



Youth Empowerment through co-creative Activity development

Supporting Youth Participation and Social Relations

Literature review A2.1



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Supporting Youth Participation and Social Relations – Literature Review

Youth Empowerment through co-creative activity development (YEA) project is about building up social relations between youth with and without a migrant background who do not feel a sense of belonging to their community, through a co-creative process to develop leisure time activities. Project is carried out by CESIE in Italy, Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland and UCLL University of Applied Sciences in Belgium (coordinator).

Through the activities in this project, youth will be engaged, connected, and empowered to become a more active member of their community and create sustainable, customized activities for all young people. The YEA project consortium carried out a literature review, which aimed to find out important contextual information for the project and to identify important themes related to building social relations and inclusion. The literature review specifically aimed to identify potential target groups, barriers, opportunities and facilitators related to young people's participation, and building social bridges.

The initial literature review was conducted in the partner countries of Italy, Finland, and Belgium, with each partner organization having a specific focus. CESIE, for instance, concentrated on identifying the most vulnerable youth groups residing in Italy, while Laurea explored themes related to supporting the social inclusion of youth. Additionally, UCLL collected crucial data concerning the statistics of migrants in reception centers and gained insights into their experiences and well-being. The findings were subsequently reviewed and discussed in collaborative workshops.

As a result, important themes were identified and will guide the planning of the next stages of the YEA project, specifically in the research phase. In particular, the most relevant themes identified within the consortium will be mentioned to evoke conversation with youth involved in the project in the participatory research activity. Additionally, the themes identified, will provide a framework that will help guide surveys and workshops that will be executed later in the project.

Identifying target groups and needs

Literature review showed that the effects of global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and regional conflicts have had a great impact on local and migrant youth and their well-being. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only affected young people's long-term employability, but it has also had a huge impact on their psychosocial well-being in a period where the social isolation and lockdown at home were the only possible preventative measures against Covid-19. While young people usually score highest on mental well-being compared to other age-groups, the trend has reversed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, in July 2020, 48% of European youth were considered at risk of depression, while 20% showed to be at risk of anxiety and 17% were feeling lonely (Puers, 2021).

In Italy 44,6% of youth under 37 years old (49,4% of which between 18-25 years old) state to have suffered from anxiety and depression during the Covid-19 pandemic, while 81% of the educational staff of the Italian secondary schools noticed more and more symptoms of depression and existential crises among youth. These conditions tend to be more severe among youth living in peripheral and/or rural areas of Italy, where 48,5% of young people residing in municipalities with less than 10.000 inhabitants claim to have suffered from anxiety and depression and 18,8% of them increased the consumption of alcohol and drugs. (Italian National Agency for Youth, 2022.)

Based on the most common youth beneficiaries of local as well as European projects in Italy, among the most vulnerable groups are youth with migrant background, especially unaccompanied minors in transition to adulthood, and Roma and Sinti youth. It is worth noting that all these groups experience a dual social vulnerability. Most of them confront two distinct forms of discrimination: one stemming from the social or ethnic group they belong to, and another arising from the challenges of being young in Italy, a country that doesn't adequately value its youth and their potential.

The lack of scientifically reliable socio-demographic and economic statistical data for Roma and Sinti people in Italy presents a significant barrier to identifying issues affecting these communities. While attention to Roma and Sinti rights has been increasing, interventions targeting these communities do not reference leisure activities as a potent means of engaging young people. For instance, the National

Roma and Sinti Strategy 2021-2030 includes a relevant section on "Promoting awareness of Roma and Sinti art, history, and culture" to combat racism and increase awareness of their history. However, it does not fully explore the potential of activities like art and history education in fostering social connections among Roma and Sinti youth.

There are a few initiatives aimed at increasing the visibility and participation of Roma youth in Italy. For example, there is an international arts competition held in Italy every year called "International Gypsy friend Arts competition" which is recognized by the President of the Italian Republic and the Italian Ministry of Public Education. In addition, there is a podcast series created by a young Roma woman in which she invites young Roma artists and experts (dancers, violinists, pedagogists, etc.) living in Italy as her guests (+ Rom – Rum). The aim of the podcast is raising awareness of Roma youth in Italy through personal stories and identities.

The target groups of the YEA project will also be the unaccompanied minors (UAMs), who face challenges related to transition to adulthood, social life, housing as well as labour-market opportunities in Italy (Civilhood, 2023a). To date, the highest rate of unaccompanied minors is registered in Sicily, Italy with a total of 4621, corresponding to the 22,1% of the total (Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2023). In addition to that, currently there are no official guidelines or policies regulating the phase of transition of UAMs. Focus group interviews conducted as part of the CIVILHOOD project, involving professionals working closely with unaccompanied minors (UAMs), revealed a notable absence of supportive programs designed to establish social networks and a limited allocation of resources for the acquisition of the local language (Civilhood, 2023b).

In Finland, Laurea University of Applied Sciences is located in the city of Vantaa, which is the most multicultural city in Finland. In 2022, 24.8 percent of the residents of Vantaa were foreign-language speakers (i.e. persons whose native language is some other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami). The foreign-language speakers are significantly younger than those who speak the native language, and most of them are under school age and between 30 and 44 years old. In different neighborhoods, the proportion of foreign-language speakers ranges from a few percent to 51 percent. Vantaa has very active and dynamic NGOs supporting the city in the integration of migrants. (Vantaa.fi)

In a study examining the social well-being of foreign-born population in Finland, 14 % of all individuals with a foreign background frequently experienced loneliness, genders did not differ from each other. Nearly two-thirds (63 %) participated in leisure activities monthly, men's active engagement in leisure activities (66 %) was slightly more common than women's (60 %). Almost one-fifth reported having only up to one good friend living in Finland. About three-quarters of both men and women were satisfied with their relationships. Especially concerning findings arose regarding individuals who have migrated to Finland from the Middle East and North Africa. They were less satisfied with their interpersonal relationships compared to other background groups and a smaller proportion of them participated in leisure activities on a monthly basis. (Castaneda & Kuusio, 2019.)

In line with migration trends observed in various European countries, Belgium saw a rise in asylum applications over the past year, resulting in the placement of many individuals in asylum centers located throughout the country. In 2022, Belgium provided shelter to a total of 31,759 people through these asylum centers, with 10% of them being unaccompanied minors (Fedasil, 2023). This number of unaccompanied minors has been steadily increasing since 2018 and represents the highest recorded figure in the past decade, as indicated in the annual report analyzing the data from the last 10 years. The majority of these unaccompanied minors are male (96%), aged 16 or older (79%), and a significant portion hails from Afghanistan (74%). Furthermore, in response to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Belgium has witnessed an influx of immigrants. According to Caritas International, an organization dedicated to supporting vulnerable populations, especially migrants and refugees, more than 62,000 Ukrainian refugees have been granted protection in Belgium since February 2022, with the majority receiving temporary protection status (Caritas International, 2022).

A large number of migrants entering Belgium are housed in reception centers. A qualitative study published in December 2022 investigated the well-being of 106 applicants residing in four collective reception centers in Belgium. Results were based on 10 different aspects of well-being, including a few that play a central part in our project: belonging, relaxation, and involvement. In their interviews, many respondents presented their well-being from a more negative perspective. According to the findings, residents do not feel at home "because they have limited

opportunities to experience their own culture". Although residents can enjoy different leisure-time activities both inside and outside the centers, participation is minimal with residents citing that facilities and organized activities in the center are limited and insufficiently diversified, while activities outside the center require overcoming language and financial barriers. Additionally, residents interviewed expressed a feeling that they are not involved in important decisions and indicate that there are few "structural moments when their opinions and cooperation are sought" (Fedasil, 2022).

These feelings of social isolation and a need for belonging transcends the reception centers and is also present in leisure time activities offered through organisations and clubs. For example, Vandermeerschen et al. (2017) explored how nonprofit sports clubs in Belgium perceive their role and responsibility towards socially disadvantaged groups in Belgium and how they act on it. What they found was that while sport clubs do not actively exclude anyone, they also do not actively pursue diversity and social inclusion either. Approximately one-third of sports clubs report making efforts to reduce social and/or cultural barriers for individuals living in poverty or to promote and enhance their integration into the club. In addition, the study found that there is a limited presence of structural or organisational policy addressing social inclusion. Sports clubs that possess robust structural capacity in terms of planning and development are more likely to be well-equipped to pursue social inclusion. Furthermore, the findings indicate that clubs in which also underprivileged people take part are more likely to make efforts toward inclusivity. However, the analysis does not provide clarity on the direction of this effect. It's possible that the club's leadership takes measures to reduce barriers because they are aware that some members are facing challenging circumstances or it could also be the case that clubs actively working to lower barriers are more accessible to everyone, with the presence of underprivileged individuals being a consequence. (Vandermeerschen et al., 2017.)

Supporting inclusion and participation

The YEA project seeks solutions to the challenge of social exclusion. Social exclusion and, by extension, social inclusion, have been defined in various ways. Levitas et al. (2007) defined social exclusion based on a scientific literature review as "...a complex

and multidimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole”.

Levitas et al. (2007) further identified domains and sub-domains for social exclusion. The three domains are resources, participation, and quality of life. Resources refers to material and economic resources, access to public and private services and social resources. Participation refers to economic and social participation, political and civic participation and culture, education, and skills. Lastly, quality of life refers to health and well-being, living environment and crime, harm, and criminalization. The YEA project aims to pay attention to all these three domains and support young people's social resources, social participation, and well-being. The project organizes free leisure activities and aims to involve young people in the planning of the activities. In addition, the project gives voice to young people's own stories and experiences and aims to support young people to be active in their own communities and in their own living environment.

According to the definition by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2023), the three dimensions of participation are:

- Participation in one's own life, which refers to the ability to decide what kind of life to lead and what activities to engage in.
- Participation in communities and influencing processes, which means the opportunity to belong to meaningful groups and influence matters that are important to oneself, as well as receiving support for such influence.
- Participation in the common good, which involves the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the collective and contribute to its production and distribution, resulting in receiving recognition, gratitude, and connections with other individuals.

In other words, when supporting participation, one should consider an individual's opportunities to influence their own life, their community, and society at large.

According to Rissanen (2020), measures aimed at the integration of refugees in Finland do not adequately address the diversity within the target group and their

varying needs. These measures should be more flexible and customizable to suit the individual circumstances of each person. In addition, Rissanen (2020) notes that refugees' engagement within society is notably limited, accompanied by a lack of awareness about their potential for influence and participation. In supporting the integration and participation of refugees and immigrants, attention should be paid to individual needs and the customization of developed measures, as well as increasing awareness of participation and influence opportunities.

Valkola (2020) interviewed youth with immigrant backgrounds about their experiences of inclusion in Finland. The study identified five factors related to the experiences of inclusion: getting help and support when needed, language proficiency, access to studying and working, family and friends and an opportunity to progress in life and plan for the future. Valkola (2020) also interviewed coaches about their experiences of promoting youth participation. According to the coaches, the starting points in promoting inclusion in coaching are youth-oriented approach, trust building and providing support and a reliable person to turn to. In addition, it is important to assess and consider the individual's entire life situation as a whole, support the ability to influence one's own life, strengthen social and cultural understanding, support social relationships and a sense of community and work against prejudice and racism.

Bruhn and Gonzales (2023) emphasize that spaces of belonging, where connection, sustenance, and recognition are readily available, are essential to immigrant youth and families' experiences of migration. Participation in relational spaces of belonging varies according to the age of children when they migrate and their developmental requirements. Organizations offering leisure activities and spaces constitute powerful opportunities to feel a sense of belonging besides the mandatory routines at school and home. "Sports can function as spaces of agency, efficacy, and recognition and deserve more considered attention from scholars and educators striving to better understand how immigrant young people assert their belonging in their communities (Bruhn and Gonzales 2023).

Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) examined how organized sports, as a network of social interactions and procedures, can play a role in reducing the vulnerability of socially disadvantaged youth in the context of a Flemish sport project. Haudenhuyse et al. (2012) identified several dimensions in creating social outcomes for vulnerable youth.

Fundamental features in these dimensions are a coaching approach that prioritizes the well-being of young people and a coaching method that do not rely on abstract concepts of pro-social or positive development through sports but rather begins with the specific needs and life circumstances of young individuals. This suggests that to gain a deeper insight into the potential of sports-based interventions for socially vulnerable youth, the emphasis should be on experiences rather than outcomes. (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012.)

Tell et al. (2022) have used the Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning and explored factors that promote or inhibit collaboration of the sports sector, NGOs, and public sector in intersectoral projects aiming to meet the needs of vulnerable youths. According to Tell et al. (2022) promoting factors for collaboration are a common goal, an appreciation of the complementary skills and knowledge of each partner, clear roles and responsibilities within the collaboration, and a strong user perspective and user-oriented approach in the activity choice. The YEA project will pay special attention to these factors in the project implementation.

In Italy, the National Coordination of the New Italian Generations (CoNNGI) was established to strengthen the participation of young people in decision-making processes. CoNNGI is a network of 35 young people with migrant background founded in 2017 as part of the activities of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (European Commission, 2023). In 2022, the coalition of organizations affiliated with CoNNGI introduced an updated version of its Manifesto for the New Italian Generations. This initiative aims to play a role in shaping policies that enhance opportunities for inclusion and the recognition of the diverse identities and talents of young individuals with migrant backgrounds. The most relevant aspects covered in the Manifesto are sports as a tool for inclusion and its accessibility to everyone, social networking and activism and involving media to promote positive narratives of young people and creating virtual spaces where young migrant people can express themselves. In addition, a key element in the Manifesto is CONNGI's commitment to create a European network of new European generations and establish a common European Manifesto.

Building Social Bridges

Studies have demonstrated how friendship networks often divide between youth with immigrant backgrounds and the native population. In Finland, some studies emphasize the desire and need of immigrant youth to connect with and meet native Finns. According to the interview study, challenges in befriending native Finns include, among other things, encountering and making contact with Finns, as well as language proficiency. (Heikinheimo & Säilä, 2016.)

On the other hand, there are also studies according to which young people with immigrant backgrounds prefer to form friendships primarily with others who share a similar background (e.g., Hiqaab, 2023). In an interview-based study, Hiqaab (2023) examined factors that influence the formation of peer relationships among young people with immigrant backgrounds in the capital region of Finland. The findings revealed that young people with immigrant backgrounds prefer to form friendships primarily with others who share a similar background. Six themes emerged from the narratives of the participants regarding the formation of peer relationships: sense of belonging, integration, ethnic identity, language proficiency, prejudices, and shared cultural traits. According to the interviewees, the formation of friendships with other individuals of immigrant backgrounds may be strengthened by close relationships with the children of their parents' friends, as well as the fact that immigrant families often live in the same areas. Different preferences, hobbies and habits may also play a role. For example, one interviewee described that ice hockey is a strong part of Finnish tradition, but it may not be the most common sport among young people with immigrant backgrounds. The interviewees unanimously agreed that having an immigrant background was significant in their choice of peers. The study also highlighted that young people with immigrant backgrounds did not perceive themselves as Finnish, even though all interviewees had been born in Finland.

In addition to majority-minority relations, it is also important to consider relations among minorities. Many studies indicate for example, that immigrants can function as mediators bridging the gap between newly arrived refugees and the host community, aiding newcomers in navigating their new daily routines (e.g., Larsen, 2011; Schech, 2014; Wren, 2003). Peer relationships, peer learning and mentoring are

also utilized in various models aimed at promoting social inclusion, learning and teamwork. One example of such a model is Buddyschool model used in schools in Finland (Helsingin kaupunki, 2019). Mentoring and peer learning are models that could also be used in the YEA project.

Minority relationships do not develop in isolation - the broader society significantly impacts them. The group's outlook towards other groups is influenced by how much social recognition and respect they receive, as well as their ability to establish contacts with other groups. (Pauha & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2017.) In improving intergroup relations, it is important to support each minority in their own identity while fostering an integrative identity and a shared narrative or common 'great story'. Moreover, the importance of positive interactions between groups and supportive community planning is backed by empirical evidence. (Pauha & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2017.)

One framework for supporting positive intergroup interaction is Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). According to the Contact hypothesis, there is four conditions under which intergroup contact will reduce prejudice. These conditions are equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and support of authorities, law or customs. In other words, groups must engage equally in the relationship and members of the groups should have similar backgrounds, qualities, and characteristics. In addition, groups must work on a problem or a task and share a common goal that can only be attained if the members of two or more groups work together by pooling their efforts and resources without competition. Groups also need to acknowledge some authority that supports the contact and interactions between the groups. The contact should encourage friendly, helpful, egalitarian attitudes and condemn ingroup-outgroup comparisons.

Conclusions

The purpose of the literature review was to find out important contextual information for the project and to identify important aspects related to supporting social inclusion and participation. In addition, the literature review helped to define a specific target group in each country. CESIE will focus on unaccompanied minors as well as Roma and Sinti youth; Laurea will concentrate on youth with immigrant background

attempting to integrate into neighbourhood activities; UCLL will emphasize the relationship between reception centres for migrant youth and local vulnerable youth.

CESIE's literature review focused especially on identifying the most vulnerable youth groups living in Italy, with the aim to explore the every day's challenges faced, as well as the current opportunities offered and their limits, and the needs of the young people through focus groups, and youth-led initiatives. Laurea explored themes and mechanisms related to supporting social inclusion and participation of the youth. UCLL found important information regarding the statistics of migrants in reception centers, insight into their experiences and well-being, and how sports clubs in Belgium could better approach including this target group. All these data brought more awareness of the state of art of vulnerable youth living in Italy, Finland, and Belgium and how the YEA project can contribute to enrich social inclusion's opportunities across Europe and empower young people to be agents of their own future.

The YEA project will use the themes, principles, and methods found in the literature review in the planning of project activities. When designing activities and promoting inclusion, the project will consider three aspects of participation: an individual's ability to affect their own life, their community, and society as a whole. Special attention is paid to identifying individual needs of specific target groups and customization of the activities accordingly. Other themes and principles utilized by the project include a youth-oriented approach and trust-building, the utilization of mentoring or peer learning models, work against prejudice and racism, and emphasis on experiences rather than outcomes.

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