



# Youth Empowerment through co-creative Activity development

A summary of case studies  
based on “Defining your group”  
activities

2025



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## Main result 3.1

### Building social relations: Insights from activities seeking communal characteristics within a group

#### Introduction

This report is a collection of themes observed and recorded during workshops and conversations as part of the Youth Empowerment through co-creative Activity development (YEA) project. A part of this Erasmus+ project aimed to understand what is important when different groups within the same community connect with each other.

One of these groups included young adults (aged 13-30) in the community who do not always involve themselves in participating in leisure activities (e.g., sports, culture, arts). Often, these young people are living in vulnerable situations, because of poverty, disability, and/or differences in cultural background, are youth with immigrant backgrounds and may be members of different minorities, including sexual or gender minorities. Other groups included adults as well, particularly professionals who work directly or indirectly with youth in local and support organisations or through municipality services. Due to scheduling and engagement challenges, some information was gathered during individual or small group conversations instead of workshops.

The literature review produced in an earlier phase of the project provided valuable insights that were utilized in the activities and workshops in the subsequent phases of the project. The review emphasized the importance of social relationships and inclusion, guiding the YEA project's activities to focus on strengthening these areas (YEA, 2024). Practical inclusion opportunities included workshops, community events, and the creation of support networks, all aimed at supporting youth integration and well-being.

Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging among youth, which is crucial for their social and emotional well-being. When youth actively participate in community activities, they develop skills, confidence, and social networks that are beneficial for their

future. Furthermore, inclusion gives youth the opportunity to influence their own lives and surroundings, increasing their motivation and commitment (YEA, 2024).

## Target groups

The main groups targeted during these workshops and conversations were:

- Youth
- Professionals working in local youth-centred organisations
- Professionals working in support organisations
- Representatives from municipalities and youth services

Between February and May 2024, “Defining your group” workshops and activities took place in Pelt (Belgium), Vantaa (Finland), and Palermo (Italy).

## Safe(r) Spaces

In the YEA project, it was crucial to create a safe(r) space for the participating youth, professionals, and project staff. Since the primary target group of the project included youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, and the project's goal was to empower and build bridges, it was essential that the project and its activities provided a safe(r) space. This environment allowed for genuine interaction, mutual learning and respecting individual times and needs, and the creation of something new together.

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### Definition of a Safe(r) Space

A safe(r) space is an environment where individuals feel physically, emotionally, and socially secure. It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination, bullying, harassment, and violence through proactive prevention and intervention. Additionally, a safe(r) space is inclusive, accessible, and free of barriers (Vantaa, 2025). These spaces can help mitigate the negative effects of peer pressure and promote a sense of belonging, which is especially important during adolescence.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, "A safe(r) space is a formal or informal place where people can feel physically and emotionally safe. The term 'safer' in this context refers to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or the fear

of violence), or abuse. It is a space where people can freely express themselves without fear of judgment or harm" (Maglietti & Miquel, 2015).

In the YEA project, safe(r) spaces helped young people express their thoughts and feelings freely and through this helped them build resilience and confidence. Communities must respect diverse values and create inclusive spaces that accept everyone, regardless of gender, body type, or cultural background (Aarnio et al., 2025).

The principles to create a safe(r) space include:

- **Avoid Assumptions:** Be mindful of the assumptions made about others and remain open to diverse people and topics.
- **Maintain Dignity:** Ensure no one is degraded or embarrassed due to their appearance or identity.
- **Reject Stereotypes:** Do not perpetuate sexist, racist, or harmful stereotypes in your speech, actions, or behaviour. Ask for preferred personal pronouns to make everyone feel seen and respected.
- **Intervene:** Take action if offensive behaviour is witnessed.
- **Show Respect:** Respect others' physical, mental, and emotional boundaries. Always ask for permission before touching someone.
- **Ensure Participation:** Make sure everyone has the chance to participate in discussions, especially on sensitive topics.
- **Exchange Feedback:** Encourage the giving and receiving of appropriate, constructive feedback.

## Workshop objectives

In the YEA project, an aim was to give young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, a voice and make their experiences visible to professionals and public authorities who work directly or indirectly with this group. Including young people in the project was our main priority, as the YEA project focuses on youth participation and strengthening their sense of inclusion (Kurki et al., 2025). Additionally, the youth had an opportunity to hear the experiences and opinions of professionals related to their work with young people. In order to prepare the content of the workshops, we

collected data in a previous phase of the project from the target groups using two different methods: 1) photovoice for youth and 2) a needs and opportunities analysis for organisations.

## Photovoice of youth

The consortium utilized photovoice methodology, which proved to be a successful qualitative research method, for the youth who participated in our project. It was accessible for the youth and provided a unique approach to gather their experiences and perspectives. By being able to take photos of their communities, it gave them an opportunity to reflect and share perspectives of being a young member in that environment. Their photos guided some of the discussions of the workshops and led to youth finding similarities and differences in the experiences of other youth, which focused mainly on how they spent their free time.

## Needs and opportunities of organisations

Furthermore, professionals involved in the field of social education and integration took part in filling in a questionnaire where they could share challenges and barriers they encountered in their work daily basis with young people. Among the barriers and difficulties in engaging youth, professionals from Finland, Belgium and Italy highlighted lack of economic and human resources to ensure sustainable leisure activities for youth, instability of professionals' working condition and last-minute changes in youth lives when living in residential centres (e.g. in the case of unaccompanied minors).

## Workshop Structure

In order to facilitate the workshops and meet the objectives, we organised separate workshops for each of the target groups mentioned above. Bringing together individuals within the same target group led to efficient exchange of experiences. Each workshop had a focus of developing a cohesive perspective for the group, hence the "Defining your group" name of the workshop. The main activities of the workshop were sharing the results of the photovoice and needs and opportunities analysis of the organisations. Each group was presented with the results of their own group as well as the results from the other groups. Through discussions, creative ideas were formed relating to youth's sense of belonging and participation within the local

communities of Italy, Belgium and Finland. Further down, there are some key themes that were identified and recommendations that were suggested.

## A bit more on photovoice

Due to its success among youth and in this project, we offer here more information about how this methodology was implemented in previous phase of the project. The photovoice methodology was adapted and used to explore the perceptions of youth in vulnerable situations regarding their sense of community, belonging, and participation. Photovoice is a method where participants take photographs to highlight their experiences related to the research topic. The topic is usually predetermined by the research team and/or the community. The photographs are then shared with researchers and/or participants for individual or group discussions aimed at building a shared narrative around the research topic (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Kurki et al., 2025). Key insights are often disseminated through exhibitions, reports, or articles to raise awareness and promote change (Wang & Burris, 1994 & 1997; Kurki et al., 2025).

Leading up to the execution of the photovoice method within each of the partner countries, there was a brainstorming session held among the project partners to discuss the potential themes. We selected topics under two main themes: Opportunities and Challenges. Young people were asked in advance to take pictures related to various themes, such as a place or community where they feel a sense of belonging or something they would like to change in their lives (Kurki et al., 2025).

Participants were asked to take at least three pictures. Young participants enjoyed taking part in the photovoice project. One participant gave positive feedback, saying that reflecting on their photos helped them think about what is important in their life and what they want for the future (Kurki et al., 2025).

The differences between countries, as well as translation nuances, influenced how the assignment was interpreted. While in Belgium and Italy, the photo stories were more focused on physical aspects of communities, in Finland, the wording guided participants to reflect more on communities in terms of human relationships (Kurki et al., 2025).

Photovoice turned out to be a vital bridge. It connected professionals and young people, but also the young people with each other across different vulnerable



conditions. The photos captured places in the city that symbolized home, danger, safety, and belonging, allowing participants to reflect on where they felt seen and where they felt invisible. It made them protagonists in their own narratives (Kurki et al., 2025).

The photovoice method offered a powerful way to explore the lives and experiences of young people. Through the images, discussions were sparked, and young participants were able to share their stories in a deeper and more open way. The photographs became windows into their lives, revealing what is meaningful to them and what they dream of (Kurki et al., 2025). It helped them give meaning to their experience, initially without words and only images. In this way, their voice was given a place, reminiscent of the saying, “a picture is worth a thousand words”.

## Results

Instead of providing results from the separate workshops with the different target groups from each partner country, we have analysed and combined them into two sections: key themes and recommendations.

### Key themes

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#### Engagement of youth

- Youth engagement is crucial for the development of community activities. Youth often feel their voices are forgotten in planning phases and lack opportunities to express their ideas. Moreover, their needs are changing with each generation. An additional challenge for professionals is trying to reach young people who are not currently engaged with various organisations and activities.
- Promoting youth ownership of their needs and solutions is central to these efforts of designing activities, and many young people taking on roles as volunteers or ambassadors. Targeted promotion ensures that a diverse range of youth are informed and inspired to take part in meaningful activities that reflect their voices and aspirations.
- At the local asylum centre (Belgium), a wide variety of enjoyable and meaningful activities are regularly organised and evaluated, while ensuring



they remain relevant and engaging. Youth participation is particularly strong within the centre, with both unaccompanied minors (UMAs) and those accompanied by parents actively involved. The presence of a dedicated supervisor for UMAs ensures that these vulnerable youth receive focused and consistent support.

## Barriers and accessibility

- There are still barriers and challenges faced by youth when participating in community events and activities. In Finland, the main barrier was anxiety, with youth reluctant to meet new project staff. In Belgium, OverKop is an easily accessible organisation, with a low threshold for youth to participate. Youth can walk in whenever they want (between opening hours) and there is no expectation or pressure towards the youth to talk about personal matters. But youth often face high barriers if they don't know anyone there or have no one to go with. According to professionals in Finland, a significant challenge is reaching young people who are not engaged with various organisations and activities. It is particularly important to hear their voices to understand what kinds of activities they would like to see, enabling them to participate more actively in their community. Unfortunately, we were also unable to reach these young people during the project.

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## Engagement differences between youth and professionals

- Despite multiple attempts to engage local stakeholders, reaching and motivating youth to participate in workshops proved challenging. Professionals discussed areas for improvement in youth engagement, suggesting better communication channels and inclusive activities.

## Activities

- It is important to hear the voices of the youth to understand what types of activities they would like to see offered, hopefully drawing them to participate more actively in their communities. Youth expressed a common wish to play games together, such as board games, but noted there were no places where they could play together. Professionals highlighted existing leisure services and the need for more sports-related activities targeted at young adults.

- Depending on the organisation (Belgium) some youths are actively involved in shaping leisure activities and are consistently encouraged to participate, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement. Collaborations with organisations focused on youth participation and community building further enhance the quality and inclusivity of these initiatives. Projects that bring together young people from different nationalities and cultures help to build mutual understanding and social cohesion.

## Communication

- Effective communication is essential for engaging youth. Suggestions included taking more care of communication channels where opportunities for youth are shared on the Internet and simplifying communication language on official websites.

## Recommendations

### Improving communication channels

- Develop a social media strategy to engage youth using platforms popular among them.
- Simplify communication to ensure clarity and resonance with youth.
- Implement anonymous feedback systems to gather input from youth.

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### Fostering collaboration among organisations

- Organise regular networking events for local organisations, schools, and community groups.
- Establish partnerships with external organisations to provide diverse opportunities for youth.
- Develop joint initiatives involving multiple organisations working together on common goals.

### Creating inclusive activities

- Offer a variety of programs that cater to different interests and backgrounds.
- Integrate leisure activities within school schedules or collaborate with schools to promote these activities.

- Create safe(r) and welcoming spaces where youth feel comfortable participating.

## Addressing anxiety and participation barriers

- Implement buddy systems to help new participants feel more comfortable.
- Start with small group activities to build confidence and gradually transition to larger events.
- Provide access to mental health resources and support for youth dealing with anxiety.

## Enhancing youth engagement in planning processes

- Establish or strengthen youth councils where young people can have a say in planning and decision-making processes.
- Conduct regular workshops and focus groups to gather input from youth.
- Provide leadership opportunities for youth to lead projects and represent their peers.
- Support youth throughout the entire process of starting and maintaining hobbies—especially when it involves navigating communication, payments, or subsidies. This is essential to reduce dropouts and foster long-term commitment.
- Use a facilitator or a mentor/coach, they can play an active role in monitoring and following up on youth engagement. Multiple consultation and evaluation moments should be embedded into the workflow to ensure continuous improvement and responsiveness.

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## Overcoming Stigma and Building Trust

- Ensure that all activities and communications respect and promote a safe(r), inclusive space where everyone feels valued and heard. Uphold the principles of mutual respect, active listening, and non-discrimination in all interactions.
- Promote positive stories and achievements of youth involved in programs.
- Engage with the broader community to build understanding and support for youth programs.

- Be transparent about the goals and activities of youth programs.

## Conclusion

These activities contributed to expanding the YEA project's key findings related to the sense of community and its challenges from previous activities. During these "Defining your group" activities, it was important for each of the target groups to establish a unifying voice, demonstrating how they feel as a group. The groups explored their needs, challenges, and resources relating to building social bridges between youth, professionals, and institutions.

The photovoice methodology played a significant role in the YEA project by providing a powerful tool for exploring the lives and experiences of young people. Through photovoice, participants were able to capture and share their perceptions of community, belonging, and participation through photographs. These images sparked meaningful discussions and allowed young participants to express their stories in a deeper and more open way. The photographs became windows into their lives, revealing what is meaningful to them and what they dream of. This method not only connected professionals and young people but also helped bridge gaps between youth in different vulnerable conditions, fostering a sense of understanding and empathy among participants.

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In addition, professionals with different expertise and experience from Italy, Finland and Belgium, committed in the field of social education of young people, were offered with a unique opportunity to meet among themselves. They could find safe(r) spaces where challenges and ideas can be discussed to better provide youth with more meaningful activities and tailored educational tools.

The project highlighted the importance of empowering youth by involving them in the planning and execution of activities. This approach not only enhances their sense of belonging but also builds their confidence and leadership skills. Ensuring that all activities are inclusive and accessible is crucial. This includes considering physical accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and providing support for those with anxiety or other barriers to participation.

Effective communication is key to engaging youth. Utilizing social media platforms popular among young people and simplifying communication on official websites can

help reach a broader audience. Establishing trust between youth and professionals is essential. Promoting positive stories and achievements of youth involved in the project can help build a supportive community environment.

To maintain youth engagement, it is important to offer a variety of activities that cater to different interests and backgrounds. Regular feedback from participants can help tailor activities to their needs and preferences. Fostering collaboration among local organisations, schools, and community groups can create a more cohesive support network for youth. Joint initiatives and regular networking events can enhance the impact of the project. Regular reconnection between participants and maintaining the bridge is necessary to continue engagement. It is insufficient to build the bridge once and then not maintain it in the future.

By addressing these additional insights and recommendations, the YEA project can continue to build on its successes and further support the empowerment and inclusion of youth in their communities.

And by extension, this set the foundation for bringing positive impact in other European countries concerning improving youth participation in our communities.

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