



KEY ISSUES IN APPLYING EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS experience of five EU countries

THE SUMMARY OF THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH REPORT



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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS
– EXPERIENCE OF FIVE EU COUNTRIES**

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Index

ABOUT THE PROJECT.....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	8
THE EDI GO RESEARCH.....	9
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	10
YOUTH WORKERS ABOUT DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND EXCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE..	10
YOUTH WORKERS ABOUT BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS.....	13
The organizations who work with general population of young people.....	13
The organizations working with specific groups of young people in disadvantaged position....	15
YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND EXCLUSION.....	16
YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS.....	18
CONCLUSIONS.....	20
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	21



ABOUT THE PROJECT

“EDI GO – introducing the organisational approach to integration of equality, diversity, inclusion model in working with young people”

Partners:

Forum for Freedom in Education (Croatia); KMOP – Education Hub (Greece); Centre for Creative Development “Danilo Dolci” (Italy); La Xixa (Spain); ADICE (France); Humana Nova (Croatia)

In various strategic documents the EU provided clear direction to encourage social inclusion, value diversity and promote equality of opportunities for young people (e.g. in the **EU Youth Strategy** and the Erasmus+ **Inclusion and Diversity Strategy**). In addition, in many European countries, these principles are the basis of youth work.

However, there is always the need to reflect, re-evaluate and consequently improve our youth practices and policies that we, as youth work organisations, have in our everyday practice.

The main objective of the project EDI GO is to support youth organizations working with young people through the strengthening and improvement of internal good practices promoting equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI practices). This project anticipates developing the whole-organisational approach to reviewing one’s own EDI practices within different aspects of the organisation thus initiating organisational systematic change.

To achieve the project objectives, the first step was to implement focus groups and interviews with young people and youth workers in five countries. The findings are presented within the comparative report **“Key issues in applying EDI practices in youth organizations – experience from 5 EU countries”**.

Here we present the highlights of these research findings.

INTRODUCTION

Young people today face specific challenges related to uncertainties about their future due to globalisation, climate change, armed conflicts, technological change, demographic and socioeconomic trends, populism, discrimination, social exclusion, fake news and so on.¹ **One-third of young people in Europe are at risk of poverty and social exclusion**, many do not have access to their social rights and many continue to face multiple discrimination, experience prejudice and hate crimes. The migratory phenomena brought several social and inclusion challenges as well.

Therefore, it is important to **reach out to disadvantaged groups and communities** and equip youth workers with the necessary competences to significantly contribute to positive interaction and social harmony among different groups, regardless of their ethnicity, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality, skin colour, socio-economic background, appearance, educational level, language spoken, etc.²

Being inclusive means giving equal access and opportunities to everybody, no matter their background and identities.³ To achieve this goal, all organisations and individuals must do their part towards the building of an inclusive and equal society. This particularly relates to youth organizations that can impact so many lives of young people in disadvantaged positions. The integral part of youth work practice needs to be **the social justice approach**, which also means an effort to achieve equality (equal access), equity (overcoming unfairness), rights, participation and diversity (recognizing and respecting differences).

1 The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027

2 The EU Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (2021)

3 Embracing Diversity – A Guide to Diversity Management for Organizations Active in Intercultural Youth Work (2021, SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre)

THE EDI GO RESEARCH

The goal of the research conducted within the **EDI GO project** was to investigate **young people's experiences of unconscious bias, social exclusion and discrimination** (in society and in youth organizations) as well as the **perceptions of youth workers** on the same topic. In addition, it was to investigate possible **barriers to participation** as well as **recommendations** on how youth organizations can be more inclusive of diverse groups of young people.

Between April and June 2023, the EDI GO team of researchers from five countries:

- selected **30 organizations** working with young people in their countries
- held **50 individual** semi-structured interviews with youth workers, and
- conducted **15 focus groups** with **99 young people** (aged 16-25).

The selected organisations belonged to two general categories: organisations working with the general population of youth and organisations that work specifically with youth (and families) with disadvantaged backgrounds. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants to provide conditions for the sharing of views and possible experiences of unconscious bias, prejudice, exclusion and discrimination in their lives and possibly their organisations.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

YOUTH WORKERS ABOUT DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND EXCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The interviewed youth workers shared what were the most common reasons for youth's vulnerability to discrimination, exclusion and/or lack of access to equal opportunities in their experience. The order of below listed reasons respond to the most often order of reasons the interlocutors described themselves.

Low socio-economic status

Different features of families with the low socio-economic status, such as spatial marginalization (living in rural and/or remote areas, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, refugee camps), NEET status (not being in employment, education or training), or single-parent families/families with mental health issues significantly contribute to vulnerability to discrimination and exclusion of young people. All this in turn has a negative effect on youth's academic success, job attainment and living standards.

“The pattern of socio-economic discrimination is perpetrated, the parents are unable to support their child so (s)he drops out of school.” (France)

“It is a whole social group, marginalised by poverty. The group is closed in itself, they don't go out of the neighbourhood and they don't know anything about the city.” (Italy)

Country of origin, race, ethnicity, religion or nationality

The youth workers named a number of different groups of young people, they work with, such as young migrants, Roma/travelling community, Muslim youth, as well as other ethnic and religious minorities that experience prejudice, social exclusion and discrimination in general society.

“Only Croatian citizens can be employed in our public system, so even if a young person with migrant status enrolls in nursing school, they cannot be employed in public health.” (Croatia)

“Many young people (with migrant backgrounds) in our town choose technical schools because they think they can't do anything else and teachers don't help them with guidance.” (Italy)

Gender inequality, people outside of cis normativity, sexual orientation

Being a young woman (gender inequality) or belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community are also determinants of being vulnerable to discriminatory and exclusionary practices recognized by youth workers. The transphobia in the society and its particularly discriminatory and even violent demeanour towards LGBTIQ+ young people are also reported. Inequality between young men and women was mentioned in all five countries, particularly the widespread gender stereotyping in workplace.

“I have met men who wanted jobs like secretarial work, beauty care or hairdressing, and they were put off. Or a girl in her IT training who was the only woman and was sometimes discriminated against.” (France)

“We live in a world of widespread masculinity.” (Italy)

Physical or cognitive disabilities, mental health issues

The youth workers reported exclusionary experiences of young people with physical, cognitive and/or psychological disabilities. The mental health issues occurring among young people was a frequent mentioned topic due to their salience during and after the pandemic. Although young people with impaired abilities might be supported during their education, they lack further support and have fewer opportunities after leaving school and entering the labour market.

“After finishing high school, they (young people with disability) usually don’t get a job, that’s where their social interaction that they had up to now ends (they moved in society, had some peers, acquaintances, and friends). And then they are left to the care of their families.” (Croatia)

“Young people have newly acquired anxiety from social situations from which they were ‘torn away’ for some time and they have difficulty just sitting close to each other at the workshop.” (Croatia)

Multiple vulnerability to discrimination, exclusion and/or lack of access to equal opportunities

Young people who belong to multiple disadvantaged groups are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and susceptible to various exclusionary practices, which matches both complex legal aspects of discrimination, and the concept of intersectionality - the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989)⁴. The youth workers reported disadvantages of young people that belong to multiple groups and identities: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers.

*“The knowledge of language is the fundamental passage to socialisation and to employment without ending in the trap of poor jobs (low income and hard work).”
(Italy)*

*“Many young people face multiple discrimination. For example, a young LGBT person living on an island - there is a very large number of those excluded...”
(Croatia)*

“For many minorities, negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices are everyday phenomena. There is a lack of awareness and understanding in the general population and especially in the people who are in power positions (parents, educators, coaches).” (Greece)

⁴ Crenshaw, K. (1989) “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

YOUTH WORKERS ABOUT BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

The interviewed youth workers shared their perspectives on the barriers to including a more diverse youth population in their work.

The organizations who work with general population of young people

Lack of time and resources

The youth workers are aware that their organisations lack human and other resources to become more inclusive. They would need more support and additional resources to allocate time and effort to include young people with for example physical disabilities or to include young people who speak only their native language, but not the language of the organisation.

“Despite us, employees, being willing to change and trying to promote diversity, we are trapped in rigid and inflexible procedures...which stem from the overall biased treatment from the state institutions and the limited support they tend to offer (about refugees).” (Greece)

“It is necessary to plan their inclusion (youth Roma) and adjust your programs so that it is not so far from their life and that it is possible for them to follow. Many organizations do not have so much time to invest and then the exclusion takes place – reinforcing their negative experience.” (Croatia)

Lack of initiative

The youth workers also recognized their own lack of initiative and not investing time and resources that they already have into attracting more diverse young people into organisational activities. They shared reluctance to apply for inclusion costs within different grants as this usually means much more work. They shared that it was easier to include motivated individuals from the general population into their organisations of whom some might have certain disadvantages. They report that the young people involved are usually those who have capacity and time to participate, have family support, live in the vicinity of the organisation and thus have more opportunities.

“Unfortunately, people who can access (our organisation) have no economic difficulties; they can afford to pay for the course and excursions. Even though there are grants, they are not accessible for everyone. This is the reason why most children are White and from well-being families.” (Spain)

Lack of staff training opportunities on EDI practices

The importance of EDI values and practices as common shared values are recognized by interviewed youth workers, both on personal and on professional level. However, these are not always easy to practice due to uncertainty on how to approach and work with some young people. Youth workers reported of usually not having the possibility to talk, share and resolve some insecurities about their work with young people of diverse backgrounds.

“For me personally...it was always a bit difficult how to balance including a young person with difficulty and not to make them feel different, so that this person feels as a part of a mini collective you create, and still get support.” (Croatia)

Lack of diversity among organizational staff

Some youth workers observed the homogeneity of their teams in terms of race, nationality, education and economic status, pointing out even gender stereotyped working positions while the community they work with was becoming increasingly diverse. They pointed out that having more diverse staff could be beneficial when working in diverse communities.

“We do think we need more diversity among our team. I mean, for us, it would be an added value to have people from different cultures and religions.” (Spain)

Lack of organizational diversity policies.

The youth workers also noticed that youth organisations often lack the organizational diversity policies in place as with no concrete policies on diversity and inclusion leave the organisational practice to leadership teams who may lack sensibility and awareness about these topics.

“Some level of formality would help, too much informality leaves room for blurred information and high levels of unawareness.” (Italy)

“Without explicit guidelines and structures in place to promote equality and address biases, prejudice can go unchecked and become ingrained in the organisational culture.” (Greece)

The organizations working with specific groups of young people in disadvantaged position

The youth workers working directly with disadvantaged young people mainly report **lack of resources and sometimes initiative** to support young people they work with to participate in the opportunities that other youth organizations offer. They recognize the importance of supporting their youth to participate in organisations that would provide them networking potential outside of their community. For example, youth with disability, migrant background or Roma youth, are more hesitant to apply and participate in opportunities that other organisations provide (for example Erasmus+ mobility) even when all costs are covered.

“It is my next mission, to find some organisations that will help them (migrant youth) and that do not revolve always about the same topic (migrant), but to find some other contents that would help them to open up to others and that others open up to them, so that it really becomes an integration like two way path.” (Croatia)

YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND EXCLUSION

The young people in focus groups talked about the reasons that make them and their peers vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion and/or having less access to different opportunities. **Difference to youth workers' perspectives** can be seen in the order of the mentioned categories of youth's vulnerability to discrimination and exclusion that young people identified but also **additional categories the adults did not report** like physical appearance, academic success and age.

Race, ethnicity, religion

"Migrant background is not so important as long as it is not visible in a way that you are white. If you are not white, your migrant background becomes a basis for discrimination." (Croatia)

"Okay, I think nationality certainly plays a role as well, that is, in jobs, a Greek prefers to hire a Greek. It has been a bit like that since the old days." (Greece)

Sexual orientation and gender (outside of cis-normativity)

"Although the western world is making progress, I still feel if you are anything but straight you grow up feeling ashamed because you are different and excluded from many things." (Croatia)

"People don't have any knowledge about trans identity." (France)

Socio-economic status

"Without a job, it is also very hard to find a house and this leads eventually to extreme conditions of vulnerability, addictions, mental and physical diseases and marginalisation." (Italy)

Disabilities, physical and mental health status

"It does not matter how obvious or not it is (mental health issues), functional or dysfunctional you are, once you inform someone about your challenges, their behaviour changes and not in a good way." (Greece)

Physical appearance

“It happens at parties sometimes, if you don’t dress as it is expected they might not let you in.” (Spain)

Academic success

“Teachers grade you by looking at other teacher’s grades that they gave you. This is injustice being evaluated this way.” (Croatia)

Age

“Boomers are super loyal. They worked 50 years for the same company and they say that we, the generation Z and millennials, have no loyalty because we want to change our job. But it’s not because of the loyalty, it’s because the world is changing so fast and we need attention and we are craving for learning different things, we are different, physically, psychologically, emotionally, everything is different for us.” (Croatia)

YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

The young people in focus groups identified different barriers that hinder the participation of young people in youth organisations and these can be summarised in the following four categories:

Socio-economic status. Participants of the focus groups noticed that young people who participate in the work of youth organizations have extra time and no existential worries. For example, opportunities that some youth organisations offer to young people, such as youth exchanges and other mobility programs are types of activities for which one needs to have some expenses covered and free time to invest.

Disability. Young people with different disabilities, physical, cognitive and psychological, most often need additional support to participate in various activities. The young people recognized that certain activities organised by the youth organisations (for example, activities in the mountains, or physically demanding activities) are inaccessible for young people with physical disabilities.

Migrant status, cultural diversity and language barrier. It was recognized that young people participating in their youth organisations most often represent the country's majority population. Various reasons were mentioned in focus groups why it is difficult for young people with migrant status to participate in the work of youth organisations. Unresolved legal status, inability to travel, unfamiliarity of the local language or opportunities, makes them unable to take part in the work of youth organisations.

Living in remote areas, refugee camps or disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Young people mentioned that if one lives in rural areas, remote areas or islands (during winter) they almost certainly lack opportunities to participate in youth activities. One young person participated in an online youth drama program and reported that young people from remote and rural areas appreciated this project as almost the only opportunity to participate in youth activity.

“My application for participation was rejected due to lack of experience. I don't understand; if I am excluded from such initiatives, how will I gain experience? Why is the rationale in youth organisations the same as in the labour market?”(Greece)

“It is not only a fact of money, but of contacts, having an occupation, having free time, etc. (to participate)” (Spain)

“Nothing can replace live communication, but sometimes online content is just as good because young people from all over Croatia can get involved.” (Croatia)



CONCLUSIONS

- Organizations that work directly with disadvantaged youth have a more in-depth insight into the scope of exclusion and discrimination youth faces.
- Organizations that work with the general population of youth have clear statement of support for values of equality, diversity, and inclusion in their work and, at the same time, express their insecurity and incapacity to reach out and include more disadvantaged youth.
- With experiences of not being accepted in wider society, young people with disadvantaged backgrounds tend to seek security and acceptance within their own groups.
- Some disadvantaged youth, such as newly arrived migrants and refugees or Roma youth, have particularly unequal access to the education system and job market as they encounter already existing structural inequalities that are additionally enhanced by the language barrier.
- The youth with disabilities, although integrated into the education system, usually, after finishing their formal education, end up in their family's care, and they end up deprived of social situations and contact with their peers.
- All countries report unequal treatment and gender-biased behaviour towards young women and men and discriminatory and exclusionary behaviour towards LGBTQI+ youth.
- The exclusion and discrimination of young people is additionally enhanced if they simultaneously belong to multiple disadvantaged groups, for example a young person who does not speak local language, lives in a remote area and has a different racial and/or religious background than the majority population.
- Very often, just being young by itself puts people in a disadvantaged position because of lack of status, life experience, and power.

Therefore, **youth organisations, but also all organizations working with and/or employing young people**, depending on their capacity, profile, and scope of work, need to make an effort **to undergo organisational and structural changes** to become (more) inclusive towards youth with various backgrounds.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The youth workers and young people from five countries provided **extensive recommendations** on how their organizations can become more equal, diverse, and inclusive, as well as concrete **good practices** that already exist in these organizations.

Some of the key recommendations to youth organizations on how to reach and engage more young people of diverse backgrounds and identities that can be identified are:

- Review current inclusive processes and design potential reach they can achieve for diverse youth in their communities.
- Develop or improve organizational policies and/or protocols that integrate the values of equality, diversity, and inclusion into concrete organizational practices.
- Review current recruitment practices and create conditions for more diverse recruitment of staff and volunteers.
- Choose a horizontal approach to making these changes and include young people as well as staff and volunteers in these processes to ensure a bottom-up approach and not only a top-down approach to these changes. Therefore, increasing the ownership and commitment of everyone.
- Create partnerships with underrepresented communities and organizations to get access to diverse young people and the knowledge and expertise their staff have on inclusion and diversity.
- Ensure in-service training opportunities for staff and volunteers about how to be more inclusive, how to deal with discriminatory and exclusionary situations in their work, how to use inclusive language, and how to improve their intercultural competencies.
- Review and improve communication with diverse young people, their families, and communities, aiming for recognition and visibility of their identities and backgrounds.
- Review and adapt direct activities with young people, aiming to strengthen everyone's commitment and competency for equality, diversity, and inclusion.

“It’s the simple, inspiring idea that when members of different groups — even groups that historically dislike one another — interact in meaningful ways, trust and compassion bloom naturally as a result, and prejudice falls by the wayside.”⁵

5 Singal, Jesse. (2017) “The Contact Hypothesis Offers Hope for the World.” New York Magazine: The Cut, 10 Feb. 2017. <https://www.thecut.com/2017/02/the-contact-hypothesis-offers-hope-for-the-world.html>





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