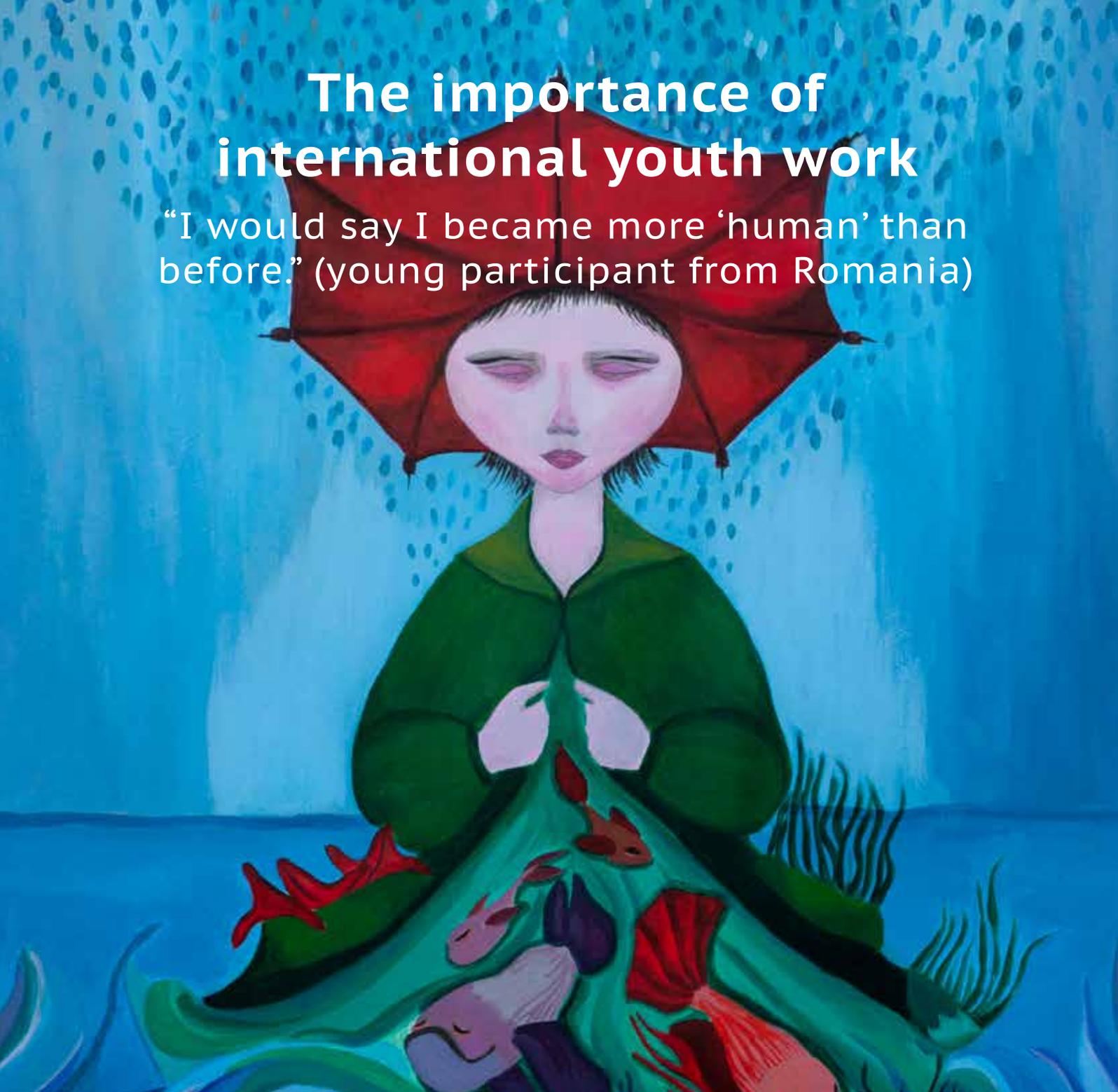


The importance of international youth work

“I would say I became more ‘human’ than before.” (young participant from Romania)





Lessons learned and recommendations of participatory youth research to evaluate the impact of international youth work

February 2019

Contributions by young researchers, artists, youth workers, European youth work organisations and the research group Social Work of the Saxion University of Applied Sciences.

The ImpACT+ exhibition is funded by the Erasmus+ youth programme. The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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Introduction

All over Europe, youth work organisations provide an alternative form of education for young people. This work methodology is better known as 'non-formal education', enacted in an international youth work setting. It is a form of education that allows young people to have agency in their own learning process, to find their intrinsic motivation for learning, to formulate their issues of concern, and to have an impact on their communities.

However, what is the actual contribution of international youth work to the development and education of young people? This exhibition has been designed to accompany the research results of an international and participatory youth research team. This research looked into the question of whether international youth work has an impact on the personal and professional development of young people and youth workers.

Seven young artists from Spain, Portugal, Romania, Lithuania, South-Africa, The Netherlands and Ireland produced the artwork. The conclusions of the participatory youth research were the inspiration for the artists' work.

We want to give you a warm welcome to this exhibition, we would like to inspire you, and above all, we hope that this exhibition will support your understanding of the value of international youth work in the development and education of young people.

The definitions used by young people, youth workers and organisations to describe their learning experiences and work differ. Activities, programmes, projects, international youth work activities, international activities, exchanges, training & Erasmus+ youth programmes all refer to the "activity" in which the learning process took place. In this exhibition booklet you will also find references to the Erasmus+ youth programme. The Erasmus+ youth programme supports young people, youth workers and youth organisations with funding in their international learning activities.

Lessons learned

In the following pages of this exhibition booklet, the outcomes of a participatory youth research are presented through eight important lessons learned. Each of them can be regarded as a reason in itself to increase the support, knowledge and recognition of international youth work.

International youth work is rooted in the EU Youth Strategy framework. Within the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme, the European Council advocates an increased recognition of the 'crucial role of youth work as a provider of non-formal learning opportunities for all young people' (EU-CoE Youth Partnership, 2011, p.4).

Non-formal learning and education (NFLE) can be defined as any organised educational activity that takes place outside the formal educational system. It is usually flexible, learner-centred and contextualised, and it uses participatory approaches. The fact that a learning process is taking place is always clearly communicated. In practice, this means that learning is creative, interactive and based on the needs and learning goals of the participants.

The engagement of young people is an inevitable aspect of youth work. It results from the emphasis on participating in meaningful activities. The currently dominant image of young people is one of active, wordy citizens that have a role in decision making. Consequently, it would not be too bold to say that the desired outcomes of youth research can best be reached when young people and youth workers have an essential role in it. Participatory youth research can overcome the potential issues of legitimacy and accuracy of traditional methods. Peer researchers are already located in the world of those being researched; they share a common language and everyday experiences. Being similar in age and experience also encourages participants to open up to their peer researchers in a way that the power relationships in traditional research might prevent.

Enjoy reading about the lessons learned. If you are interested to find out more about the needs that led to this research project, its methods and conclusions, please scan this QR code for the full research report "The importance of international youth work":





High motivation and level of expectation

Participants had different reasons for joining international youth work activities, and most of their expectations were amply met. **“My expectation was to get to know myself, to learn more, to expand my competence limit. And I got more than I expected.”** (young participant from Lithuania).

When participants described their motivation to participate in an international activity, it became clear that there is an actual demand among young people to participate in exchanges that contribute to their personal development. Both youths and youth workers mention the wish to develop their skills related to working in a group, connecting and networking with others, gaining leadership skills, but also learning to take ownership over their own learning process.

For some, learning more about the topic that was dealt with during the exchange was a motivator to join the programmes. **“I think it’s important to keep growing”** (youth leader from The Netherlands). Youth workers specifically mentioned they wanted to experience Erasmus+ youth programmes. **“As a youth worker, the Erasmus+ youth programmes were an area of work I hadn’t ventured into as a method of working to socially engage young people”** (youth worker from Ireland).

Also, the programmes provided people with the opportunity to experience new places. People were expecting something that they were not experiencing in their daily life. The opportunity to experience new cultures and to connect and work with people from different backgrounds was for many participants a motivator to join the programme. Some mentioned that the possibility to travel was mainly what motivated them to join. Some people had never travelled before. **“And anyway it would be fun, even if the project was bad (...) and I thought, no matter how it is there, I already want to travel there, because it’s about human rights and about tolerance and that topic I really like”** (young participant from Lithuania).

It was also apparent that people with previous experience in similar exchanges had different expectations. It seems that due to their previous experience, their expectations were higher than those of the people who had not taken part in any programme before.

The process of non-formal learning

The safe, motivational, non-competitive environment encourages participants to experiment, fail and learn. **“I think our society should give more importance and value to the kind of skills that you gain through non-formal education. There is still a lot to do to really make justice to this excellent process”** (young participant from Portugal).

The self-organised workshops on different subjects are regarded by respondents as the most appropriate education method to approach difficult topics. **“(…) accepting mistakes and failures, which I think is a big part of non-formal education. We are not used to hear that in formal education. So that was something I really... I wouldn't say I embraced it, because it was something difficult to live, but that was something I definitely took back from this programme”** (youth leader from Spain). Respondents mention that being in an environment of like-minded and loving people allowed them to feel free to be themselves. They felt more confident to share their opinions in a non-formal context, which increased their personal reflection and learning. Participants became more comfortable speaking to people they did not know and they were more involved in discussions.

There were people who expected a formal setting with lecturing and conferences to tackle the subjects. They expected a formal learning method and encountered non-formal education in the programme. The safe environment created thanks to non-formal education methods helps participants to learn and overcome fear. It increases their confidence in sharing opinions and determining their personal reflection and learning. **“(…) for me the non-formal education process was really shocking at first, but then I thought it was amazing and new and innovative, and an extraordinary way to learn and it, of course, changed the way I deal with my problems and the way I live, as well, in a certain way”** (young participant from Portugal).

Also, the evaluation meetings allowed respondents to get involved in future projects. The standard evaluation activity when closing a workshop or exchange offers support, because some topics are 'hard-hitting'. Debriefing helps participants to share their personal stories. **“I learned how to take feedback from this project, I learned to work better in a team and to remain silent when someone gives me feedback”** (youth leader from Romania).





Open-mindedness through intercultural learning

Respondents often mention they learned from other people's experiences, perspectives and intercultural sharing. **"It made me see life a little differently in experiencing this. See there is a world outside of our daily life (...), there's a whole different culture out there"** (young participant from Ireland).

The exchanges taking place in an international context give people the possibility to learn from different cultures and to become more culturally aware. Participants mention they had never had the opportunity to work with people from different backgrounds and with such a different mindset. Respondents mentioned that by being in an intercultural environment and working as a group on specific topics, they learned more about themselves and others. Both the topics that were dealt with during the programmes and the confrontation with others gave participants a different opinion and new insights.

Respondents repeatedly mentioned hearing other people's stories and how that impacted them, especially stories shared by locals. Through each other's stories, young people became more aware of the similarities between countries and cultures. **"And that was the moment where I understood how we are alike. This really stuck in my head and changed my perception on gender-based violence"** (young participant from Lithuania). Some felt really touched and empathised with the people sharing their story. After such activities they admitted that their perspective had changed.

Participants mentioned that they became more tolerant regarding different attitudes and behaviours. It changed the way they related to other people, they became more open minded. This attitude helped them to lose the fear to travel and meet new people. It brought people together and had an impact on their attitude back home. **"I am a lot more able to see things from other people's point of view"** (young participant from Ireland). Indirectly, the projects resulted in the local communities becoming more open to action related to the different topics of the programmes.

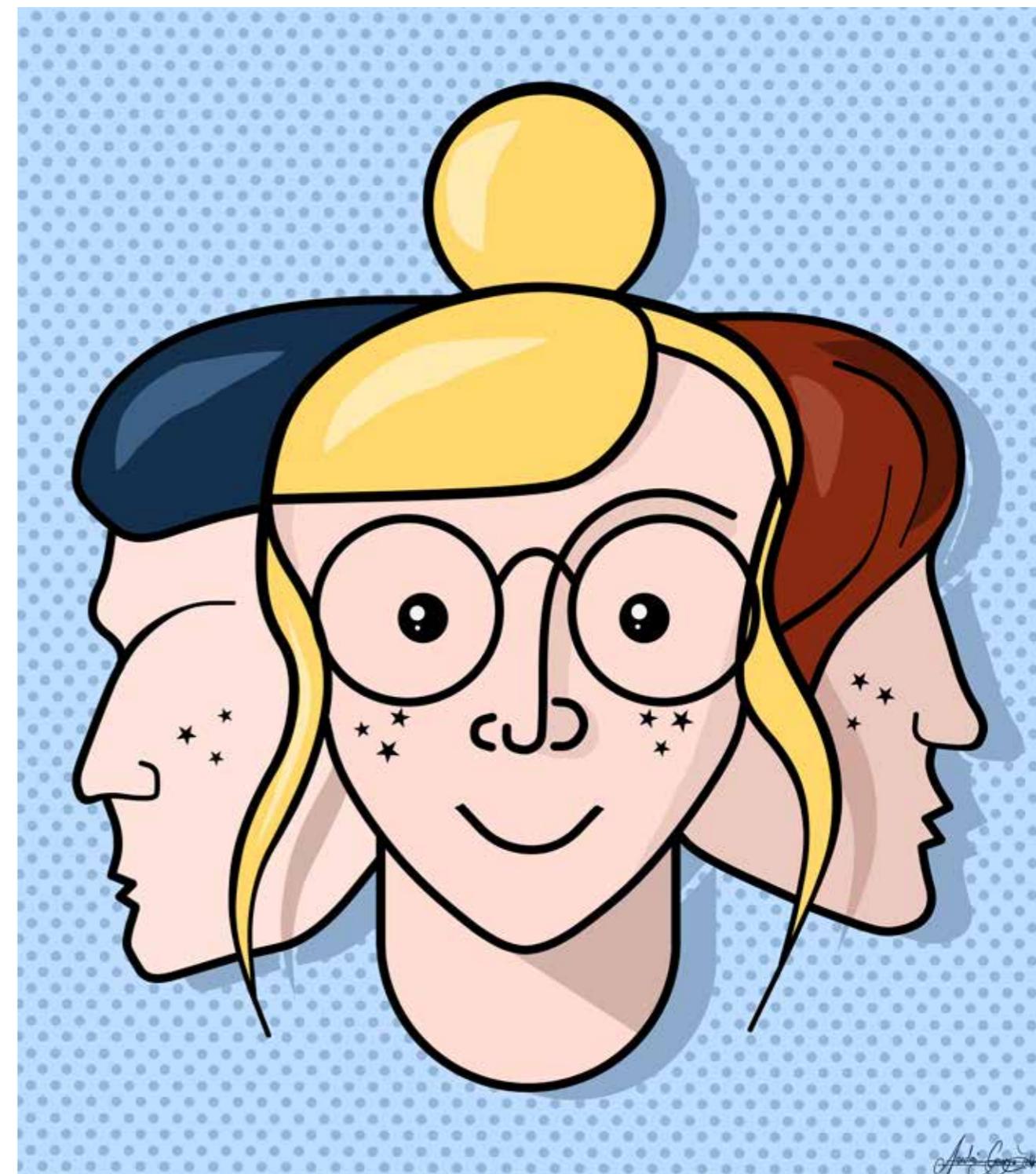
Increased level of empathy and flexibility

The working methodology during the programmes helped participants to gain soft skills such as empathy, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, flexibility, and adaptability. **“I’m telling you I feel wonderful that they helped me to find these fears”** (young participant from Lithuania).

The cooperation with people from different backgrounds made participants learn more about how to interact with others. Respondents said that they became more aware of the reasons behind people’s behaviour and talked about how that influenced their own actions. Participants noticed they became more considerate towards others, not labelling people and being more patient with them. It became easier for them to be around other people, which resulted in an increased involvement in volunteer work.

Participants acquired soft skills through a variety of activities, such as discussions, reflection, active listening tasks, or presenting topics, ideas and thoughts. Youth exchanges create a safe environment where participants can have a voice and talk in front of large groups. It helps them to bond with others and to work on a common goal. **“I am more confident now in the way I relate to others and in the way we have to adapt to make new friendships”** (young participant from Portugal).

In the professional field, participants felt more confident at job interviews and felt more committed to their work. On a personal level, participants noticed that they felt the need to share their feelings, to believe in themselves and act according to it.





Changed use of language

Youth exchanges create a safe environment where participants can have a voice, talk in front of large groups and fight stage fright. **“You can pass a certain barrier and people also give you confidence (...) It is not a problem if you misspell a verb or don’t remember a word in English. Yes, that helped a lot!”** (youth leader from Romania).

Meeting with people from different backgrounds and cultures, communicating in another language and learning about topics related to language use makes young people more aware of what they say and of the power of words. **“I’d bring it up to friends and be like ‘you shouldn’t be saying this here, it is really not right’”** (young participant from Ireland). Communication skills were increased, participants mentioned being more conscious about the way they expressed their opinions and feelings. They improved their communication skills by leading discussions, which resulted in them feeling more confident in speaking up.

While working in the national and international groups, the participants not only learned other languages, they also improved the use of their own mother tongue. **“It helped me be more careful with what others have to say: if they answer me in a certain way, if they are hurt by what I said or what I do or say bothers them”** (young participant from Romania). It increased their interest in reading and they became aware of their use of language. Both in their personal and professional life, participants mentioned that they choose their words more carefully now and they are more conscious while expressing their opinions and feelings.

Participants also mentioned that they got involved in new projects after they improved their English language skills. Youth workers mentioned language learning as a big part of their development process. They insisted on the importance of learning by doing and learning to make mistakes as a big part of their professional development. The non-competitive environment during the exchanges motivates and encourages participants to improve their (English) language skills. **“I feel more confident also in my language skills in English in terms of communication”** (youth leader from Portugal).

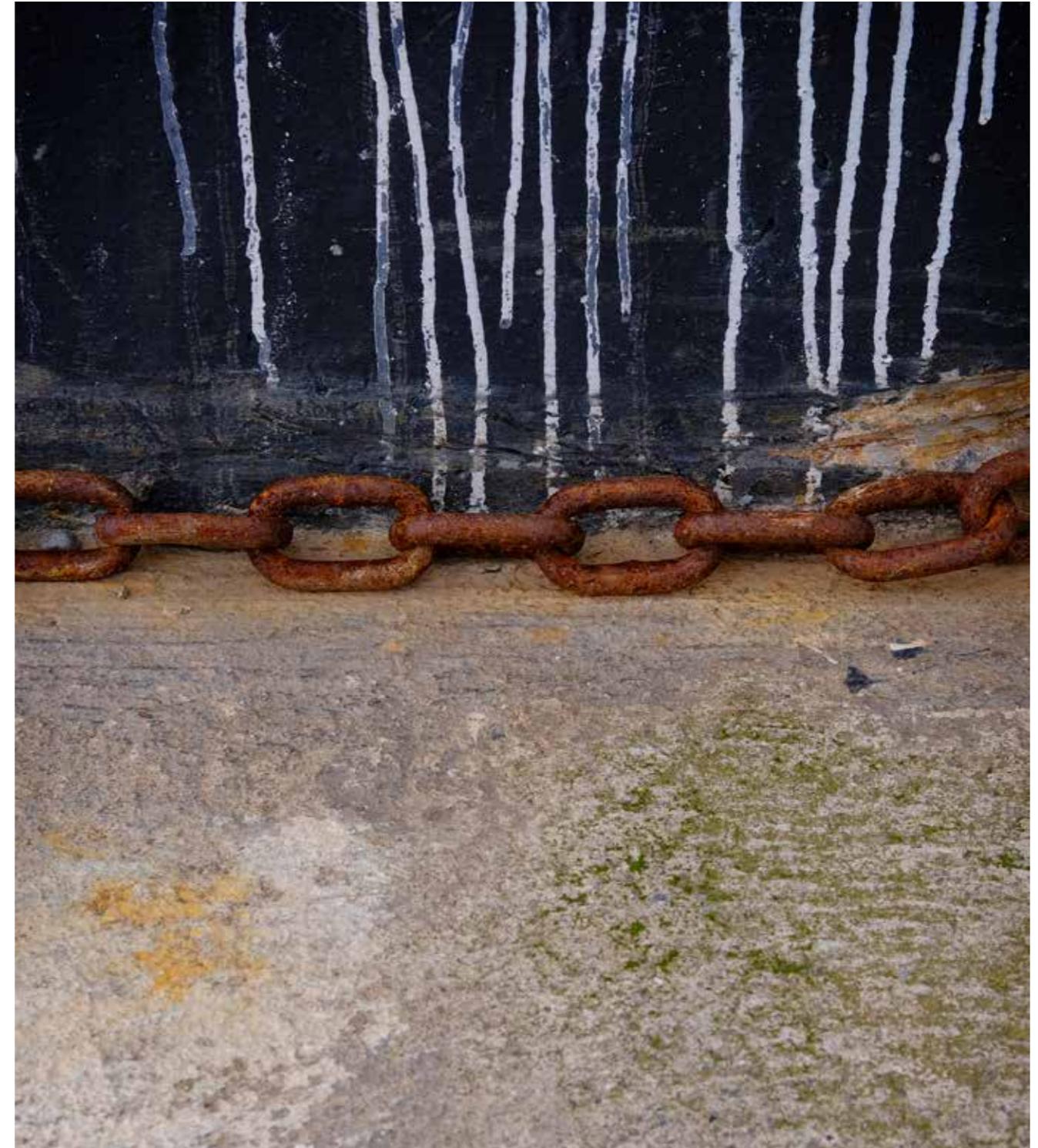
Increased empowerment and leadership skills

The positive experience of the project encouraged participants to undertake activities to be able to experience the same or similar feelings again. It made them become more proactive. **“I proposed a campaign in the NGO (...) so when I came back, I insisted. We had some funds and we were going to decide what the campaign would be. I suggested the possibility to do it and we did it”** (young participant from Spain).

Throughout the programmes young people were given tools to effect change in their personal life and/or direct environment. This increased their confidence in their skills and in realizing what they stand for. **“That’s the perfect example of empowerment. When you got people coming for one thing and then being able to reproduce it, improve it, transmit it and then doing it the next year. And changing it every time, and improving, and getting lots of input from outside. And I think that’s the best thing”** (youth leader from Spain). They feel empowered and proud of being capable of doing things that they thought they were not able to, or had never experienced before. It increased their involvement in their local communities. The desire to get more involved in society and to contribute positively was mentioned by a large number of participants.

The structure of the programmes offers participants the possibility to grow and take a more active role as team leader in a follow-up activity. This increases their sense of ownership and gives them hands-on leadership experience. **“The leadership skills acquired in the youth exchange have allowed me to gain more self-confidence and communication skills”** (young participant from Portugal). Participants mentioned that the programmes helped them to bring back old passions. They study and work more and increase their sense of empowerment. Regarding their professional life, participants mentioned they became more perseverant, committed and engaged in their work. **“I can’t stop bringing up the subject and trying to raise awareness of the people I have around. Much more than I would if I had not been in the exchange, because I have more perspective now, more knowledge”** (young participant from Spain).

Participating in the programmes led a number of participants to change jobs, become more critical about their values or start being involved in volunteer work. Some became youth workers in a youth centre. The knowledge that participants gained has been spread to others by telling stories, giving examples, sharing pictures and videos. **“In that moment I felt the power that I could either start deciding myself (...) or just keep on swimming and not decide anything”** (young participant from Lithuania).





Ownership over the programmes

Working on specific topics during the programmes helped participants to learn more about themselves and the skills they possess. **“Experience as a participant motivated me to do more and being a youth leader was a logical next step (...). I am also thinking about giving back what I’ve learned and experienced to others”** (youth leader from The Netherlands).

The way the projects are set up gives a strong sense of responsibility and freedom to the participants. They are themselves creators of the activities and programmes. Going through the process of problem solving and getting things done sparked the motivation of respondents to remain active after the programmes. This process is only facilitated by the youth workers. They create a safe space in which participants can experiment and make mistakes. This process leads to an increased intrinsic motivation among the participants. **“I gained more confidence in myself and my ability to facilitate workshops or public speaking by organising a youth exchange”** (youth leader from Ireland).

The support from youth leaders and youth workers greatly contributes to this process. They act as role models and they initiate reflection throughout the learning process. Respondents mentioned that the programmes contributed to an increased perseverance in their work and in reaching their goals. **“I was confronted with new situations. Especially with... ehm... keeping your promises”** (youth leader from The Netherlands).

Each programme closes with an evaluation meeting in which youth workers and youth leaders gather to look back on their personal learning and realization of the activities. **“The evaluation was a key moment, a realization of how much work had been put into the exchange”** (youth leader from Ireland). The evaluation helps the participants to define what they realized and how they learned. It encourages participants to get involved in future projects.

Change of perspective

The programmes brought people from different backgrounds together in a safe and inspiring environment. It encouraged participants to become more aware of themselves and their interactions with others. **"I don't want to say that my entire life has changed, because it's not like it has, but my perspective on my own life has changed"** (young participant from Spain).

Participating in these programmes made participants more open minded and helped them learn more about themselves. **"(...) I started doing my own thing a lot more and doing much more of what I like. Am I no longer so bothered about what other people think, what they expect"** (young participant from The Netherlands). They feel free to share their opinions and change their attitude or perspective regarding life and education. Participants specifically mention the unique moments when they overcame their differences and became an international group showing their similarities. Going through the same experiences with their peers helped participants to bond with others and increase their empathy. Making new friends in a relatively short period of time increases the participants' confidence, changes their view on existing friendships and their relation with themselves. **"I became more accepting towards myself and that, in turn, really helped me to cope better with my own insecurities or fears"** (youth leader from The Netherlands).

Youth workers bring the experience with non-formal education and the exchange of experiences with international partners back to their local youth organisations and communities. **"I think I can say that all the participants felt the need to be more engaged in society, to make a positive contribution"** (young participant from Romania). Both youth workers and young people mention that increasing their skills and knowledge strengthened their motivation and confidence. It led them to grow and take on new challenges in their professional career. For some, it has led to a change in career path: **"It has also changed me in the sense that it has opened me to other perspectives, to other approaches, my perspective as a social worker, if I ever get to have that job"** (young participant from Spain).



The proven value of international youth work

Each lesson learned presented in this exhibition is by itself relevant to explain the value of international youth work. The impact of international youth work reaches much further than the activities themselves. We have observed a change in how young people perceive themselves and how they look at the world around them. This has an effect on their relationship with others. Moreover, thanks to volunteering or other forms of societal engagement, it has a direct effect on their local communities.

“It helps us to have a European identity and, above all, to understand that our reality is sometimes so similar to other (...) countries’ and that, deep down, what separates us is the barrier of a language or a belief but (...) that we all seek to create the energies to create a better world” (youth worker from Portugal).

With this exhibition, we hope to spread what was learned by the young people who participated in the programmes. With the support of many youth work organisations and youth workers, young people with all kinds of backgrounds are given the opportunity to broaden their horizons and expand their worldview. This is an important task that youth organisations have in creating an open society in which there is a place for everyone. We encourage involving as many young people from Europe as possible. In order to do so, it is important that youth work organisations and youth workers are recognised for the role they have in the positive development and education of young people. Recognition inevitably leads to the support of young people in the local communities, which is needed for the continuation of the work. Support is needed from local, regional and national policy and decision makers, from the community itself, from the schools where young people undergo their formal education, from family and peers.

“(...) it has definitely been worth any type of investment in time, money or effort. It has definitely changed my life in a lot of ways” (youth leader from Ireland).

In this exhibition young people have shown that non-formal education, which is enacted in an international youth work setting is a valuable form of education that allows young people to have agency in their learning process, to find their intrinsic motivation for learning, to formulate their concerns and to have an impact in their communities.

“My experience as a participant motivated me to do more and being a youth leader was a logical next step (...). I think it’s important to keep growing and I think these possibilities give more responsibilities to not keep doing the same. I am also thinking about giving back what I’ve learned and experienced to others” (young person from Spain)



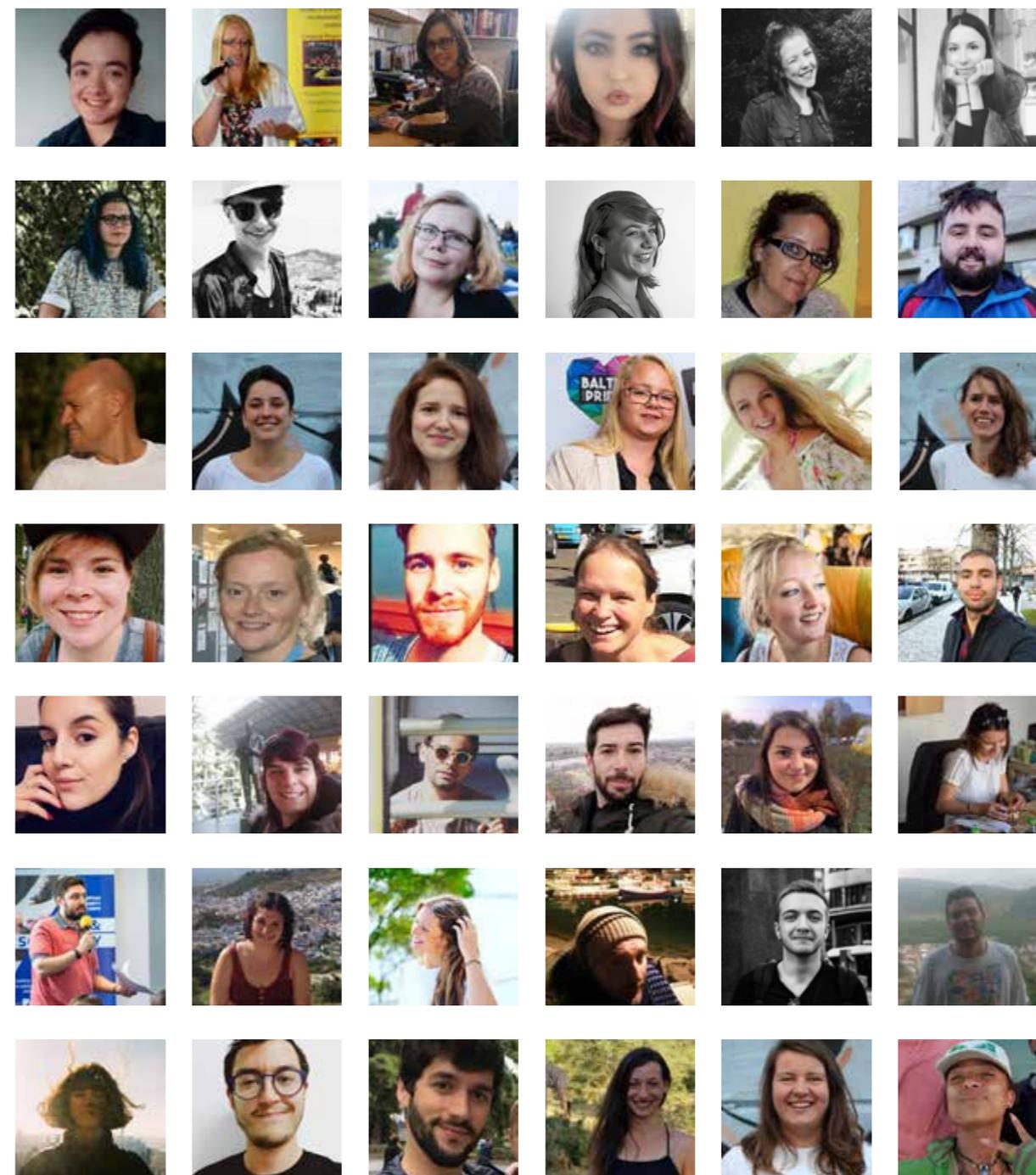
Who we are

This project could not have been possible without the cooperation of all the people involved. Three groups have participated in writing the content of this booklet.

The group of young researchers (in alphabetical order): Razvan Mihai Bacanu (Romania), Francisco Barros (Portugal), Gabrielė Bartkutė (Lithuania), Celine Brinkman (The Netherlands), Lindi ter Brugge (The Netherlands), Nina Buckley (Ireland), André Costa (Portugal), Hélder Costa (Portugal), Eric Cunningham (Ireland), Rita Delgado (Spain), Jonay García Rodríguez (Spain), Ana María Gongadze Gogvadze (Spain), Andra Iulia Grigore (Romania), Esther Haro (Spain), Sanne van den Heuvel (The Netherlands), Ran Hogeweg (The Netherlands), Svajonė Leleikaitė (Lithuania), Mark McMahon (Ireland), Vika Matuzaitė (Lithuania), Veerle Meijer (The Netherlands), Lucas Pérez Soto (Spain), Beatrice Poti (The Netherlands), Enrique Sánchez Ochoa (Spain), Elena Selaru (Romania), Anita Silva (Portugal), Manon Vaanholt (The Netherlands), Giedrė Valčiukaitė (Lithuania), and Carly Weafer (Ireland).

The artists that provided the illustrations for this exhibition: Elena Bruno (Spain), Shamiko De Jongh (South-Africa), Andrei-George Dobra (Romania), Lizzy den Haan (The Netherlands), Renate Hofstee (The Netherlands), Paulė Januškevičiūtė (Lithuania), Ignacio Lupi3n (Portugal), Jonathan Stokes (Ireland).

The managers, organisers and editors: Jean-François Alberghi (Spain), Francisco Barros (Portugal), Margriet Braun (The Netherlands), Maartje Bulthuis (The Netherlands), Diana Cerqueira (Portugal), Lisa Downes (Ireland), Llanos Godes (Spain), Bas Lankamp (The Netherlands), Titas Medelis (Lithuania), Maron Nijhof (The Netherlands), Eglė Poteliūnė (Lithuania), Razvan Sassu (Romania), Boglarka Szalma (The Netherlands) Gabriela Toma, and Carly Weafer (Ireland).



Short project description

Does international youth work offer a valuable contribution to the development and education of young people? Six youth work organisations from Romania, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Ireland, Lithuania wanted to provide an answer based on sound research. The six organisations collaborate in providing an alternative form of education for young people all over Europe better known as 'non-formal education', which is enacted in an international youth work setting. Contrary to formal education, learning outcomes within non-formal education are not measured by standardised testing, but based on self-evaluation and peer assessment. The organisations involved were eager to explore ways to measure the impact of their non-formal educational programmes. In line with their work methodology, this started with the inclusion of young people.

Between 2015 and 2017, the ImpACT+ framework implemented six international multi-activity youth programmes financed by the Erasmus+ youth programme. A total of 450 youngsters, 110 youth workers and an estimate of at least 60 staff members were part of these programmes. Although each of the organisations received a significant amount of positive feedback from the (young) people involved, the organisations wanted to get a better understanding of how these programmes contributed to

- the personal and professional development of young people,
- the personal and professional development of youth workers,
- quality development within the participating youth organisations,
- the local communities of each organisation.

It was evident that young people and youth workers should play an essential role in the project. In collaboration with senior researchers of the research group Social Work of the Saxion University of Applied Sciences, an approach was developed where young people were not solely the topic of research, but they were the researchers themselves instead. It was evident that participatory youth research would allow both goals to be reached. This provided the outlines of ImpACT+; a research that aims to gather data on the impact of non-formal educational programmes, but also teaches young people to do research.

In order to effectively use the outcomes of the research, it was decided that the ImpACT+ research would provide two sets of recommendations developed for youth work organisations and policymakers with the aim:

1. to increase the quality and outreach of international youth work activities, consequently contributing to the development of young people, youth workers, local communities and youth work organisations,
2. to reach out for more stakeholders, gaining more support, knowledge and recognition for international youth work among stakeholders and policymakers (exhibition).



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ImpACT+ resources

The ImpACT+ project developed three resource documents that can be freely downloaded and disseminated. Scan the QR code:

- If you want to learn more about ImpACT+ participatory youth research, its methods and outcomes;
- If you work with young people in international youth work activities, the following 12 best practices can help you to increase the quality and outreach of your actions;
- If you are a youth work organisation and you would like to reach out to stakeholders and policymakers for support, knowledge and recognition of international youth work, you can download the entire exhibition booklet and posters for free:

