Key issues in applying equality, diversity and inclusion in youth organizations – experience of five eu countries

THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

IMPRESSUM

"Key issues in applying equality, diversity and inclusion in youth organizations – experience of five EU countries" - THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

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CONTENT

ABOUT THE PROJECT

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 at 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 the youth work organisations have in our everyday practice. We as youth work organisations' leaders, educators, trainers and practitioners need to develop and continuously improve our knowledge, skills and experience in order to meet the challenges that practice of inclusion, diversity and equality requires.

The project *EDI GO – introducing the organisational approach to integration of **equality, diversity, inclusion** model in working with young people* anticipates developing the whole-organisational approach to reviewing one's own EDI practices within different aspects of the organisation thus potentially initiating a process of the organisational systematic change. The resources developed within the *EDI GO* project would thus support organisations working with young people to review their inclusive practices and provide recommendations on how to improve them.

The first key step was to investigate young people and youth workers' perspectives and experiences of unconscious bias, prejudice, social exclusion and discrimination and to track their good practices and recommendations for improvement of equality, diversity and inclusion in youth work. The findings in front of you are to inform the development of the **EDI GO Tool Box** that would provide guidelines in ensuring EDI values by using the whole-organisational approach.

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INTRODUCTION

The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 recognizes that young people face specific challenges related to uncertainties about their future due to globalisation and climate change, technological change, demographic and socioeconomic trends, populism, discrimination, social exclusion, fake news and so on. According to **the EU Youth Goal *#3 Inclusive societies***, 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.

The EU Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (2021) as well as the above *The EU Youth Strategy* recognize the importance of reaching out to disadvantaged groups and also equipping youth workers with the necessary competences to successfully manage and support diversity. This would significantly contribute to positive interaction with different inclusion groups, regardless of their ethnicity, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality, skin colour, socio-economic background, appearance, educational level, language spoken, etc. Supporting a positive response to diversity will ultimately benefit young people with fewer opportunities, their inclusion in society and access to more equal opportunities.

Only in inclusive societies will everyone – irrespective of diverse backgrounds and identities – be able to fully contribute to the best of their abilities. **Being inclusive can be understood as giving equal access and opportunities to everybody, no matter their background and identities**[1]. 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 made a significant impact on so many lives of young people in disadvantaged positions. The integral part of the youth work practice is 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).

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

Within the mentioned project *EDI GO*, the partner organizations from France, Italy, Greece, Spain and Croatia selected 30 organizations working with young people in their countries and held conversations with their youth workers and young people. The goal was to investigate their **perceptions on young people's experience of unconscious bias, social exclusion and discrimination** as well as possible barriers to their participation in youth organizations alongside recommendations on how youth organizations can be more inclusive of diverse groups of young people. The findings presented here are to inform the development of the youth work resources promoting organizational policies and practices that support equality, diversity and inclusion in youth work.

SHORT THEORETICAL REVIEW

Young people, who are at the focal point of this research, experience exclusion or discrimination at some point in their lives and **their discriminatory experiences are in fact enhanced due to belonging to a certain group** based for example on race, ethnicity, religion, and disability. When talking about **social exclusion** of young people, we need to understand its **connection to discrimination** as well as **behaviours they resort to in order to feel less excluded**.

Here we will illustrate social-psychological concepts of social exclusion, discrimination and their consequences on individuals and groups.

We need to keep in mind that their core principles are applicable in different contexts, can be observed across different groups of people and that **understanding the context** in which individuals and groups interact **is essential** since it **provides a frame for making decisions** when working with individuals and groups.

Social exclusion refers to keeping an individual or group **out of social situations** and typically occurs in the context where the individual or group is believed to possess undesirable characteristics. Social exclusion has **negative consequences** on young people such as poor health and well-being,

academic underachievement, antisocial and criminal behaviour, or reduced access to housing, employment and social justice. Additionally, when young people are excluded from a group, they lose all the psychological and material benefits associated with being the part of any group like social networks, social and informational support or access to resources.

Young people **belonging to racial and ethnic groups** are particularly susceptible to social exclusion that has negative effects on their physical health and well-being. Cultural differences in lifestyle, material wealth, educational attainment, job security, housing conditions and access to healthcare services (Mays, Cochran & Barnes, 2007) are just some of the factors that **additionally affect** excluded ethnic and racial groups of young people. However, young people can be excluded from a group for virtually any reason, but it has to be important to the group and its members. For example, young individuals can be excluded from a group because of their music or fashion preferences, while within the group of adults, music or fashion choices may be irrelevant.

Social exclusion is closely related with **discrimination**, which, in its essence, indicates that individuals or groups of people are disadvantaged while other individuals or groups are having advantage in various social situations. Discrimination can happen on a structural **or institutional level** which can be seen in social or organizational policies and practices that negatively affect, for example, young people of different colour, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion or age. Due to discriminatory institutional practices, young people can be hired, fired or treated differently just because they belong to a certain group. Discrimination is also present on an **individual level**, and can be observed when individual members of one group systematically disadvantage members of other groups or benefit to the detriment of members of other groups. Denial of employment to a young person with a disability, hostile verbal harassment directed to a young ethnic minority individual, or physically assaulting a young gay man are examples of discrimination on an individual level.

Discriminatory behaviour is regulated by the national law of each EU member state, and on a broader, EU level, EU Charter of fundamental rights prohibits discriminatory behaviour on the grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnicity, social origin, genetic features, language, religion of belief, political or other opinions, belonging to a national minority, property, birth, disability, age, or sexual orientation. However, there are differences among EU countries in the scope of discriminatory behaviour addressed by the national law, together with situations in which discriminatory behaviour can occur. Regardless of legal or psychological aspects of discrimination, **discriminated and socially excluded individuals and groups suffer similar consequences**. This is particularly visible in cases of youth's racial discrimination, which is related to poor health, depressive symptoms or lower level of

life satisfaction, and children who are rejected by their peers engage in less prosocial and more antisocial behaviours than those who are accepted.

One mechanism to remedy negative effects of exclusion and discrimination is for **the members to increase their loyalty to their own group** by identifying more strongly with it. This allows individuals to feel included in a group and can easily prepare in cases of threats coming from other groups (Abrams, 2015; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stott, Hutchison & Drury, 2001). However, this approach can produce further negative consequences – individuals feel accepted, but the whole group can start behaving differently than before that can make this group become **more excluded from wider society**.

However, belonging to different groups can determine how individuals perceive themselves, which is known as **a social identity** (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Individuals and members of a group **want to have a positive self-concept**, and **use various strategies to improve their social position** in relation to other groups, which in turn enhances their social identity. If young people, irrespective of the group they belong to (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) do not have a positive self-concept, and perceive an opportunity to feel better about themselves, they might take (il)legitimate action to achieve this goal. For example, youth might display deviant behaviour in school or local community or advocate their rights in students' board in school.

This is why it is **important to understand what strategies young people use** in order to improve their position in a society, irrespective of the group they belong, and what can facilitate **positive inter-group attitudes that are a prerequisite for inclusion**, thus giving us a frame to better understand the research findings presented in this report.

Psychologist Gordon Allport formulated in 1954 his famous **contact hypothesis** that has had massive **influence on improving relationships between groups**. According to Allport's hypothesis (1954), members of opposing groups can improve their relationships and reduce prejudice just from **interacting one with another**. In order for this to happen, certain conditions need to be met. For example, **groups should have equal status**, **they should cooperate on solving mutual problems**, and they **should be able to get to know each other better** and **be supported by the institutions**.

If we look for further recommendations for improving relationships among diverse groups, the literature points out that **direct interaction between groups and their members is not always necessary** in order to improve mutual relationships. For example, extended contact means that attitudes towards other groups can be improved just by knowing that a member of one's own group has a close friend from another group (Wright et al, 1997, Vezzali, et al, 2017). Also, there is evidence that simply asking people to imagine interacting with members of other groups can improve their inter-group attitudes (Turner, Crisp & Lambert, 2007). Additionally, evidence suggests that contact alone can often produce improved attitudes that can be generalized beyond the individuals to the entire group (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

Youth workers in general, and particularly the ones who work with disadvantaged youth, can **use the knowledge elaborated within the contact hypothesis** to reduce exclusion and increase inclusion of young individuals into a group. Youth workers and young people we talked to in this research shared their experience of social exclusion and discrimination as well as their positive experience and good practices that emerge from this hypothesis – working to ensure a safe and inclusive environment where young people can feel safe and accepted.

Despite the astonishing **power that contact can have on interpersonal and inter-group relationships**, there is nevertheless plenty of missed opportunity for contact in youth work as well as the one that can lead us in an unwanted direction if not planned adequately. It is therefore **important that as youth workers we learn further about circumstances and nature of contact experiences**, and be aware that the same contact situation may be perceived quite differently by different youth groups and young individuals. Hopefully, the research findings presented below can provide some contribution to our learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants of this research were 99 young people and 50 youth workers, beneficiaries and staff of 30 youth organisations from Spain, France, Italy, Croatia and Greece. These young people, aged from 16 to 25, participated in focus groups while the partner organisation's project coordinators between April and June 2023 interviewed youth workers and other expert staff.

The project partners developed and used **the research protocol** that included three key themes:
- perspectives on discrimination, prejudice, exclusion and unconscious bias toward young people;
- barriers to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) of young people in youth organisations;
- good practice examples of EDI and recommendations on how to improve EDI practices in their organisations.

The aim was to investigate perspectives and experiences of youth workers and young people about discrimination, prejudice and unconscious bias towards young people in their societies. Simultaneously, possible discriminatory and exclusionary practices in youth organisations and their recommendations on improving youth organisation's policies and practices of equality, diversity and inclusion were being detected. As mentioned before, the findings would facilitate the development of resources such as *EDI Toolbox* that would support youth workers in raising awareness and creating specific steps necessary for improving both EDI policies and practices applicable in their organizations.

It is important to note that direct working with young people was the key criteria for selecting organisations to participate in the research. Partners decided to invite in the research the organisations of diverse profiles to gain more diversified views on practices that might be exclusionary and discriminatory to participation of young people. Anonymity of results was guaranteed by explaining that names of individuals or organisations will be kept confidential and will not be mentioned in the report. This approach turned out to be successful and facilitated the sharing of views and possible experiences of unconscious bias, prejudice, exclusion and discrimination in their lives and possibly their organisations.

The selected organisations can be divided into two general categories: (1) organisations working with the general population of youth and (2) organisations who work specifically with youth (and families) with disadvantaged backgrounds.

The core activities among the organisations working with the general **population of young people** are for example those of international volunteering, youth mobilities (Erasmus + programs), those working in the field of sport as well as scout activities and grass-root youth work. Two youth organisations worked on promoting anti-mafia agenda and two partners (Greece and Croatia) also included each one **school** (vocational high school).

Other involved organisations were those working directly with **young people with disadvantaged backgrounds such as organizations exclusively working with** Roma/Travelling youth, young people with migrant status, young people in a need of employment opportunities (NEET population) and young people with mental and physical disabilities.

This distinction between two profiles of organizations involved proved to be significant as they had, to certain level, different knowledge on discrimination and exclusion certain youth groups experience. For example, organisations who work with general youth had less in-depth view about their problems of exclusion and discrimination than organisations who work with disadvantaged youth.

After the implementation of interviews and focus groups, every partner organisation wrote a country report (technical report). Lead partner compared the qualitative data from national reports, using thematic analysis and drafted the comparative report.

In total, 50 individual interviews and 15 focus groups (three per country) have been implemented and 99 young people participated in 15 focus groups.

RESEARCH RESULTS FINDINGS

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH WORKERS

Perspectives on discrimination, prejudice and exclusion of young people in society

The interviewed youth workers from the five countries shared their views about discrimination, prejudice and unconscious bias in the lives of young people they work with, and their observations about possible exclusionary and/or discriminatory practices within their organisations. They shared perceptions of good practices that promote inclusion, equality and diversity and listed further recommendations for improving these inclusionary practices in working with young people.

From the youth workers perspective, **the most common reasons for being vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion and/or lack of access to equal opportunities** can be described by the following categories:

1. low socio-economic status
2. country of origin, race, ethnicity, religion or nationality
3. gender inequality; people outside of cis normativity; sexual orientation
4. physical or cognitive disabilities, mental health issues

Low socio-economic status of young people and their families has been identified by youth workers as the reason for being vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion and lack of access to equal opportunities. 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 (not being in employment, education or training), or single-parent families/families with mental health issues additionally contribute to **further 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 he drops out of school." (Youth worker, 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." (Youth worker, Italy)

"This is especially visible if they (rural youth) move to urban areas for education or work, in that they simply do not have the same starting positions, both in terms of cultural and social capital, which is later perpetuated in their psychological problems as well as in building relationships in terms of social networks." (Youth worker, Croatia)

The country of origin, race, ethnicity, religion or nationality of young people have been identified by youth workers as another factor of being vulnerable to social exclusion and discrimination. They 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. Each country has their own specific issues with particular social categories of young people mentioned above. For example, the youth worker from **France** pointed out stigmatised media portrayal of youth with immigrant background living in certain territories. In **Croatia**, Roma and Serbian national minorities were identified by youth workers as the ultimately most often discriminated against due to their ethnic/national/religious background. **Croatian** youth workers also pointed out various bureaucratic procedures that made it difficult for young migrants to enrol in school, leaving them without opportunities to be educated and build support systems. Youth workers from **France** and **Italy** highlighted the discrimination rooted in historical or institutional reasons, towards the migrant population, that spans even to the second or third generation of migrants. Consequently, some of these communities become closed groups and as one youth worker pointed out,

'They only speak to themselves'. The youth worker from Italy (Sicily) shares that 'kids at school unfortunately stay with peers of the same cultural background'.

It was also reported by **Greek** youth workers, particularly teachers, that school principals sometimes refuse to register migrants and refugees in their schools. In addition, there are no reception classes for refugees and migrants in schools or that students and parents do not get sufficient information

about the Greek education system and these are just some of the exclusionary and discriminatory practices young people with refugee status experience within the educational system. Refugee youth living in the camps or migrant youth in the suburbs are particularly susceptible to these exclusionary and discriminatory practices, which are intensified by the **language barrier** leading to further isolation of young people in schools, consequently affecting their socialization, academic grades and future prospects.

"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." (Youth worker, Italy)

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

"The political consensus is that the Roma should be helped, no one disputes about these things, but they are helped within the framework of the categories and boxes that are set for everyone else…The same thing happens with migrants." (Youth worker, Croatia)

Being young woman (gender inequality) as well as young people belonging to LGBTIQ+ community are also determinants of being vulnerable to discriminatory and exclusionary practices recognized by youth workers. **Croatian** youth workers pointed out that young people are extremely careful not to disclose their sexual orientation or transgender identity at their jobs or university in order to avoid discrimination. At the same time, youth workers reported transphobia in the society and its particularly discriminatory and even violent demeanour towards LGBTIQ+. Inequality between young men and women was mentioned in all five countries, particularly the widespread gender stereotyping in workplace as well as gender-based violence. A youth worker in **Italy** reported discriminatory practices and lack of understanding across sectors and social areas about young people with transgender identity.

"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, she was sometimes discriminated against." (Youth worker, France)

"We live in a world of widespread masculinity." (Youth worker, 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, and the approach is inherently set for those who are easier to reach (both with state institutions and for civil society)." (Youth worker, Croatia)

"On social networks, homosexuals are subject to a lot of discrimination." (Youth worker, France)

Physical or cognitive disabilities as well as mental health issues of young people were also reported by youth workers as the determinants of discrimination and exclusion as well as unconscious bias. The mental health issues occurring among young people was obviously the topic among youth workers, due to their salience during and after the pandemic. The youth workers reported exclusionary experiences of young people with either physical, cognitive and psychological disabilities. 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. Additionally, youth workers in **Croatia** and **Italy** pointed out that young people with cognitive disabilities **tend to resort to self-isolation** due to lack of necessary support. However, **Croatian** youth worker who works on daily basis with these young people explained that in **her experience the self-isolation could sometimes be avoided by encouraging interaction between young people with and without disabilities, resulting them having a qualitative time together and better integration**. Youth workers who work directly with young people with disabilities highlighted the importance of having youth with disabilities in activities that are aimed for the general population of youth. This remark was made with regard to the printed and other visual materials youth organisations produce, because youth with disabilities are underrepresented in visual materials made by youth organisations who work with the general youth population.

"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, friends). And then they are left to the care of their families." (Youth worker, Croatia)

"Young people have newly acquired anxiety from social situations from which they were 'torn away' for some time and sometimes they have difficulty sitting close to each other at the workshop." (Youth worker, Croatia)

"Disability is seen as a taboo, and even in this one-to-one relationship is failing. Group work needs to be done." (Youth worker, Italy)

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Besides the above-mentioned basis for social exclusion and discrimination of young people, the youth workers have also referred to **multiple reasons for discrimination and exclusion,** indicating that 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[2]. For example, Roma girls and Muslim women with veils are reported to be vulnerable to discrimination due to their religion/ethnicity but also because of their gender as their religious/ethnic communities but also society in general provide fewer opportunities for girls. In the opinion of an interviewee, Muslim women in France who wear the veil when looking for internships or jobs leads to an additional discrimination as Muslim men don't necessarily have a visible sign of their religion.

Another example was of the young migrant vulnerable to discrimination due to his race (and religion), refugee status (unresolved legal status) and spatial distance from job opportunities (living in the refugee camp outside of the city). The youth workers, particularly those working directly with disadvantaged youth, described different intersecting inequalities that these young people experience in society.

The language barrier was the most prominent exclusionary factor for young people with migrant and/or refugee status alongside **the complex bureaucratic procedures** that significantly hinder access to secondary and high education as well as employment. In **France**, several interviewees explained that some neighbourhoods in rural or more disadvantaged areas face less access to employment opportunities, financial resources and other institutional obstacles (access to care, jobs) so these communities encounter numerous perpetuating problems. The interviewed youth

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[2] Intersectionality (or intersectional theory) is a term first coined in 1989 by American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. It is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. It asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers.

workers in **France** explained that young people living in these circumstances often feel reluctant to get out of their neighbourhoods and rather stay in isolation to avoid discrimination.

So-called "protective isolation" was also reported by the **Croatian** youth worker working with young Roma people. According to her, it is difficult to take Roma people into new settings, as they would not feel accepted by the majority so *'the way they protect themselves is to simply not expose themselves to those situations.* In addition, youth workers described stigmatisation of disadvantaged young people in media and social networks, therefore many young people experience rejection from the "mainstream" population. In **Greece**, youth workers described particular disdain from the local population toward refugees and widespread 'us vs. them' attitude.

"There is a lack of understanding, complaints from the dominant population for more favourable treatment of minorities, unequal treatment… building an Us vs. Them attitude." (Youth worker, Greece)

"…they (Roma youth) have a harder time deciding on something new, they are not sure how they will be accepted there (other youth organisations) and that is why they are looking for additional support for them to get involved at all. They respond well to social mentoring." (Youth worker, Croatia)

"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)." (Youth worker, Italy)

"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)." (Youth worker, Greece)

Barriers to participation in youth organisations

Youth workers were also asked to reflect on **barriers to participation** of diverse young people in their own organisations recognizing that due to lack of different resources and opportunities their own organisations are not as inclusive as they could be.

The barriers for including more diverse youth population as reported by youth workers are the following:

1. **lack of time and resources** of organizations with general population of young people,
2. **lack of initiative** of organizations with general population of young people,
3. **lack of resources and initiative of organizations working with disadvantaged young people**,
4. **lack of staff training opportunities** on equality, diversity and inclusion practices,
5. **lack of diversity among organizational staff** and
6. **lack of organizational diversity policies**.

Due to lack of time and resources, the organisations who work with the general population of young people are often having difficulties to adapt their activities to young people with disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, for youth with disability an organization needs to get additional support for a guardian if the activity includes travel and stay in various places. The diverse participants require extra skill and resources from organizations to adapt for example the training content to the largely differing language capacity if having Roma or migrant young people and national language speaking young people. Despite being aware of the importance of inclusion, youth workers are aware that their organisations lack human and other resources to become more inclusive. Youth workers report that they would need major support, additional resources and time to include young people with physical disabilities who need supporting guardians. Additional challenge is to include young people who speak only their native language, but not the language of the organisation. This implies that the organisation should become multilingual, both in verbal and written communication which is an organisational demand most of youth organisations cannot achieve. One experienced mobility youth worker from **Italy** noticed that *'even if there is the "inclusion budget", it is really difficult for small organisations to include people with disabilities.'*

"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." (Youth worker, Spain)

"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)." (Youth worker, 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." (Youth worker, Croatia)." (Youth worker, Croatia)

These youth workers also recognized their own **lack of initiative** and not investing time and resources that 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. Youth workers reported it was easier to include motivated individuals from the general population into their organisations of whom some might have certain disadvantages. Therefore, young people involved in the work of the organisation are usually those who have capacity and time to participate, have family support, live in the vicinity of the organisation thus have more opportunities. Youth workers working directly with disadvantaged young people reported a lack of initiative from youth organisations to customize their activities to a more diverse youth population. Another important aspect is the lack of initiative to directly detect the needs of disabled youth and use this information to develop organisational projects. **It seems that youth organisations have a well-established pattern by which they work and need to invest conscious effort to redirect their resources to youth with disabilities and other more diverse groups.** Not all youth organisations have the capacity to do so but also not attempting as well. Hence they keep working as they have, leaving disadvantaged youth with less opportunities to participate in the work of youth organisations.

"Even at school, there are no Arabic or French projects despite the fact that for 50 years we have been living all together with our cultural and language differences." (Youth workers, Italy)

"The minority youth is not aware of the existence of youth organizations and what they can offer." (Youth worker, Greece)

"If we only pretend to listen to their opinions (young people) and not really hear them, it is disappointment that leads to withdrawal and to find their own groups where they will feel that they are heard and understood." (Youth worker, Croatia)

Organizations working directly with disadvantages young people recognized their own lack of resources and sometimes initiative to support young people they work with. This can be seen in supporting disadvantaged 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. The **Croatian** youth worker reported that involving young Roma people in youth organisations means making an effort to adapt for example workshops (education, training) to their needs (duration, topics, language). *'For them it is often an obstacle to their participation because they are afraid that they won't understand something, and because of that, the environment will somehow reject them and make fun of them'.* However, the youth workers recognised the importance of experiences outside of disadvantaged youth's community for personal and social development of disadvantaged youth.

"It is my next mission, to find some other 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." (Youth worker, Croatia)

"Young people with disabilities need to participate in other organisations, it builds their confidence, contributes to their personal development, they are full of enthusiasm." (Youth worker, Croatia)

Lack of training opportunities on equality, diversity and inclusion practices are named as another barrier to include a more diverse population of young people in their work. The interviewed youth workers recognized the importance of promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion as common shared values, both on personal and on professional level. However, these are not always easy to practise due to **low level of awareness and sensibility** 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**, which subsequently leads to youth's exclusion. Positive examples come from organisations in **Spain** and

France that reported having gender equality strategy in place and provision of the staff awareness training on for example transgender young people. However, a number of interviewed **youth workers from all five countries exhibited a certain degree of unconscious bias** when talking about various disadvantaged groups and possibilities about including them in their work. Reason for not doing so was justified by the lack of awareness and training opportunities, despite identifying themselves with the values of diversity, inclusion and equality. One youth worker talked about taking the neutral approach, meaning that they advocate for seeing all young people the same, which could lead to oversight of the needs and challenges that disadvantaged young people encounter.

"We do not even care if they have an immigration profile because how much does it matter? The idea is young people without any label, without any categorisation, because that is what people are. If people are put into categories, the game is over; there is no equal society." (Youth worker, Greece)

"There is often a lack of knowledge among youth workers about mental health difficulties young people have." (Youth worker, Italy)

"Stereotypes are ingrained in us, even if we are not consciously racist. Society stereotypes sometimes are ingrained in us." (Youth worker, France)

"We can also stigmatise when we are trying to de-stigmatize. We have to train ourselves to avoid reproducing these things." (Youth worker, France)

"It is easy to say that you are open to all religions but difficult to do. But it is very cool to say it." (Youth worker, Spain)

"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." (Youth worker, Croatia)

Lack of diversity among the organizational staff was another aspect that some youth workers observed when talking about diversity. Some 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. Youth workers pointed out that having more diverse staff could be beneficial when working in diverse communities, consequently having their beneficiaries feel more supported, understood and accepted within the youth organisations. This could lead to young people's increased access to educational opportunities that would otherwise be harder to reach. Some youth workers underlined the current underrepresentation of either men or women in their youth organisation, caused by the organization's historical development, and the influence it might have on the gender of young people who would join the organisation in the future. Most importantly, one youth worker (**Greece**) observed how decision-making processes within organisations may lack diverse perspectives and representations *'thus leading to the neglect of the unique needs and concerns of people who do not hold a power position in the organisation'*.

"In the board only 2 out of 10 people are women and this is the reason why women don't get closer and don't feel heard." (Youth worker, Italy)

"I became aware that we don't have people working who are at a lower level of education or with disabilities." (Youth worker, Spain)

"We need more diversity in our team, it would be an added value to have people from different cultures and religions." (Youth worker, Spain)

The youth workers also noticed that the youth organisations **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. In addition, many organisations, according to one youth worker from the **Greek** sports organisation, *'do not have robust mechanisms in place for reporting and addressing discriminatory incidents thus creating a climate of silence and fear'.* Youth workers from one **Spanish** organisation described how they initiated the discussion within the organisation about including participants from lower SES, and not mostly having participants from middle and high social stratum families. Another youth worker from **Greece** observed that organisations with hierarchical organisational culture have less sensibility for inclusion and diversity policies and practices than organisations with collaborative and participative culture.

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

"Structure (within the organisation) that thinks that talking about discrimination is not necessary when this will help things move forward." (Youth worker, France)

"In many sport organisations the concepts of diversity and inclusions are not well-defined therefore anti-discriminatory policies are not strong and engaging. Without explicit guidelines and structures in place to promote equality and address biases, prejudice can go unchecked and become ingrained in the organisational culture." (Youth worker, Greece)

Finally, the project coordinators who interviewed youth workers reported that all youth workers **reported willingness, curiosity and interest in how to improve their** proactivity and inclusiveness as well as expressing interest in the continuation of *EDI GO* project activities (resources and training).

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Perspectives on discrimination, prejudice and exclusion of young people in society

Ninety-nine young people that participated in the 15 focus groups in five countries shared their perspectives on experiences of discrimination and social exclusion of young people in their countries. Their perspectives and perceptions are **somewhat similar to those of the youth workers**. It is important to note that the intended age of participants was from 16 to 25; however, two focus groups from **Italy** and **Greece** involved older young people (up to 35).

The young people shared their definitions and understanding of discrimination, prejudice and exclusion. There was a common understanding among them that they all experience discrimination,

exclusion and unequal opportunities to some degree. The reasons for young people's vulnerability to above mentioned problems depended upon the societal and country specific contexts as well as their disadvantaged background. The young people mentioned the following reasons that make them vulnerable to discrimination, prejudice and exclusion and/or having less access to different opportunities:

1. Race, ethnicity, religion
2. Sexual orientation and gender (outside of cis-normativity)
3. Socio-economic status
4. Disabilities, physical and particularly mental health status
5. Physical look
6. Academic success
7. Age

Race, ethnicity, religion. Race and migrant background have been mentioned as reasons for vulnerability to discrimination as well as to having fewer opportunities. The participants from **France** and **Spain** shared experiences of being victims of racial profiling in public transport, them being questioned by police and not their present White friends. The youth in **Greece** recognized that racial background determines access to employment and differential treatment at work. In **Croatia**, young people were mentioning the example of young Roma people who change their names in order to hide their Roma ethnic background in order to improve their prospects. Additionally, a young person with migrant background **(Croatia)** shared experience of the specific institutional barriers that aggravated access to education and jobs, while access to housing was lingered due to property owners' discriminatory behaviour.

"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." (Young person, 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." (Young person, Greece)

"The (Roma) community is affected by a huge stigma, people in Palermo don't know it at all." (Young person, Italy)

"Some employers told me that they do not employ foreigners, one even said they do not have room for refugees… I have to get used to it as it is everywhere, not only in Croatia." (Young person, Croatia)

Sexual orientation and gender (outside of cis-normativity). Another reason for discrimination and prejudice evident in all participant countries was gender discrimination and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ youth. Young people in **France** reported bullying and mocking that gay people are exposed to starting from early age continuing well into their adulthood. **French** youth reported discriminatory behaviour taking place on social networks with no consequences for those who commit it. Focus group participants from **Croatia** shared young people's openness with their sexual orientation thus breaking social taboos. Some of them also exhibited unconscious bias when talking about their LGBTQI+ peers, *"…gay young people should not carry their sexual orientation too openly so as not to provoke".* Another young person from **Croatia** mentioned examples of LGBTQI+ youth becoming homeless after being rejected by their families due to opening up about their sexual orientation. Young people in **Spain**, though, stressed out that gender equality is being taken seriously in their youth organisations and that youth workers are strategically raising awareness on this topic. On the other hand, young people in **Greece** (students) reported their teachers homophobic and transphobic behaviour. A young person with transgender identity in France reported perpetual misgendering and exclusion at work places and reported the good practice of the youth organisation whose job counsellor was educated and supportive of their identity.

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

"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." (Young person, Croatia)

I don't think it is such a big problem in our school. As long as it isn't stuck in your face. (Young person, Croatia)

"Many teachers are homophobic and transphobic!" (Young person, Greece)

Socio-economic status. Young people in **Italy** and **Greece** who work with disadvantaged youth indicated that Roma, migrant and refugee young people experience multiple discrimination in forms of racism by the ethnic majority, having access only to low paying jobs that do not provide sufficient financial resources. Young people point out socio-economic inequalities as the reason for exclusion by their peers and socialising opportunities because students who cannot afford expensive and branded clothes or latest technology are being mocked and excluded by their peers. Young people in **Spain** and **Croatia** noted that having style is more important than money and that aesthetic barriers could be obstacles for acceptance among peers.

"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." (Young person, Italy)

"Those who are in a high social class certainly see those in a lower social class as more disadvantaged." (Young person, Greece)

Disabilities, physical and particularly mental health status. Having physical disability and/or mental health issues have been recognized as a factor that often leads to exclusionary practices. Young people from **Spain** recognize the notion of living in an *ableist* society and how young people who have diverse capacities (physical, psychological, cognitive) have much more access to the same opportunities. **Croatian** young people report that youth living in **rural and/or remote areas** have less opportunity highlighting that buildings (facilities) with adequate infrastructure could provide young people some opportunities. Additionally, a young person with disability who participated in the **Croatian** focus group reported that people lack knowledge and skill on how to approach people with disabilities, leaving them invisible. Interesting remark was made by a young person with disability about people who avoid them, as they are afraid to be unintentionally discriminatory toward them. Young people in **Italy** and **Greece** observe young people with mental health issues being stigmatised, their difficulties are often taken as their own personal responsibility leading to exclusion by their peers simultaneously lacking professional support. Young people from one focus group from **France** report that due to bullying, many students suffer mental health issues (even suicide) at the same time lacking appropriate intervention by responsible adults.

"...and they will talk with that person (with disability), not everyone, but exclusively about their disability, and when the topic is exhausted, then we no longer have topics, which is funny to me, because disability is not what defines a person, it is only one of the characteristics, as well as the colour of hair, skin, eyes..." (Young person, Croatia)

"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." (Young person, Greece)

The young persons with impaired vision from **Croatian** focus group mentioned **extreme behaviours** such as *'they will totally ignore us' as a form of discrimination,* because people are not sure how to approach a visually impaired person. Additionally, they mentioned they might be **positively discriminated against** *'poor her, she needs to be helped first'*, which is nevertheless also discriminatory.

In addition to youth workers' reports, young people reported other reasons of prejudice and exclusion that takes place in their lives and that significantly influences their wellbeing. They particularly talked about **physical attractiveness and appearance, academic success and age** as something that guides their acceptance in society and among their friends.

Physical look and appearance as the reason for exclusion from their peers is often related with the influence of social media and **gender- stereotyped expectations**, such as the appearance of a typical boy or a girl. Mentioning **social class** in this context is important, as some young people could not afford brands perceived as desirable among their peers. Some young people said that these peer exclusions influenced their **self-esteem and well-being** which reflected in their **academic success**. Most young people reported that looks and fashion styles are the basis for division and exclusion particularly in schools, increasing the pressure to look and dress in a certain way.

"There is a certain standard (about the look). In a group of friends, people can be put aside and made fun of." (Young person, France)

"We (young people) tend to compare ourselves with others, what I have and you don't have, what he wears, what she wears, and things like that." (Young person, Greece)

"It happens at parties sometimes, if you don't dress as it is expected they might not let you in." (Young person, Spain).

Academic success was mentioned as the reason for exclusionary and unjust practices taking place in schools, where young people mentioned teachers' exclusionary practices of students obtaining lower grades. Consequently, academically successful students start mocking students with lower academic achievements. Students participating in the research have witnessed and experienced this injustice on a daily basis, particularly in high school. Some students in focus groups reported that their grades are also influenced by various issues their families are coping with, for example, lack of jobs or mental health issues.

"Poor or even middle-class families face multiple discrimination in education, from not being able to buy necessary stationery, to not being able to afford afternoon classes for SAT exams or studying in cities other than their hometowns." (Young person, Greece)

"Teachers grade you by looking at other teacher's grades that they gave you. This is injustice being evaluated this way." (Young person, Croatia)

Age. Young people also shared experiences of being discriminated against due to their **age**, particularly in employment. Young people in **France** and **Greece** reported discriminatory behaviour at work, being the target of various remarks about their age but also being fired with no justifiable explanation. Young people in one **Croatian** focus group observe differential treatment of young people through the lens of transgenerational criticism. According to them, discrimination appears when older generations in positions of power misunderstand and lack insights about the lives of young generations in contemporary world job market.

"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." (Young person, Croatia)

"It is said that children should always respect their elders because they are always right. Is it true though?" (Young person, Greece)

"I don't see you as a grown up but as a kid with a problem." (Young person, Italy)

Barriers to participation in youth organisations

Similar to youth workers, young people identified different barriers that hinder their participation in youth organisations.

1. Socio-economic status
2. Disability
3. Migrant status, cultural diversity and language barrier
4. Living in remote areas, refugee camps or 'closed' communities

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. One young person from **Greece** said she was not able to participate in youth initiatives because of financial reasons. Once she had the funds, her application was rejected due to her lack of experience *'I don't understand; if I am excluded from such initiatives, how I will gain experience? Why is the rationale in youth organisations the same as in the labour market?'* A young person from **Spain** noticed that *'it is not only a fact of money, but of contacts, having an occupation, having free time, etc.'*

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. One

focus group in **Croatia** comprised of young people with disabilities pointed out they can sometimes only participate in organisations that address the needs of disabled people leaving them with no choices based upon their interests *'disability is not what defines a person, it is only one of the characteristics, as well as the colour of hair, skin, eyes…'*.

Migrant status, cultural diversity and language barrier. It was recognized that young people participating in their youth organisations represent the country's majority population *("white people from our territory"* (young person, Spain). Various reasons were mentioned 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. For example, young people in **Spain** mentioned that all activities in their organisations are held only in Catalan, rarely in Spanish, almost never in English. Therefore, for some young people, the language barrier is the key barrier for participating in the work of an organisation. Another important aspect noticed by the interviewer in focus groups held in **Spain** was that young people exhibit **unconscious bias** toward young people of different cultural backgrounds who have religious beliefs *'well, these people who believe, they will evolve and understand'*. Even with the expressed attitude of having no prejudice against religious people, the interviewer observed young people's condescending views on religion practising young people.

Living in remote areas, refugee camps or disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Young people in **Croatia** mentioned that if you live in rural areas, remote areas or islands (during winter) you 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. One focus group in **Greece** reported that excluding young Roma people from participation in their activities was sometimes purely for logistic reasons, because the Roma minority lives in campgrounds in suburban areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Organisations who work with different profiles of youth have different insights into the scope of exclusion and discrimination youth faces.**

Youth organisations who work specifically with disadvantaged young people like youth with disability or with migrant background or Roma youth have an in-depth view into discriminative and exclusionary practices youth faces than youth organisations who work with the general population. The organizations who work with the general population of young people have clear declaratory support for values of equality, diversity and inclusion in their work and at the same time share their insecurity and incapacity to reach out and include more disadvantaged youth. Both youth workers and young people thus recognize that most of the young people involved in their organizations already have access to various opportunities in society as well as time and resources to participate and thus further enrich their prospects. Unlike them, young people from disadvantaged groups have less access to educational and job opportunities and with these existential worries, they less recognize the youth organizations as potential places of support and resources.

- **With experiences of not being accepted in wider society, the young people with disadvantaged backgrounds tend to seek security and acceptance within their own groups.**

Even though this self-protection is understandable, it also leads to some form of isolation of young people with disability, those of migrant and refugee status as well as Roma youth within the wider society and consequently having fewer opportunities for social situations that provide opportunities to build social capital – networks of different people and communities as resources for both their well-being and future prospects.

- **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 an already existing structural inequalities that is additionally enhanced by the language barrier.**

The youth organizations that work directly with this population play a significant role in integrating young people in society as they strategically plan their activities to meet the needs of their target

group and improve their life quality and future job and education prospects. In addition, in recent years some grass-root youth organizations have increased their awareness about the need to reach out to migrant youth living in their local communities. However, organizations working with the general population of young people, particularly the organizations who are large in their scope of work tend to omit these young people as much more strategic and organizational change is required to adapt their activities.

- **The youth with disability, although integrated into the education system, usually after finishing their formal education end up in their family's care and they are deprived of social situations and contact with their peers.**

Their participation in youth organizations that work with the general population of youth is scarce and often not planned due to real or assumed obstacles to their participation. The fact is that including young people with disabilities often needs additional resources that the youth organizations do not have. However, it seems the organisations who work with the general population of youth tend to make no effort to include youth with disability even when there are conditions for it as they express insecurity on how to treat them fairly within the youth groups. This can be observed in printed and on-line materials made by such organisations in which disabled youth are underrepresented or not presented at all.

- **All countries report unequal treatment and gender-biased behaviour toward young women and men and discriminatory and exclusionary behaviour toward LGBTQI+ youth.**

These young people experience exclusionary and discriminatory behaviour not only in the wider society but also in their families and schools thus leaving them without support and safe spaces. Some involved youth organizations have in place policies and practices that strategically work on improving gender equality in their organizations and unlike in wider society provide adequate support to these young people. These organizations recognized the need to introduce the organizational policy on gender equality as well as protocols that would guide staff and volunteers on dealing with these topics when working with young people.

- **Significant challenges for youth organisations to tackle discrimination and exclusion in society regarding young people who simultaneously belong to multiple disadvantaged groups.**

Besides belonging to the disadvantaged group, their exclusion can be enhanced by for example language barrier and/or living in remote areas or parts of the city that have various issues and less job opportunities. Unless youth organizations directly target them, they are much harder to reach in regular youth work activities. Notably, youth workers in this research and the young people they work with expressed that their organizations need to be more inclusive and to make more effort to reach them with their activities and thus tackle discrimination and exclusion they experience in wider society.

Therefore, youth organisations, depending on their capacity, profile and scope of work, need to make an effort **to undergo organisational and structural changes** in order to become (more) inclusive towards youth with various backgrounds. 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.

The key recommendations to youth organizations on how to reach and include more diverse young people are:

- To review current inclusive processes, and design potential reach they can achieve to diverse youth in their communities.
- To develop or improve organizational policies and/or protocols that would integrate the values of equality, diversity and inclusion into concrete organizational practices.
- To review current recruitment practices and create conditions for more diverse recruitment of staff and volunteers.
- To choose a horizontal approach to making of these changes and include young people as well as staff and volunteers in these processes as to ensure bottom-up approach and not only top-down approach to these changes. Therefore, increasing the ownership and commitment of everyone.
- To create partnerships with underrepresented communities and organizations to get access to diverse young people, knowledge, and expertise their staff have on inclusion and diversity.
- To 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, how to improve their intercultural competencies.
- To review and improve communication with diverse young people, their families and communities aiming for recognition and visibility of their identities and backgrounds.

- To review and adapt direct activities with young people, aiming for strengthening everyone's commitment and competency for equality, diversity and inclusion.

These recommendations and good practices are integrated into the EDI GO toolbox as they present the voice of youth workers and young people about their own experiences and views on creating inclusive environments for all young people.

Youth workers have the power to create a safe environment that would include youth of various backgrounds. As the literature suggests (Dovidio, 2017), providing opportunities for contact and collaboration among diverse young people enhances their mutual acceptance and provides them with opportunities to build their own networks and social contacts outside of their groups.

"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." (Jesse, 2017)

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