of Not in Employment, Education or Training youth (NEET youth) in Azerbaijan was 23% in 2017, which the government aims to reduce to 15% by 2030.

The considerable share of NEETs among the country’s youth population raises alarming trends about the fragility of the local youth community. The situation is highly disturbing considering the fact the NEETs have been demonstrated to be particularly exposed to the risks of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion and to have limited capacity to mitigate those risks due to poor educational background and lack of social networks in various studies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; Varshavskaya, 2017; The World Bank, 2014). Consequently, young people in such fragile conditions are very likely to be driven to hopelessness and anxiety about their own future, which can push them to seek alternative “support” mechanisms and become vulnerable to recruitment by organized crime groups, gang associations, and extremist groups and resort to violence, drug abuse, and engage in other adverse behaviors (ILO, 2018, p. 4).

Despite the above-mentioned disturbing trends, Azerbaijan is recognized by the UN as one of the countries demonstrating continuous support and commitment to youth policies and issues, conducting regular reviews of youth-related matters, and updating the national youth policy in response to the needs and challenges of the youth (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, pp. 2–12). Such an assessment of the country’s youth policy creates skepticism about the understanding of local communities’ real situation by external actors, like the UN, who assume broad responsibility for promoting youth development and present themselves as guarantors of youth interests (UN, 2018b, p. 5).

In light of this perplexing situation, this article aims to explain the extent to which the state youth policy of Azerbaijan is designed with economic and social challenges of its local youth communities in mind and whether it reflects the needs and challenges of these communities. Moreover, particular attention is devoted to the analysis of understanding the reality on the ground by external actors, like the UN, and whether the norms, advocated by such global actors, can contribute to the resolution of the problems, encountered by local youth communities.

**Methodology**

The analysis is conducted with a focus on the school-to-work transition of young people in Azerbaijan and draws on the study of the main policy documents and reports concerning Azerbaijani youth and youth policy, an online survey with young people, and in-depth interviews with experts and insiders of the national youth policy in Azerbaijan. The online survey, consisting of 25 questions designed specifically for this research, was intended to identify young people’s fundamental needs, assess their awareness of the government’s employment and education support programs/projects for youth, and their participation and satisfaction level with those activities. The survey also included a series of questions related to the reasons for their non-participation or whether they had ever participated in activities to support the employment and education needs of youth, to the likelihood of their future participation, and, finally, to their overall satisfaction with and expectations from the state youth policy. The survey was mainly distributed with the assistance of several youth organizations and active young people with a vast network in order to avoid confining it to one homogeneous (if large) group of peers and friends, who are likely to hold similar views. In total, the survey was completed by 124 respondents. Among the respondents, 57.3% were female and 41.9% were male (0.8% of the respondents preferred not to indicate their gender). In all, 61.3% were residents of Baku and the Absheron peninsula, and 38.7% were youth living in the regions of Azerbaijan. In total, 8.4% were in the 14–19 age interval, 41.1% in the 20–24 age interval, and 8.9% in the 25–29 age interval, with the remaining 1.6% in the 30–39 age interval. Ninety-six percent of the respondents were single, and 4% were married youth. Totally, 80.6% of respondents were enrolled in a formal education program at the time when they completed the survey, which was the survey’s one of the major limitations, discussed briefly below.
The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with experts and youth workers to shed light on all the questions that emerged from the document analysis and the survey results. Altogether five people were interviewed. Three of them were experts, while the other two were youth workers involved in the management of two well-known youth non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Both youth workers and one of the experts requested to keep their names confidential (see Appendix 1 for more information about the interviewees). The issues discussed during the interviews included, but were not limited to, the quality of employment and education programs/projects for youth in the school-to-work transition; the effectiveness, impact, and geographical coverage of those programs; the outreach strategies for vulnerable youth groups; the level of youth workers and funding for youth programs; the coordination and communication among key stakeholders of the state youth policy; the selection of participants for major youth activities and the level of commitment to ensure participation of all youth groups; any activities to reach out to NEET youth and efforts to keep track of them; the forms of “structural constraints” affecting the youth policy; and the motivation of youth and their trust in the implemented programs/projects. For the in-depth interviews, experts who had prior experience as (for example) researcher, youth policy consultant, or related to general youth issues were selected. The youth workers were also selected deliberately and with the main focus placed on their background in the youth sector and their independence in terms of political affiliation. The depth of interviews played a crucial role in compensating the online survey’s limitations, which were particularly poor outreach to inactive youth and vulnerable youth groups due to the lack of databases that could be helpful in reaching out to those youth groups.

In the subsequent parts of this article, we will provide a brief overview of the nature of the policy interventions to support youth transition from school to work and the importance of the NEET indicator, which will be followed by an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of Azerbaijan’s youth policy. In the fourth part, we discuss how external actors’ poor understanding of the reality on the ground and poor operationalization of the norms promoted by such actors can add to fragility in local communities. We conclude the article by highlighting the importance and contribution of this research to the literature on youth issues.

Helping youth transition in disturbing times

The youth phase of life is the stage when young people are expected to stand on their own feet by making the transition from education and/or training to full-time employment, establishing their own family and independent living (Barry, 2005, p. 81). Interviews with young people, conducted as part of previous studies (Barry, 2005, p. 81) on this topic, revealed that the overwhelming majority of youth identify this transition as successful if they are able to access meaningful and stable employment, have their own home, and establish a family and parenthood. While this is so for most youth, it may vary depending on an individual’s gender, social class, and other personal characteristics. For instance, young people with disabilities consider transition as successful if they can live independently, which is their main desire (Barry, 2005, p. 86). Personal goals and ambitions, expectations of family and community members, and various hardships and frustrations associated with this period make youngsters a particularly pressured and vulnerable group in need of support (Barry, 2005, p. 80). Therefore, in order to minimize the risk of possible failures and negative impact of prolonged transitions, it has been a well-established policy expectation that interventions to support school-to-work transition of young people should be given particular weightage within the framework of youth-oriented policies (ILO, 2019; The World Bank, 2006). Their importance is also recognized by the UN global youth strategy (UN, 2018b, p. 11) that identified support in youth transitions as one of the priority areas for action to ensure economic empowerment of young people.

Transition interventions are defined as deliberate strategies and efforts within the local, national, and international political realms to promote school-to-work transitions of young people (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014, p. 21). Education- and training-linked initiatives constitute the core of such policy interventions (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014, p. 22). Those initiatives mainly take the form of career counseling, vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeship programs, skills development trainings, self-employment programs, subsidized employment programs, and other similar activities to make youth competitive in the labor market and connect them with the world of work (ILO, 2018). The primary motive behind the mentioned programs is to make education and training attractive and accessible to all young people as the educational disadvantage has been widely acknowledged to be one of the most underlying reasons for troubled and lengthy transitions of youth from school to work and potential youth exclusion from society (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2019, pp. 18–46).

One of the most important indicators to measure the extent to which young people smoothly make their transition from school to work is the share NEET youth (The World Bank, 2014, p. XV). The NEET indicator has been endorsed by international organizations such as the OECD, ILO, and other UN agencies and many governments’ statistical agencies as a core and comprehensive indicator within the post-2015 sustainable development agenda to gauge youth exclusion rather than the more traditional educational and unemployment indicators (The World Bank, 2014, p. 25). The NEET measurement is recognized as a powerful tool as it also includes discouraged youth, also marked as
inactive youth. Various studies (Varshavskaia, 2017, p. 390; The World Bank, 2014, p. 25) identify discouraged youth as being in significantly higher risk groups due to being subjected to poverty, abusive behaviors, stigma, and homelessness. The NEET youth are also referred to as marginalized youth, who are usually excluded from accessing opportunities and resources crucial for their development and social integration (Iwasaki et al., 2014, p. 317). However, it is not right to consider all NEETs as being homogeneously at the high risk of social exclusion or having failed to make a smooth transition to adulthood. According to critics of the indicator, the NEET youth are not only the ones who are discouraged, excluded, and marginalized, but also the ones who voluntarily opt out of education and employment for various personal reasons, including, for instance, taking a gap year (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014, p. 1241). In one recent publication, issued by the ILO specifically for clarifying the NEET concept, it was highlighted that “equating NEETs with discouragement is a clear exaggeration” (Elder, 2015, pp. 3–4). Therefore, whenever we think of and discuss problems related to NEETs, we need to keep in mind the group’s heterogeneous nature.

Before concluding this part, it is very important to note that while analyzing the effectiveness of interventions to support youth transitions, factors behind the accumulation of NEETs, and, in general, the role of the national youth policies in promoting youth development, one should always keep in mind the context in which the policies are designed and implemented. To be more specific, this means that no policy intervention exists in a vacuum, and there are limits upon the scope of options available to policy actors in a given circumstance, also known in the relevant literature as structural constraints (Mcgrath, 2002, p. 306). Structural constraints affecting the stakeholders in the youth sector include, but are not limited to, the country’s economic environment, political context, education system, and other areas, which are not at the direct disposal of the decision-makers responsible for the youth sector (ETF, 2019, pp. 16–17; Mcgrath, 2002, pp. 306–307).

**Azerbaijan’s youth policy effectiveness**

Youth education and employment are two areas, which are regarded as fundamental to overall youth development as the progress in these areas significantly improves other aspects of young people’s lives, such as moving out of poverty, accessing health care, affording housing, and establishing family (UN, 2018a, pp. 1, 64). As this is the case for many other countries, the youth unemployment rate, equal to 15.7% in 2020, is higher than the overall unemployment rate, equal to 6% in 2020, in Azerbaijan (The World Bank, 2020). The numbers reported by some civil society organizations also show that the unemployment level among youth is much higher. An online survey conducted by one of the largest youth organizations reveals that 76% of the 8,921 online respondents were unemployed (Azerbaijan State News Agency [AZERTAC], 2019). Another worrying trend is the shortage of qualified labor force, particularly among the graduates of higher education institutions (Valiyev & Amirova, 2021). This problem, thoroughly discussed in the following sections, calls into question the quality of the country’s education system.

Meanwhile, the analysis of the national policy documents regarding education, youth, and particularly employment shows that the existence of the aforementioned problems is not caused by the omission of the relevant areas, that is, youth education and employment, from the government’s agenda. On the contrary, almost all major policy documents concerning the above-mentioned areas recognize the importance of education and employment for youth and intend to implement activities to provide young people with necessary opportunities (“The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Youth Policy,” 2002, p. 2; see also “Azerbaijani Youth Development Strategy for 2015-2025,” 2015, p. 6). In this regard, especially, the issue of youth employment has been considered to be one of the government’s priorities. The country’s first “The National Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2006-2015” (2005) was adopted in the context of alarming trends about youth unemployment when young people comprised 69% of the country’s unemployed population (ILO, 2005). Moreover, the Strategy had a special National Action Plan on Youth Employment, prepared with the support of ILO, prioritizing areas such as reforming labor market institutions and policies, strengthening the National Employment Service and modernizing VET system, improving social protection of job seekers and unemployed citizens, and creating jobs for youth, women, people with disabilities, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and other vulnerable groups experiencing difficulties in entering the labor market (Aliev et al., 2011, pp. 33–34). “The State Program on Azerbaijani Youth for 2017-2021” (2017, p. 10) also envisages actions like the organization of career guidance and counseling services, job fairs, trainings to develop entrepreneurial skills, non-formal education opportunities, self-employment and subsidized employment programs, development of VET, and its integration with the labor market to support young people in entering the labor market (“The National Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2030,” 2018, p. 8).

However, our findings show that the reality on the ground is quite different from that described in policy papers as the planned activities are not translated into real actions to bring any change for the youth communities. This gap is also felt by youngsters, who, according to the findings of the online survey for this research, want policymakers responsible for the youth sector to pay particular attention to the issues of youth education and employment.
In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the majority of the survey’s respondents, 98.4% of whom were people aged 14–29 years, consider the provision of employment and education opportunities as the most important (Babayev, 2020, p. 49). In light of this observation, it is important to provide an overview of the major programs to support transition of youth into work within the framework of the country’s youth policy.

It is worth to mention that it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the state programs due to the absence of the comparable data. NEET is not calculated, and independent researchers do not have access to raw data to calculate them for each year. Thus, we are left to use other data, for example, the share of vulnerable employment. For instance, the share of vulnerable employment in the country between 2013 and 2018 did not change much and was at the level of 56%–55% of all employed youth. People unemployment, although not a much valid indicator, also has not changed for the same period and varied around 13.5–13.7 (WDI, 2018).

The findings show that in Azerbaijan there are no special education, training, and labor market programs specifically designed for those youth who entered the labor force without any skills and specialization (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). They are mainly early-school leavers, who have only completed either general secondary (left schooling around age 15 after 9th grade) or comprehensive secondary education (left schooling around age 17 after 11th grade). As was already mentioned, people between 15 and 34 years of age constitute around 1.4 million of the approximately 2.8 million workforce with only secondary education (Valiyev, 2020, p. 20). These youth receive on-the-job training in low-paid, poor-quality jobs and are mostly employed in the informal economy (UN, 2018a, p. 56). Their situation is further exacerbated by the fact that it is very difficult to keep track of them. At this point, it should be noted that, in general, there are considerable data-related problems with regard to the youth population in Azerbaijan. For instance, despite the significance of the NEET problem, the level of NEETs is not tracked in the country, and the National Employment Strategy is the only document where the statistical information about this group is made available (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). One of the major impediments to data collection is a considerable share of the informal economy, equal to 66.12% of GDP in 2017 (Expert II, personal communication, September 17, 2020; see also Valiyev, 2020, p. 12).

Other vulnerable youth groups also suffer from the lack of attention to their needs by the government. For instance, IDPs, identified in the national law on youth policy as one of the youth groups in need of social protection, pointed to the scarcity of opportunities for youth employment as well as a need for further vocational training programs for securing jobs (Aliyev et al., 2011, p. 35). IDP adolescents aged 14–17 years and children aged 10–13 years, on the contrary, identified the unemployment of their parents and resulting household poverty as an obstacle for their continuing education. The scarcity of economic opportunities forced many IDP men to move to urban centers or other neighboring countries for work (Aliyev et al., 2011, p. 35). This causes the separation of families because women and children remain in Azerbaijan, while men travel abroad for employment. The situation with young girls on the whole is also quite alarming as their early disengagement from schools in rural areas has been identified to be a severe issue for Azerbaijan (ETF, 2019, p. 9). Despite this, there are no comprehensive and visible programs to support young women to remain in education and access job opportunities (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). The lack of adequate attention in policy documents is a relevant problem for almost all vulnerable youth groups in the country. Although the State Program on Azerbaijani Youth for 2017–2021 (2017, p. 9) plans to implement activities to support youth with special needs, all those activities are very broadly described, like increasing opportunities for young people to receive social services without supplying precise information on how that would be achieved. Moreover, there are also some observations with regard to the explicit omission of vulnerable youth groups from the policy documents. For instance, while the national “Azerbaijani Youth Development Strategy for 2015-2025” (2015, pp. 4–5) identifies the target groups in the strategy, vulnerable youth comprise only 5 out of the 17 target youth groups mentioned. These are unemployed young people—youth from low-income families, disabled young people, young refugees and IDPs, drug abusers, and those infected with HIV. Other vulnerable youth groups are mentioned in the national Law on Youth Policy, such as those released from penitentiary institutions, the ones who lost their parents and are deprived of parental care, victims of human trafficking, and others do not appear on the list of the Strategy’s target groups (“The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Youth Policy,” 2002, p. 1). This may be an indicator of the policymakers’ commitment to reaching out to specific youth groups while ignoring others.

In general, the effectiveness of the programs to support youth in transition from school to work raises serious concerns. For instance, VET has only recently started to receive a prominent place in the government’s agenda (Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016). For many years in Azerbaijan, as in many other post-Soviet countries, the VET system was almost non-existent and considered “a last resort for the weakest students” (ETF, 2019, p. 27). The result of such continuous inattention to the VET system was an outdated curriculum, deteriorated infrastructure, and a complete loss of trust in the VET by the employers and young people (ETF, 2019, p. 27). However, it has already been several years since the
national government with the expertise and financial assistance of international organizations and foreign countries has aimed to reorganize its VET system to make it an attractive alternative for young people and employers. For this purpose, the Strategic Roadmap for the development of the national VET system was adopted, and a special institution responsible for the VET policy was established (ETF, 2019, p. 28). As a consequence, the Azerbaijani parliament adopted the first national law on VET (ETF, 2019, p. 28). The actions undertaken by the government, among others, aim to modernize the curriculum in vocational schools and centers, offer new specializations, upgrade the infrastructure of educational institutions, and build relations with employers (“Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Azerbaijan,” 2016). While the VET reforms’ results and sustainability are yet to be seen, it is clear that the national VET system has played almost no role in supporting youth in their school-to-work transition for many years now.

Career counseling services, like career fairs, outlined in the policy documents as important instruments to support youth transition to work, are mainly cosmetic in nature and cover predominantly young people enrolled in higher education institutions (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020; Expert II, personal communication, September 17, 2020). According to one of the interviewed experts, for such programs to deliver successful outcomes in helping youth to identify their future careers and find decent employment opportunities, there must be quality information regarding the labor market, for example, job descriptions, and salary profiles (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). This has not been possible in Azerbaijan due to loose cooperation between the education sector and potential employers, especially in the private sector (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). The poor relationship between business and education sectors also has an adverse impact on the development of apprenticeship programs, which are another popular method of integrating young people into the labor market. They are poorly institutionalized in the country and exist informally (ETF, 2019, p. 29). In general, for various above-mentioned policy options to deliver results in connecting the youth with the labor market, they have to be implemented in an integrated way with a mechanism to coordinate the interests and actions of all stakeholders (ILO, 2018, p. 6). When this coordination mechanism is not ensured, like in Azerbaijan’s case, the key stakeholders, such as the employers and government institutions responsible for the education, employment and youth sectors, local executive powers, NGOs, and other interested parties, are often unaware of one another’s programs and problems (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020; Expert III, personal communication, September 18, 2020). Although there are employment coordination committees in Azerbaijan to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders to more effectively support young people in finding employment, they often only exist on paper (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). As a result, many activities are implemented in isolation from one another that hinders their effectiveness.

**Structural constraints for reaching effectiveness**

All the aforementioned challenges are further exacerbated by the existence of serious structural constraints in Azerbaijan, considerably affecting the deliverability of youth-targeted policy interventions. The first constraint, directly affecting the situation of young people, is an outdated, poor-quality education system that does not equip young people with skills required in the labor market (ETF, 2019, p. 18). The STEP Employer Skills Survey, conducted in Azerbaijan, showed that most employers are not satisfied with the knowledge and skills provided by the educational institutions (Rutkowski, 2015, pp. 3–4). According to the results of the recruitment survey conducted in 2017 by the American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan with the support of the Ministry of Education, the vast majority (almost 70%) of respondent companies and enterprises operating mainly in banking and oil & gas industries (considered as most developed industries) found it challenging to come across qualified candidates for graduate recruitment, particularly from public universities (Valiyev & Amirova, 2021). This issue poses even more problems considering that higher education institutions are the key suppliers of the skilled and qualified labor force in Azerbaijan (Valiyev & Amirova, 2021). According to one expert, the education system of Azerbaijan, like the Soviet system, is supply-oriented; thus, is not responsive to market needs (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). Every year, graduates face a rapidly changing competitive employment sector. To increase the chances of employment, those graduate students need to also be equipped with certain non-technical skills, also referred to in the literature as “soft” skills such as communication, teamwork, presentation, and ability to think critically and offer innovative approaches to work among others that are currently in demand by employers (Valiyev & Amirova, 2021). In this regard, it should come as no surprise that around 60% of 8,921 surveyed young people within a study by the National Assembly of Youth Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (NAYORA) noted that they work in areas not relevant to the university degree (AZERTAC, 2019). In addition, the educational institutions lack cooperation and communication with the employers and, consequently, are not aware of their demands (Expert I, personal communication, September 17, 2020). According to the employers, mismatches in skills are the primary source of business inefficiency and the cause of low productivity (Valiyev & Amirova, 2021).
The Deputy Minister of Education, Idris Isayev, described the mismatch between the education system and the labor market demands as a major threat to Azerbaijan’s future (Valiyev, 2020, p. 20).

The second structural constraint, substantially limiting policymakers’ capacity within the youth sector, is the country’s poor economic environment (ETF, 2019, p. 16). Although the World Bank has classified Azerbaijan as an upper-middle-income country, its economic growth is driven mostly by the oil sector (Valiyev, 2020, p. 7). In general, the country’s business environment is characterized by restrictive practices impeding the entry of new firms and expansion of existing businesses, limited competition, complicated access to financial means, informality, and other inefficient practices (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2019; see also ETF, 2019, p. 16). As was highlighted by one of the youth workers in an interview, all the aforementioned constraints directly affect their work (Interviewee V, personal communication, September 18, 2020). The interviewee singled out trainings on developing entrepreneurship skills for young people as an example. Despite the organizers’ commitment to providing high-quality training, the fact that the real environment for applying learned skills is restrictive is an essential factor in shaping young people’s attitudes toward the implemented programs.

In this context, while the national government has launched reforms across multiple sectors, ranging from vocational education reform to simplifying the regulations on setting up a business, considerable time is needed to reap their benefits. Moreover, the realization of certain strategic objectives, such as reducing the share of NEET youth as underlined in the National Employment Strategy, will be much more challenging (Valiyev, 2020, p. 18). It would require, among other things, actions like restructuring certain government agencies, ensuring coordination and harmonization among them, and adopting a new curriculum for education institutions. Finally, the findings of this research reveal that policymakers responsible for the national youth sector demonstrate little to no commitment for understanding the needs and challenges encountered by the youth. The interviews with the experts on Azerbaijan’s state youth policy showed that there are no institutionalized mechanisms to identify the needs of youth, especially in an inclusive way (Expert III, personal communication, September 18, 2020). In all, 71% (88 out of 124 respondents) of the online survey’s respondents indicated that they had never seen any studies, reports, and surveys by the government relating to their employment needs, one of the intended activity areas of the relevant policy documents (Babayev, 2020, p. 61). All this, combined with the poor quality of youth-related data, especially statistics, suggests that policy interventions and decision-making are not data-driven (Expert II, personal communication, September 17, 2020).

External actors and poor understanding of realities

Despite the problems encountered by the local youth communities in Azerbaijan and challenges observed in the implementation of the national youth policy, the UN, as was emphasized earlier in this article, recognized the country as one of those demonstrating continuous support and commitment to youth policies and issues, conducting regular reviews of youth-related issues, updating its national youth policy in response to the needs and challenges of youth, and implementing various activities to support the development of young people (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, pp. 2–12). Such an assessment of the country’s youth policy by an organization, like the UN, which is known as one of the most active advocates of youth development and norm entrepreneurs regarding global youth politics, deserves special attention. Apart from pointing out the organization’s lack of understanding of the reality on the ground, such an evaluation creates concerns over the impact of certain norms that the organization advocates for development of young people. Indeed, the findings of this research provide solid justifications to be concerned about the unintended consequences stemming from the poor localization and operationalization of certain norms that have been embraced by the organization. In this article, the focus is on the concept of youth participation, which is one of the most fundamental norms promoted by the UN to make youth voices heard (Kwon, 2019, p. 926; UN, 2018b, p. 10).

The calls for ensuring and strengthening youth participation in the life of society and formulation and implementation of national policies can be found in majority, if not in all, global policy documents concerning youth, including World Program of Action for Youth (WPAY) and UN Youth Strategy 2030 (UN, 2010, 2018b). The First Global Forum on Youth Policies, held in Baku in 2014, identified “youth participation structures” as one of the main prerequisites for effective youth policies and called for youth policies to be developed with “sincere participation and engagement” of youth in order to make these policies legitimate among the targeted beneficiaries (Kwon, 2019, p. 927). However, for the mechanisms of youth participation to be considered legitimate among the local youth communities and deliver youth voices to decision-makers, certain factors should be in place. Otherwise, efforts to ensure youth participation can become only cosmetic and incite certain youth groups, especially disadvantaged ones, to be more disengaged and excluded. The reason for emphasizing concerns about youth participation trends in Azerbaijan.

First, in order to ensure equal and meaningful participation of all young people, especially the most fragile ones such as youth with disabilities; deprived of parental care; released from penitentiary institutions; living on the streets; living in rural areas and mountainous regions; abusers of
alcohol, drugs, and other psychotropic substances; connected with extremist organizations; and other vulnerable groups, all of them need to be included and made aware of the existing opportunities. Previous studies held across various countries showed that one of the factors hindering youth participation was a lack of awareness among young people about implemented programs that led to a decrease in their participation and accelerated exclusion (The World Bank, 2014, p. 62). The survey results of this study found that this problem was also very relevant for Azerbaijan as the lack of awareness of the implemented programs among young people was indicated as one of the most common reasons behind their non-participation in activities (Babayev, 2020, p. 54). Apart from awareness-linked obstacles, there were also concerns regarding the participation requirements, such as educational background and prior experience in social activities, that automatically favored certain youth groups such as university students and deprived many disadvantaged young people of applying to participate in those activities (Expert III, personal communication, September 18, 2020; Interviewee V, personal communication, September 18, 2020). As a result of this, many youth-oriented programs have the same group of participants with broad networks and who were already familiar with the national programs (Expert III, personal communication, September 18, 2020; see also Kwon, 2019, p. 934).

Another important issue with regard to the involvement of the international organizations in the national youth policy is that the majority of projects implemented by them are pilot projects aiming to build the capacities of national agencies to institutionalize activities introduced by their projects (Babayev, 2020, p. 56). In this regard, many activities realized within the framework of projects supported by international organizations take the form of one-time events without any further evidence about the sustainability and institutionalization of initiated activities. For instance, youth initiatives selected to be supported by the “Establishment of Local Youth Advisory Councils in Five Districts” program funded by the European Union and implemented with the technical support of UNICEF Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Youth and Sport to promote youth participation for resolving social problems in local communities and increase the role of youth in decision-making were activities like distributing educational flyers about gender equality, conducting a tree-planting campaign, installing sports equipment in park, and other similar activities (UNICEF Azerbaijan, 2021). The mentioned activities do not significantly differ from the regular projects realized by local NGOs, and there is no available information about the achievement of intended project objectives and such projects’ contribution to strengthening youth participation.

All the above-mentioned factors are further complicated by the extent of young people’s trust in the implemented activities and even more importantly by young people’s ownership of their own future. According to one of the youth workers, only a small share of young people know what they want in terms of professional development (Interviewee V, personal communication, September 18, 2020). Another expert stated that the government should not be held accountable for these problems because many young people, like all other local communities, are not interested in participating in processes that affect their lives (Expert II, personal communication, September 17, 2020). One of the expert’s observations was young people’s unwillingness to participate in the survey, which was related to the social pressures on them. Almost the same attitude by some young people was observed during the data collection for this research where it was found that they were not interested in raising their concerns while filling out the online survey. However, it is worth noting that while almost all interviewees agreed on young people’s poor ownership of their future, some of them approached the problem from another perspective, that is, the absence of young people’s trust in the implemented activities, which was also supported by the findings of the online survey (Babayev, 2020, p. 54; Expert III, personal communication, September 18, 2020; Interviewee IV, personal communication, September 18, 2020). According to them, the structural constraints mentioned earlier in this article discouraged young people from taking an active part in programs implemented within the framework of the youth policy.

In light of all the above-mentioned observations, we can conclude that despite global calls for strengthening youth participation for better and more legitimate youth policies, the flaws in the operationalization and localization of this norm stemming from the lack of attention to the needs of local communities and structural constraints may cause more adverse impact than benefits. To be more specific, by unintentionally depriving certain disadvantaged groups from accessing youth participation programs, policymakers may cause them to be more excluded from society and make their situation even more fragile.

**Conclusion**

This article explored the extent to which the national youth policy of Azerbaijan is designed with the economic and social challenges of local youth communities in mind and whether it is capable of providing real support to young people. Although the government assumes a broad responsibility to provide youth with education and employment opportunities, the plans outlined in the policy documents have not been translated into real actions. In addition to the analysis of the effectiveness of the state youth policy, a particular emphasis has been made to discuss the role of external actors and their poor understanding of local realities. These in turn have impacted and introduced more deficient operationalization of the norms promoted by external
actors. By being one of the first academic studies based on direct measurement through a recent survey on the youth-related situation in Azerbaijan, this article can contribute to generating further academic interests toward youth studies in Azerbaijan and other post-Soviet countries. Moreover, the findings of the article can be helpful for policymakers in understanding the flaws in the design and implementation of the state youth policy.

Acknowledgements
We thank the editors of the Special Issue and the Journal’s reviewers for their comments on helping with this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work would have not been possible without the financial support of the GCRF UKRI COMPASS project (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) focusing on capacity-building in Central Eurasia.

Note
1. As all three experts were engaged (prior to and at the time of the interviews) with international and foreign organizations, it is important to note that the views, expressed by them during the interviews, are their personal views and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the organizations that they worked for.

References

Aliyev, G., Valiyev, A., & Rustamova, S. (2011). Social protection and social inclusion in Azerbaijan. European Commission.

Al-Shammar, N., & Willoughby, J. (2019). Determinants of political instability across Arab Spring countries. Mediterranean Politics, 24(2), 196–217.

Asian Development Bank. (2019, May). Azerbaijan, 2019–2023—Promoting diversified and inclusive growth. https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/510266/eps-aze-2019-2023.pdf

Azeng, T. F., & Yogo, T. U. (2013). Youth unemployment and political instability in selected developing countries. African Development Bank.

Azertac. (2019). Dayamənlı İnkişaf Maqsədləri ilə bağlı göncələr arasında sorgu keciriləcək. Azerbaijan State News Agency Azertac, March 2019. Retrieved on August 1, 2020. https://azertag.az/xebar/Dayamənlı_Inkişaf_Maqṣədər_xil_hağlı_gəncələr arasında_sorgu_keciriləcək-12552737/bclid=IwA R2B0dGExh7o71a_6bS5HbH1ec2jWCDYjuOQSBxBqecBb 2tx0sAhkQwlyE3E

Azerbaijani youth development strategy for 2015 - 2025. (2015, January 26). http://www.e-qanun.az/alpdata/framework/data/29/e_f_29206.htm

Babayev, A. (2020, November). The school-to-work transition of young people in Azerbaijan: Is the state youth policy capable of providing needed support to ensure a smooth transition? [Unpublished master’s thesis, ADA University].

Barry, M. (2005). The inclusive illusion of youth transitions. In M. Barry (Ed.), Youth policy and social inclusion: Critical debates with young people (pp. 78–95). Taylor & Francis.

Elder, S. (2015, January). What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted? International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public--dgreports--dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_343153.pdf

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). (2019). Azerbaijan country strategy 2019–2024. https://www.ebrd-consultations.com/consultations/country-strategy-for-azerbaijan/

European Training Foundation. (2019). Policies supporting youth transition to work in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2019-04/Youth%20transition%20EaP%20_report.pdf

European Youth Forum. (2018). Youth Progress Index 2017: Measuring young people’s social progress globally. https://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/page-pdfs/Youth%20Progress%20Index%20FULL%20REPORT.pdf

The first global forum on youth policies. (2014, October 28-30). Baku commitment to youth policies. https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/tag/first-global-forum-on-youth-policies/

International Labour Organization. (2005, June 21). 93rd international labour conference Azerbaijan: Leading the way to decent work for youth. https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/features/WCMS_075522/lang–en/index.html#1

International Labour Organization. (2018). Youth in fragile situations: Promoting youth employment for peace and resilience. International Labour Organization. (2019). Work for a brighter future: Global commission on the future of work. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public--dgreports--dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf

Iwasaki, Y., Springett, J., Dashora, P., McLaughlin, A.-M., McHugh, T.-L., & Team, Y. 4. (2014). Youth-guided youth engagement: Participatory action research (PAR) with high-risk, marginalized youth. Child & Youth Services, 35(4), 316–342.

Kwon, S. A. (2019). The politics of global youth participation. Journal of Youth Studies, 22(7), 926–940.

The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Youth Policy. (2002). https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Azerbaijan_2002_Youth_Policy_Law.pdf

Lundahl, L., & Olofsson, J. (2014). Guarded transitions? Youth trajectories and school-to-work transition policies in Sweden. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 19(1), 19–34.

Mcgrath, B. (2002). Towards the enablement of “unqualified” rural youth: A structurationist perspective on socially inclusive policy interventions. Journal of Youth Studies, 3(3), 291–312.

The Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2006). The statute of the Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Azerbaijan. https://www.mys.gov.az/en/ministry/charter

The national employment strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2030. (2018, October 30). https://static.president.az/media/W1siZiIsiIjIwMjQvMzAwMzAvNzBq5G95dmVhMV9TVFJBEVHIXIBLkZjJXQ%3Fsha%3D73a80919aee9fa5

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2020). States of fragility 2020. OECD Publishing.
Rutkowski, J. J. (2015). *Demand for skills: Main results of the Azerbaijan STEP employer survey*. The World Bank Group.

The state program on Azerbaijani youth for 2005-2009. (2005, August 30). http://www.e-eqanun.az/framework/10692

The state program on Azerbaijani youth for 2011-2015. (2011, July 7). https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Azerbaijan_2011_Youth_State_Program.pdf

The state program on Azerbaijani youth for 2017-2021. (2017, September 15). https://president.az/articles/25237

The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020, September). *Population statistics*. https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demoqraphy/?lang=en

Strategic road map for the development of vocational education and training in the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2016). https://vet.edu.gov.az/en/content/14/

Tamesberger, D., & Bacher, J. (2014). *NEET youth in Austria: A typology including socio-demography, labour market behaviour and permanence*. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(9), 1239–1259.

UNICEF Azerbaijan. (2021, June 29). *Youth advisory councils: Empowering youth in local development*. https://www.unicef.org/azerbaijan/stories/youth-advisory-councils-empowering-youth-local-development

United Nations. (2010). *World programme of action for youth*. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf

United Nations. (2018a). *World youth report 2018: Youth and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/WorldYouthReport-2030Agenda.pdf

United Nations. (2018b). *Youth2030: The United Nations youth strategy*. https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf

United Nations General Assembly. (2017). *Youth development links to sustainable development*. United Nations. https://undocs.org/A/72/190

Urdal, H. (2012). *A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Valiyev, A. (2020). *Attaining SDG 8 in Azerbaijan: The challenges of economic transformation and job creation*. International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/~ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_749432.pdf

Valiyev, A., & Amirova, G. (2021). *Do university graduates’ competences match post-socialist labour market demands: Evidence from Azerbaijan*. [Unpublished manuscript].

Varshavskaia, E. I. (2017). *Russian NEET youth: Characteristics and typology*. *Sociological Research*, 56(6), 389–403.

World Development Indicators (WDI). (2018). *Labour force participation rate*. World Bank. https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators

The World Bank. (2006). *World development report 2007: Development and the next generation*. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/5892/WDR2007%20English.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

The World Bank. (2014). *Tunisia: Breaking the barriers to youth inclusion*. https://data.worldbank.org/

**Author biographies**

Anar Valiyev is Associate Professor of public affairs at ADA University. His research areas are in public administration, policy analysis, democracy, and governance.

Abbas Babayev holds a Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree from ADA University, Azerbaijan. His research interests are in areas of education and employment policies, international organizations, concepts of good governance, and capacity building.

**Appendix I**

**List of interviewees**

The following experts and youth workers were interviewed during the data collection process:

1. **Expert I**—A freelance consultant (expert, researcher) who has researched for the European Training Foundation (on school-to-work transition of youth in Azerbaijan) and Asian Development Bank. He was also involved as an expert in the preparation of the National Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019–2030.

2. **Expert II**—Social worker, also engaged in the research work. At the time of the interview, he was providing consulting services to the UNICEF Country Office in Azerbaijan. Prior to that, he had worked for the United Aid for Azerbaijan (UAFA), a UK-registered non-governmental organization (NGO) operating exclusively in Azerbaijan. In the UAFA, Mr Jafarov was responsible for researching social pressures on young men aged 18–35 years.

3. **Expert III**—Policy analyst, working for United Nations Country Office in Azerbaijan with a prior experience in youth NGO management.

4. **Interviewee IV**—Youth worker involved in youth NGO management.

5. **Interviewee V**—Youth worker involved in youth NGO management.