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EMPASY
EMOTIONAL LITERACY & YOUTH PARTICIPATION

FONDAZIONE ISMU
INIZIATIVE E STUDI SULLA MULTIETNICITÀ

EMPASY HANDBOOK

ON PARTICIPATORY TECHNIQUES

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EMPASY
EMOTIONAL LITERACY & YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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EMPASY (EMotional Literacy and Participatory Approaches to Support Youth Mental Health) is a two-year Erasmus+ funded initiative aimed at strengthening youth well-being by training youth workers, youth leaders, and non-formal education professionals on how to integrate emotional literacy and participatory approaches into their work. The project brings together an international consortium with partners in Italy, Belgium, Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan.

EMPASY addresses urgent needs in MENA contexts, where young people face high unemployment, social exclusion, and limited access to psychological support. The project seeks to bridge gaps in youth support systems by promoting an integrated approach that values young people's active role in decision-making processes. Through a multisectoral network and a strong commitment to inclusion, EMPASY aims to generate lasting impact on youth well-being and the quality of educational work across Europe and partner countries.

This Handbook is one of the key results of the EMPASY project. It is designed as a practical resource for youth workers, youth leaders, and other professionals providing non-formal education opportunities to young people. Specifically, it focuses on emotional literacy in youth work and can be used alongside a complementary Handbook on participatory approaches. Both publications were piloted during an initial training cohort and developed based on a robust needs assessment conducted in Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan, using desk research, questionnaires, and focus groups.

The Handbook is structured into three sections, each corresponding to a key phase that supports users in gradually integrating new approaches into their work:

1. Laying the groundwork
2. Identifying needs through a safe space
3. Adopting strategies to respond to needs

Each section includes theoretical frameworks and definitions, as well as templates, checklists, case studies, and other practical examples.

PHASE 1

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR PARTICIPATION

1.1 KEY SKILLS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION

WHAT ARE KEY COMPETENCES AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Key competences are a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all individuals need for personal development, employability, social inclusion, and active citizenship. These competences go beyond academic knowledge, helping people navigate real-life situations and adapt to change. They are essential for lifelong learning and staying engaged in both personal and professional life. For example, being digitally competent or understanding how to participate actively in society are just as important as knowing how to read or do math.

THE EIGHT KEY COMPETENCES DEFINED BY THE EU

The European frameworks outlines eight key competences: literacy, multilingual, mathematical and competence in science, technology and engineering, digital, personal-social-learning to learn, citizenship, entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression competence. Each combines different elements of knowledge, such as understanding democracy in citizenship competence, with practical skills, like effective communication, and attitudes like respect for human rights or openness to cultural diversity. These competences are not just theoretical, they should be practiced and developed through real-life experiences, both in and outside of formal education.

COMPETENCE FRAMEWORKS

The European Commission has developed various competence frameworks and tools to support capacity building for the digital transformation of education and training (E&T), and to address emerging skills challenges. These frameworks serve to provide a shared, comprehensive understanding of key competences by establishing a common language through reference frameworks, conceptual models, and clearly defined proficiency levels. They outline competences in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes and are supported by (self-) assessment modules. Designed for multiple uses, these tools can inform curriculum review, teacher training, self-assessment and reflection, policy development, practical initiatives, jobseeker support, certification, and skills measurement, such as through Digital Skills Indicator (DSI) metrics.

LEARNING AND APPLYING COMPETENCES: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

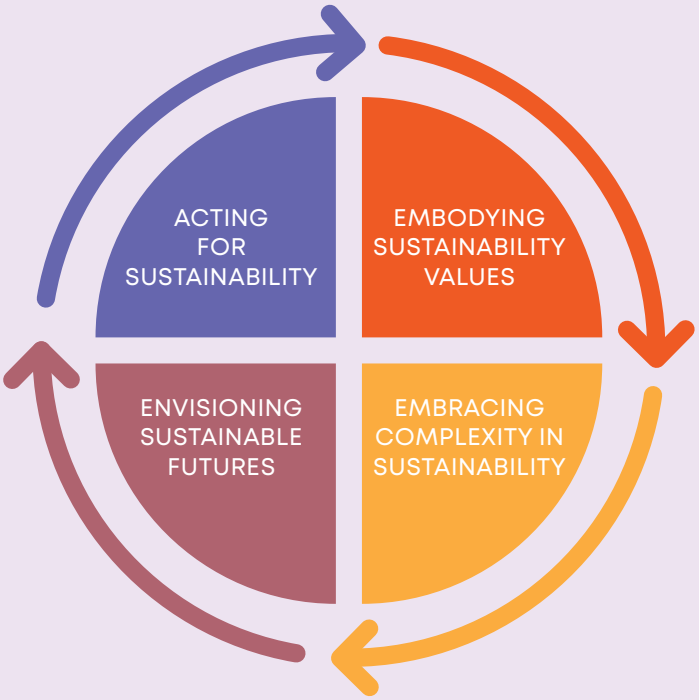
Key competences can be developed through diverse learning pathways, both formal and informal. Universities, for example, offer a rich ecosystem for this development. The academic curriculum provides structured programs and modules that can include study abroad or service learning. Alongside this, co-curricular activities (organised learning outside formal studies) and extra-curricular experiences such as volunteering, mentoring, part-time work, running a business, or engaging in student societies provide practical environments for applying competences like entrepreneurship, citizenship, and cultural awareness. Even managing one's own life or caring for others can foster personal and social competences.

These competence frameworks are key resources for both youths and youth workers to engage in participation. These are not rigid curricula but, rather, flexible guides that can be localised to different cultural and practical contexts. They can be used to design learning activities, structure reflection, guide self-assessment, support research and monitoring, and inform curriculum and policy development. Educators, trainers, and youth workers can adapt them to their own local cultures and realities.

GreenComp: the European Sustainability Competence Framework

GreenComp is a European sustainability competence framework designed to help learners think, plan, and act with care, responsibility, and empathy for both people and the planet. It defines the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to live and work in a more sustainable way. GreenComp is relevant across the entire education spectrum, from early childhood education and vocational training to higher education, adult learning, and non-formal settings like youth work and citizen engagement. Whether in the classroom, a community project, or a training session, GreenComp supports the development of learners who can understand sustainability challenges and respond to them proactively.

GreenComp is built around four core competence areas: **Embodying sustainability values, Embracing complexity in sustainability, Envisioning sustainable futures, and Acting for sustainability.** These areas support deep reflection, systems thinking, creativity, and civic engagement. For example, “Embodying sustainability values” encourages learners to align their personal values with equity, justice, and interconnection with nature. “Envisioning sustainable futures” fosters creativity and imagination to shape more desirable and inclusive futures. A grassroots example of young people “Acting for sustainability” is the Friday for Future Movement, a youth-led global climate strike movement who have been vocal in demanding political action by governments.



EMBODYING SUSTAINABILITY VALUES	EMBRACING COMPLEXITY IN SUSTAINABILITY	ENVISIONING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES	ACTING FOR SUSTAINABILITY
Valuing sustainability	Systems thinking	Futures literacy	Political agency
Supporting faimess	Critical thinking	Adaptability	Collective action
Promoting nature	Problem framing	Exploratory thinking	Individual initiative

LIFECOMP: THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND LEARNING-TO-LEARN COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK

LifeComp is the European Commission's framework for developing key life competences essential for personal fulfilment, social inclusion, and lifelong employability. It defines nine competences grouped into three interconnected areas: **Personal (P), Social (S), and Learning to Learn (L)**. These competences aim to support individuals in managing their emotions, adapting to change, maintaining wellbeing, developing empathy, communicating and collaborating effectively, and continuously engaging in learning through a growth mindset, critical thinking, and self-directed learning. While LifeComp has been primarily developed with formal education settings in mind—particularly schools—its potential extends far beyond, with increasing efforts underway to adapt it for use in non-formal and informal learning, adult education, and youth work. **The LifeComp into Action** guidelines offer practical advice for implementing the framework in classrooms.

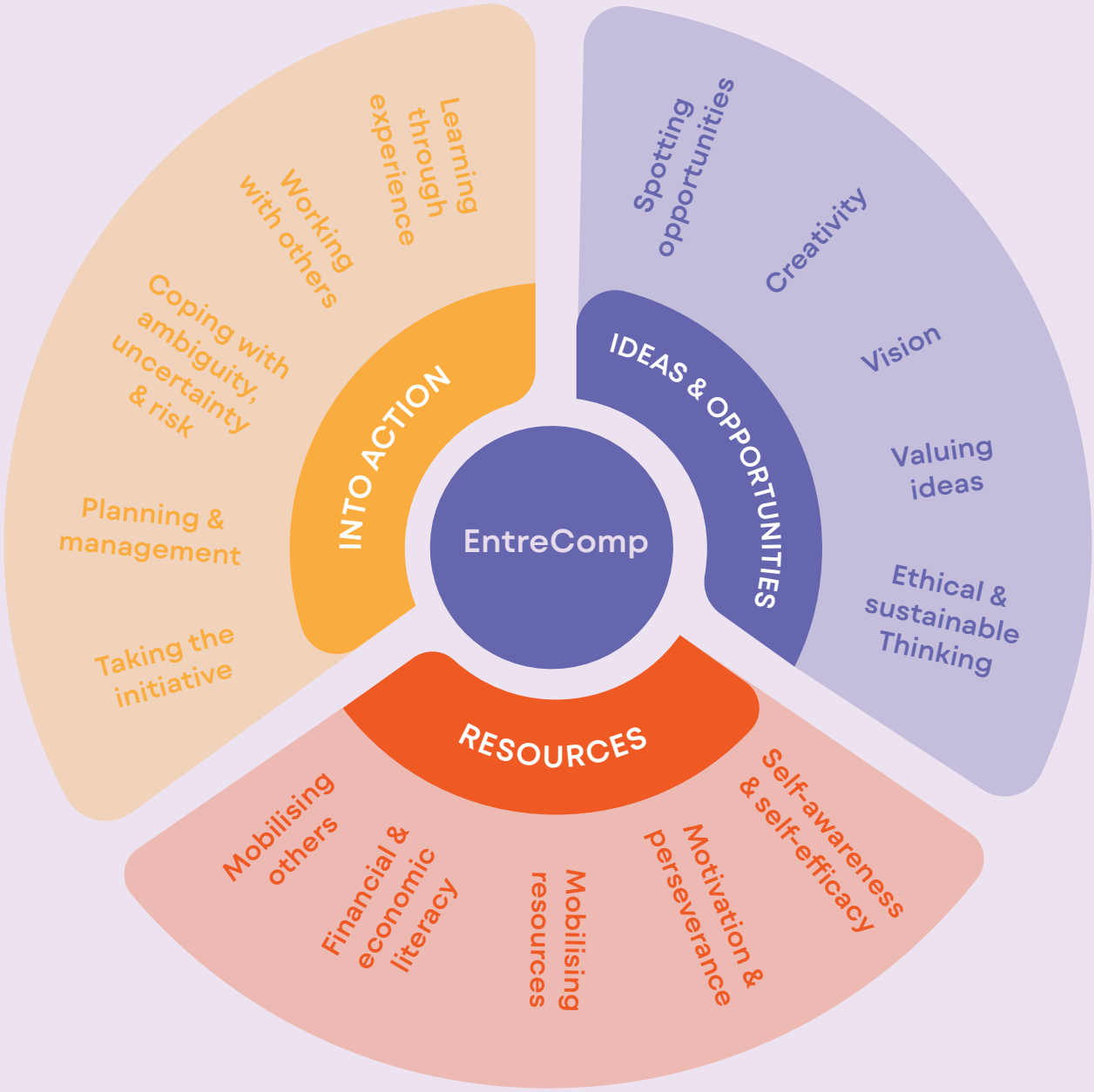
EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework

EntreComp describes entrepreneurship as a lifelong competence, identifies what are the elements that make someone entrepreneurial and describes them to establish a common reference for initiatives dealing with entrepreneurial learning.

"Entrepreneurship is when you act upon opportunities and ideas and transform them into value for others. The value that is created can be financial, cultural, or social".

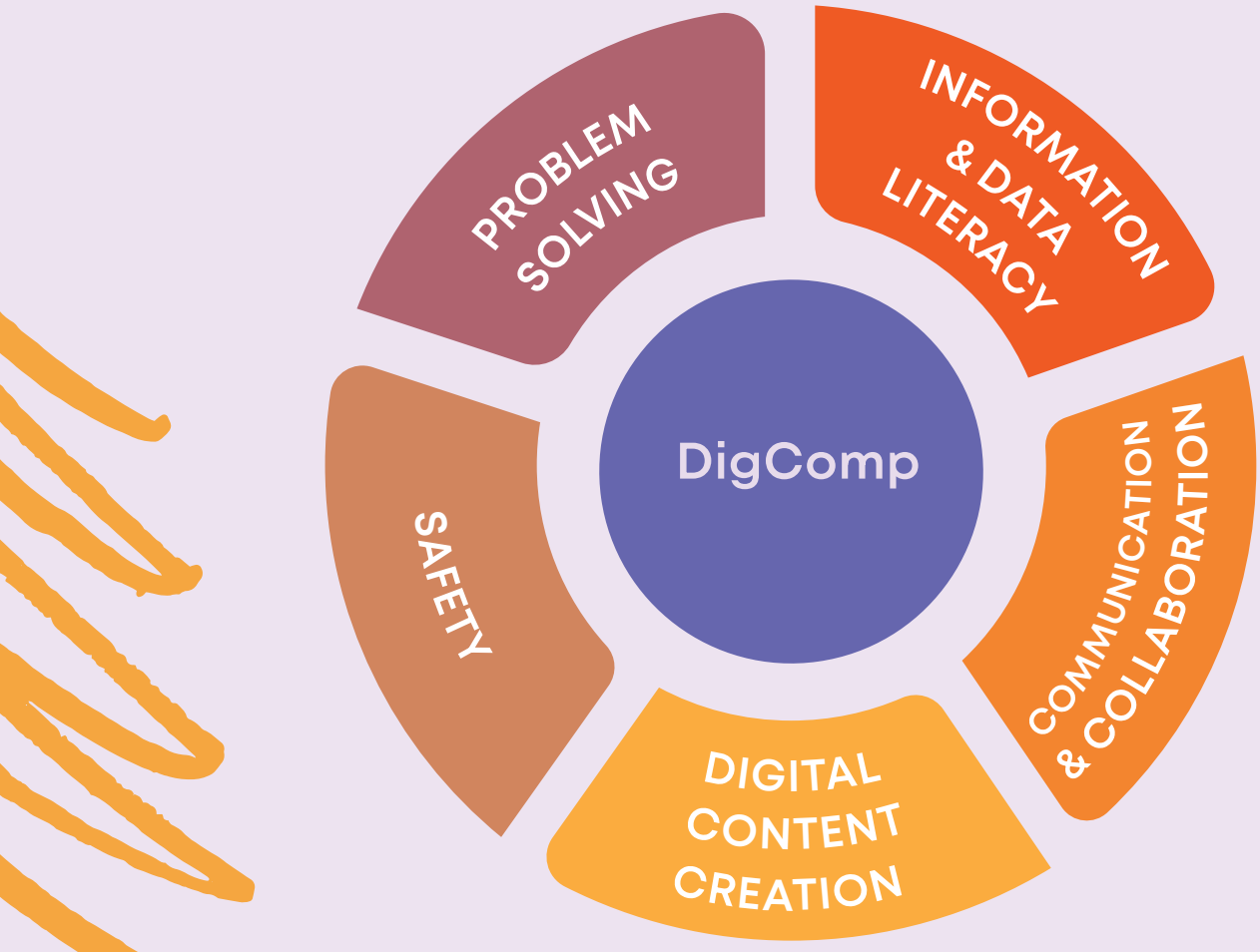
EntreComp was designed using a mixed-method approach consisting of literature review, study cases, focus groups, and consultations with experts. EntreComp describes entrepreneurship as a lifelong competence, identifies what are the elements that make someone entrepreneurial and describes them to establish a common reference for initiatives dealing with entrepreneurial learning.

Entrepreneurial value creation and entrepreneurial learning can take place in any sphere of life. By focusing on the development of competences through the actual creation of entrepreneurial value, EntreComp breaks down the boundaries between education, work and civic engagement. In this respect, the **EntreComp is transversal to formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts** and applies equally to education and training systems–from primary to vocational education and training–and to non-structured learning contexts including civil society, communities, youth work, start-ups and existing organisation such as corporations, non-governmental organisations or public administrations.


EntreComp
INTO ACTION
Learning through experience
Working with others
Coping with ambiguity, uncertainty & risk
Planning & management
Taking the initiative
IDEAS & OPPORTUNITIES
Spotting opportunities
Creativity
Vision
Valuing ideas
Ethical & sustainable Thinking
RESOURCES
Self-awareness & self-efficacy
Motivation & perseverance
Mobilising resources
Financial & economic literacy
Mobilising others

DIGCOMP: THE DIGITAL COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK FOR CITIZENS

In today's increasingly digital world, being digitally competent is essential for full participation in society. **DigComp** provides a clear and shared definition of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to **navigate the digital age confidently, critically, and safely**. It supports citizens not just in using everyday technologies, but also in adapting to emerging tools like artificial intelligence. DigComp addresses five key areas, ranging from information and data literacy to problem-solving, and promotes digital inclusion, active citizenship, and employability, especially for youth. It also emphasizes education and training to build digital literacy and combat disinformation, which are increasingly relevant in a democratic society where youth still struggle to actively participate in civic life online. An interesting tool to assess one's digital competences is the **MyDigiSkills** tool, developed to self-reflect on your digital competence level based on 5 DigComp areas.



TOOLS TO WORK ON COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

The **European Training Foundation (ETF)**, based in Turin, Italy, is a specialised agency of the European Union established in 1994 with the mission of supporting human development in the EU's neighbouring countries by helping them modernise and reform their vocational education and training (VET) and labour market systems. Its work aims to foster social mobility, inclusion, and prosperity by aligning education and training policies with current labour market needs, thus preparing individuals for employability and lifelong learning. The ETF operates in 28 partner countries across regions such as south-eastern Europe, the southern and eastern Mediterranean, eastern Europe, Turkey, and central Asia.

THE SCAFFOLD CARD DECK

The **Scaffold card deck** is an innovative educational tool composed of 102 cards, co-developed by the ETF, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, and other partners as part of the Creating New Learning initiative. Designed for educators, the deck guides users step by step through the process of planning, delivering, and assessing learning activities. Each card represents a building block ("brick") in the instructional design process, making complex European competence frameworks—such as digital, entrepreneurship, sustainability, personal, social, and learning-to-learn competences—clear and usable for teachers in any subject area or level of education.

Scaffold was created to address the challenge of integrating multiple key competences into teaching and learning in both formal and non-formal settings. The increasing importance of transversal skills and European competence frameworks required a tool that would translate policy and theory into practical classroom strategies.

Scaffold enables educators to:

- **Easily understand and implement complex competence frameworks through structured prompts**
- **Creatively design lessons that integrate various competences, learning outcomes, instructional approaches, and assessments**
- **Cluster learning outcomes based on teaching objectives and available resources, adjusting to different learning environments and time frames**
- **Benefit from a fluid, collaborative approach adaptable to individual and group planning, fostering creativity and learner-centeredness**

By making competence-based education actionable, Scaffold empowers teachers to foster essential skills for learners' success in a rapidly evolving world. The tool's flexibility and step-by-step design assist in curriculum development, lesson planning, and assessment, ensuring alignment with both European policy goals and practical classroom realities

1.2 SELF-REFLECTION AND PARTICIPATION

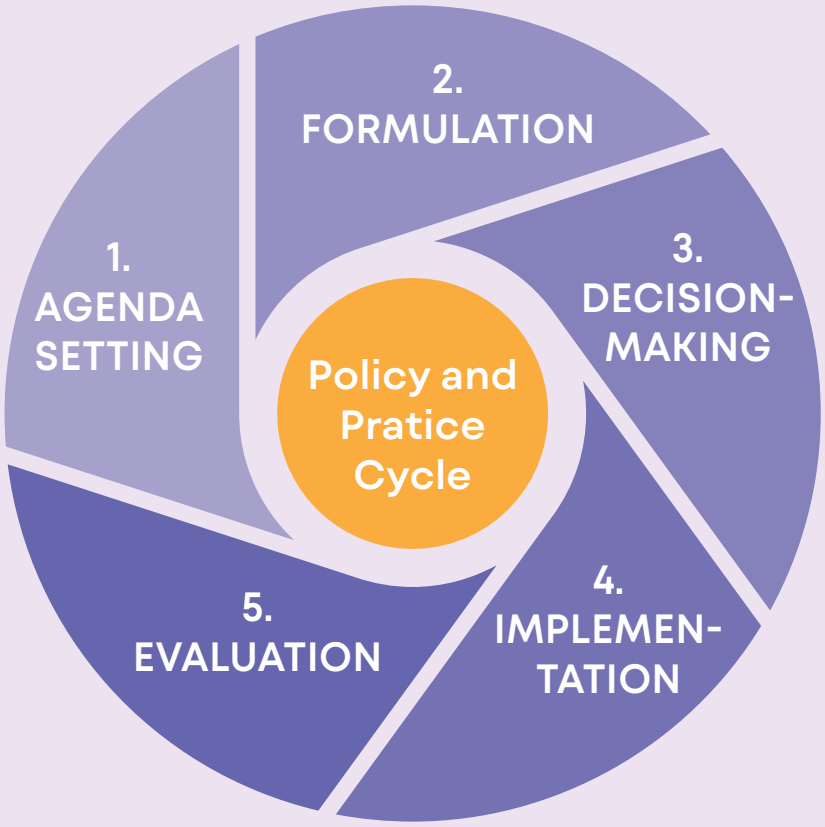
WHY DOES (SELF-)REFLECTION MATTER?

Youth work plays a vital role in addressing and overcoming the diverse challenges faced by young people. To ensure its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability, youth work must be carried out both **for youth** and **with youth**.

Recognizing that "youth" is not a homogeneous group but rather a mosaic of individual profiles and experiences, youth workers must adopt specific and tailored approaches that start from **self-awareness**.

A commitment to inclusive, diverse, and responsive youth work begins with **aligning our practice to the values of inclusion and social justice**. This involves ongoing reflection on our methods, exploring varied engagement strategies, and understanding the broader social and political contexts that shape both our own perspectives and those of the young people we support. Through self-reflection, youth workers create critical learning spaces that foster inclusive and responsive practices.

Continuous learning and adaptation are fundamental in the policy and practice cycle as they identify criticalities, come up with solutions and enhance the overall performance of actions.



SOCIAL JUSTICE

For youth workers, self-reflection means under understanding the context by exploring the wider social and political systems and the impact of these on practitioners and youth.

In youth work, this also means recognizing and address the realities of discrimination—defined as the unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on arbitrary characteristics, whether ascriptive (such as race or gender) or acquired (such as disability or migration status).

Many young people belong to disadvantaged, vulnerable, or at-risk groups, meaning they face a heightened likelihood of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and violence compared to the general population. According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, these groups require targeted support and inclusive strategies.

The concept of **social justice**, as defined by the United Nations, serves as a foundational principle for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among people. It envisions societies built on equality, solidarity, respect for human rights, and the recognition of every individual's dignity. In youth work, social justice is operationalized through five key principles:

1. **EQUITY**, which acknowledges diverse needs and circumstances

2. **ACCESS**, ensuring that all young people can reach the resources and opportunities necessary for success

3. **PARTICIPATION**, enabling active engagement in community life

4. **RIGHTS**, safeguarding the fundamental freedoms of all individuals

5. **DIVERSITY**, which values and respects differences across race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities

Embedding these principles into youth work practice is crucial for fostering inclusive, empowering, and socially just environments.

The opposite of social justice, **social injustice**, is often referred to as an oppressive experience or a "systems of oppression". A **system of oppression** is built upon three interconnected components: ideology, prejudice, and power over. **Ideology** refers to the collective values, beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, and goals that define the way of life for a particular group. When these ideologies are rooted in stereotypes and misinformation, they give rise to **prejudice**—preconceived opinions that unfairly judge individuals or groups. These prejudices become particularly harmful when combined with **power over**, which involves the control, authority, and influence one group holds over another. This power is often maintained through dominance, coercion, and fear, rather than through equitable or collaborative alternatives.

A system is oppressive when:

- A group (or groups) systematically (in an organised manner) exploit, mistreat and abuse another group (or groups)
- A group (or groups) holds power over another in society, through the control of social institutions, along with society's laws, customs, and norms
- Groups in society are sorted into different positions within the social hierarchies of 'race', class, gender, sexuality, and ability
- A group (or groups) becomes dominant and benefit from the oppression of other groups, through heightened privileges relative to others, greater access to rights and resources, a better quality of life, and overall greater life chances
- A group (or groups) has fewer rights, less access to resources, less political power, lower economic potential, worse health and higher mortality rates, and lower overall life chances
- The people in dominant groups, even if they do not actively participate in sustaining oppression, ultimately benefit from it as members of society (i.e., privilege)

Common examples of systemic oppression include **racism, sexism, classism, disablism, homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia**. These systems not only marginalize individuals but also perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Youth workers must be equipped to identify and challenge these structures, fostering environments that promote equity, dignity, and justice for all young people.

Social injustice has also several dimensions, with discrimination and social exclusion being some of their manifestations:

- **HISTORICAL** (e.g., slavery, colonialism, segregation of black people)
- **STRUCTURAL** (e.g., barriers to persons with disability)
- **INSTITUTIONAL** (e.g., exclusion from housing policy)
- **INDIVIDUAL** (e.g., bullying)

Main grounds of discrimination:

- **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**
- **DISABILITY**
- **RELIGION**
- **GENDER**
- **ETHNIC ORIGIN**
- **FAMILY STATUS**
- **RACE**
- **GENDER IDENTITY**
- **ANCESTRY**
- **PLACE OF ORIGIN**
- **CREED**
- **LANGUAGE**
- **MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATION**
- **CITIZENSHIP**
- **ETHNICITY**
- **AGE**
- **GENETIC CHARACTERISTICS**
- **RECORD OF OFFENCES**
- **MARITAL STATUS**
- **COLOUR**
- **PREGNANCY**
- **POLITICAL OPINION**
- **CIVIL STATUS**

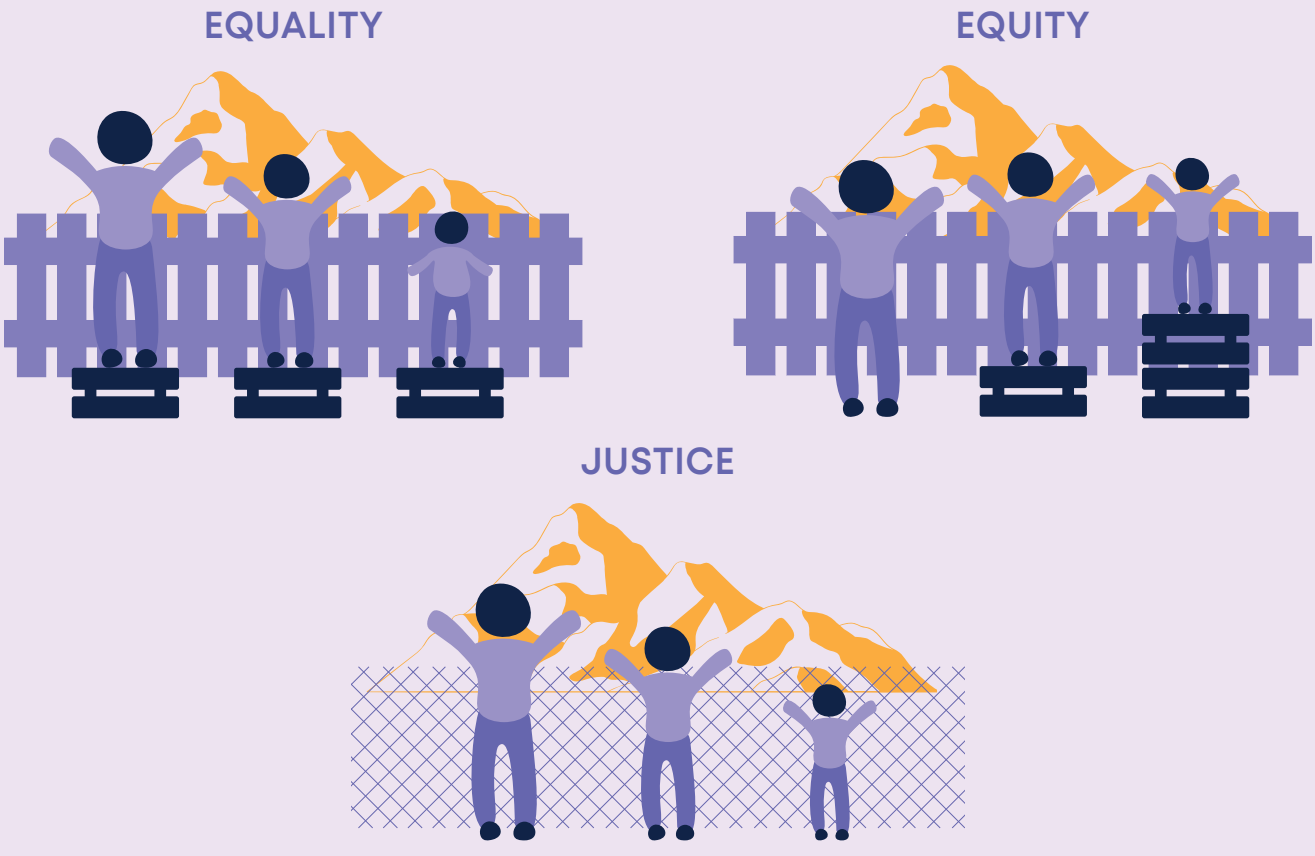
Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding how various systems of inequality—such as those based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and class—interact and overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination and disadvantage. Rather than viewing these forms of oppression in isolation, intersectionality highlights how they intersect to shape the lived realities of individuals in complex and compounding ways. In youth work, applying an intersectional lens allows practitioners to better recognize and respond to the diverse and layered challenges faced by young people, ensuring that support strategies are inclusive, equitable, and attuned to the full spectrum of their identities and experiences.

Social justice represents a specific strategy to combat oppressive systems and, therefore, differs from equality and equity:

1. EQUALITY means providing the same resources, opportunities, and treatment to all individuals, regardless of their circumstances or characteristics. It is based on the principle that everyone should start from the same point and receive identical support. While equality promotes fairness in theory, it does not account for the different barriers and needs that individuals may face in practice.

2. EQUITY goes beyond equality by recognizing that people have diverse needs, circumstances, and starting points. It focuses on providing tailored resources and support to ensure that everyone can achieve similar outcomes. In other words, equity aims to level the playing field by addressing systemic disadvantages and removing barriers that prevent full participation and success.

3. JUSTICE represents the ultimate goal of creating a society where systems and structures are fair, inclusive, and sustainable. Unlike equality and equity, which focus on distributing resources and opportunities, justice seeks to eliminate the root causes of inequity and discrimination. It involves transforming policies, practices, and cultural norms so that fairness and dignity are embedded in all aspects of social life.



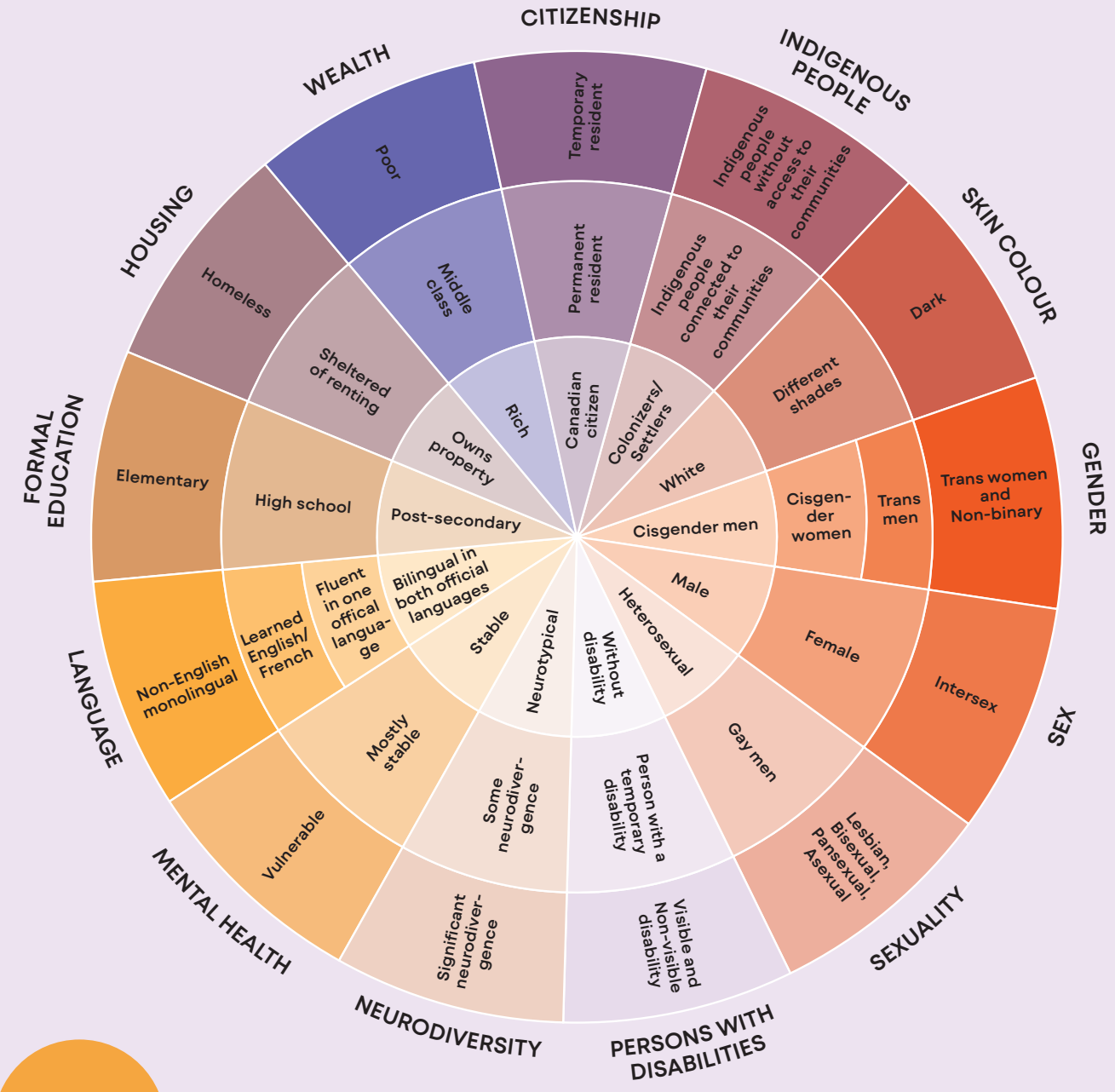
A KEY (SELF-)EVALUATION TOOL: THE WHEEL OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE

The **Wheel of power and privilege** is a visual framework designed to help individuals, including youth workers, understand how various social identities—such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation—intersect to shape one's access to power and societal privilege. At its core, the wheel highlights how certain identities are often centered and granted unearned advantages, while others are marginalized and face systemic barriers. By examining our position on the wheel, we can begin to recognize the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that influence our experiences and interactions, fostering greater awareness, empathy, and commitment to equity.

The Wheel builds on the concept of **positionality**, i.e., the unique social and cultural locations individuals occupy based on their intersecting identities—such as race, gender, class, ability, ethnicity, and geography. These identities shape how we perceive and engage with the world, influencing our knowledge, perspectives, and practices, especially in contexts like education and advocacy[1]. In social justice work, it is essential for advocates and allies to critically examine their own positionality. This reflection helps uncover how power and privilege operate in our lives and interactions, and how these dynamics can unintentionally reinforce systems of oppression or supremacy. By acknowledging our positionality, we begin to understand that our lived experiences are not universal, and that others may navigate the world in fundamentally different ways due to their perceived social identities.

Recognizing positionality is a powerful step toward building mutual respect and fostering inclusive collaboration across different power dynamics. While individuals may not fully grasp each other's experiences, engaging in honest, sometimes uncomfortable conversations about privilege, oppression, and bias can create space for empathy and culturally responsive strategies. This process promotes reflexivity—encouraging individuals to confront their own prejudices and assumptions—and supports the development of more equitable relationships. Ultimately, positionality invites us to move beyond surface-level understanding and toward deeper, more respectful engagement with diverse communities, helping to dismantle systemic barriers and co-create meaningful social change.

[1] Alcoff, L. (1988) Cultural feminism versus post structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs*. 13(3), 405–436.



EXERCISE

- Assess your privilege using the wheel of power and privilege
- Discuss as a group around these three questions:

QUESTION 1

What surprised you when mapping your identities on the Wheel?

QUESTION 2

What aspects of your own position can potentially create prejudice or biases when working with your target group?

QUESTION 3

How can you use your position of privilege to advocate for equity and justice in your practice?

1.3 IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT ACTORS: STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Engaging the right actors in youth work is essential for creating meaningful, sustainable impact. Youth development does not happen in isolation but it is influenced by families, schools, communities, institutions, and policy frameworks. Identifying which stakeholders to involve ensures that initiatives are inclusive, culturally relevant, and aligned with the needs and aspirations of young people. By mapping and engaging key actors, such as educators, local authorities, community leaders, and youth themselves, practitioners can build collaborative networks that share resources, expertise, and influence. This strategic engagement not only strengthens program effectiveness but also fosters shared ownership and accountability, which are critical for long-term success.

Stakeholders are individuals or groups who are involved in, or impacted by, a project, organization, or action. They can include a wide range of actors such as teachers, government bodies, local authorities, businesses, parents, and members of the public. Understanding who your stakeholders are is essential because their perspectives, needs, and influence can significantly shape the success of an initiative.

Stakeholder analysis is the process of identifying these groups, assessing their level of interest and influence, and determining how your work will affect them. This analysis helps in grouping stakeholders strategically to ensure effective engagement and communication throughout the project lifecycle.

Analyzing your stakeholders is a critical step in ensuring the success of any project or initiative. It allows you to create more relevant and accurate stakeholder lists, ensuring that no key actors are overlooked.

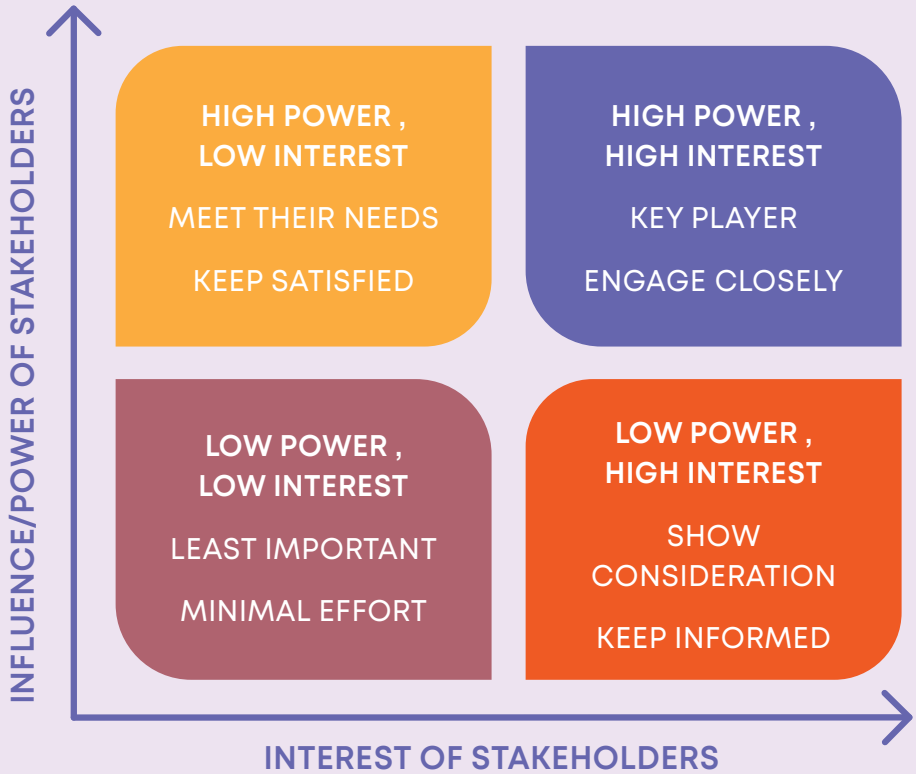
The concept of **interest** in stakeholder analysis goes beyond curiosity or willingness to participate. It often refers to a legal or formal right to be involved or consulted in the process. Additionally, stakeholders may have cultural, social, or historical connections to the area or themes of your initiative, which can influence their expectations and concerns. Recognizing these dimensions of interest allows for more inclusive and context-sensitive planning, ensuring that projects respect local realities and foster trust among all parties involved.

Power refers to the ability of a stakeholder to influence the outcome of a project, decision, or process. This influence can stem from various sources, such as formal authority (e.g., government bodies or regulators), control over resources (funding, information, networks), or social and cultural

capital (community leaders, public opinion). Stakeholders with high power can significantly shape priorities, timelines, and implementation strategies, either enabling or obstructing progress. Analysing power dynamics is crucial for effective engagement, as it helps identify which actors require close collaboration, negotiation, or careful management to ensure project success.

By understanding stakeholders' interests and power, you can prioritize engagement efforts more effectively and focus your actions where they matter most. This process also helps reduce risks by anticipating challenges and addressing concerns early on. Ultimately, stakeholder analysis enables strategic engagement, fostering stronger relationships and collaboration that support the achievement of project goals.

The **Stakeholder matrix** is a strategic tool used to map stakeholders based on two key dimensions: their level of power and their level of interest in the project. This visual framework helps practitioners prioritize engagement by categorizing stakeholders into four quadrants: high power–high interest (manage closely), high power–low interest (keep satisfied), low power–high interest (keep informed), and low power–low interest (monitor). By plotting stakeholders on this matrix, organizations can allocate resources effectively, tailor communication strategies, and anticipate potential risks or support. Using the matrix ensures that engagement efforts are focused where they will have the greatest impact, fostering collaboration and reducing resistance throughout the project lifecycle.

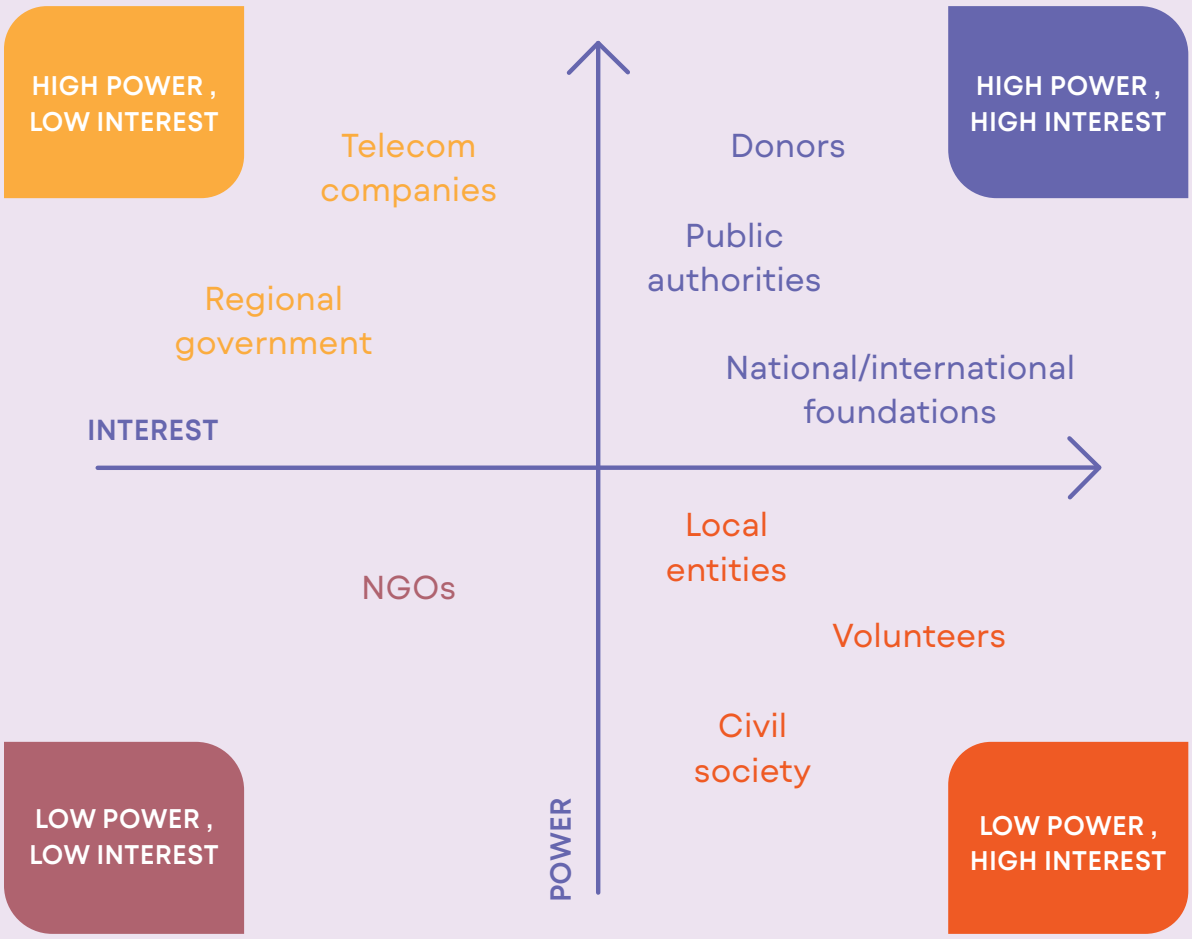


EXERCISE

- Brainstorm on the stakeholders who are relevant to tackle the problem stated below. Try to identify around 8-10 stakeholders
- Discuss about the different degrees of influence/power and interest of each stakeholder, placing them on the matrix

CHALLENGE

"Youth from rural or remote areas often face lack of access to education, health and employment, which limit their opportunity for personal development and civic participation"



1.4 IDENTIFYING WITH THE RIGHT ACTORS: EMPATHY MAPS

Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and be sensitive to another person's feelings and thoughts without necessarily sharing the same experiences. This skill is fundamental in human interaction, but its importance extends far beyond personal relationships and can directly support participatory youth work.

In today's interconnected world, **empathy plays a critical role in problem-solving**, particularly for service providers and organizations tasked with designing solutions for increasingly diverse users, cultures, and environments. By fostering empathy, youth workers can better anticipate and address the needs of those they serve.

However, the challenges faced in modern design are often systemic and highly complex, making alignment among stakeholders seem nearly impossible. This is where design empathy becomes essential. Design empathy is an approach that draws on real-world experiences to inform solutions, enabling organizations to navigate complexity with a human-centered perspective. When companies allow a **deep emotional understanding of people's needs to inspire their work**, they unlock new opportunities for creativity and innovation—transforming not only their products and services but also their teams and organizational culture.

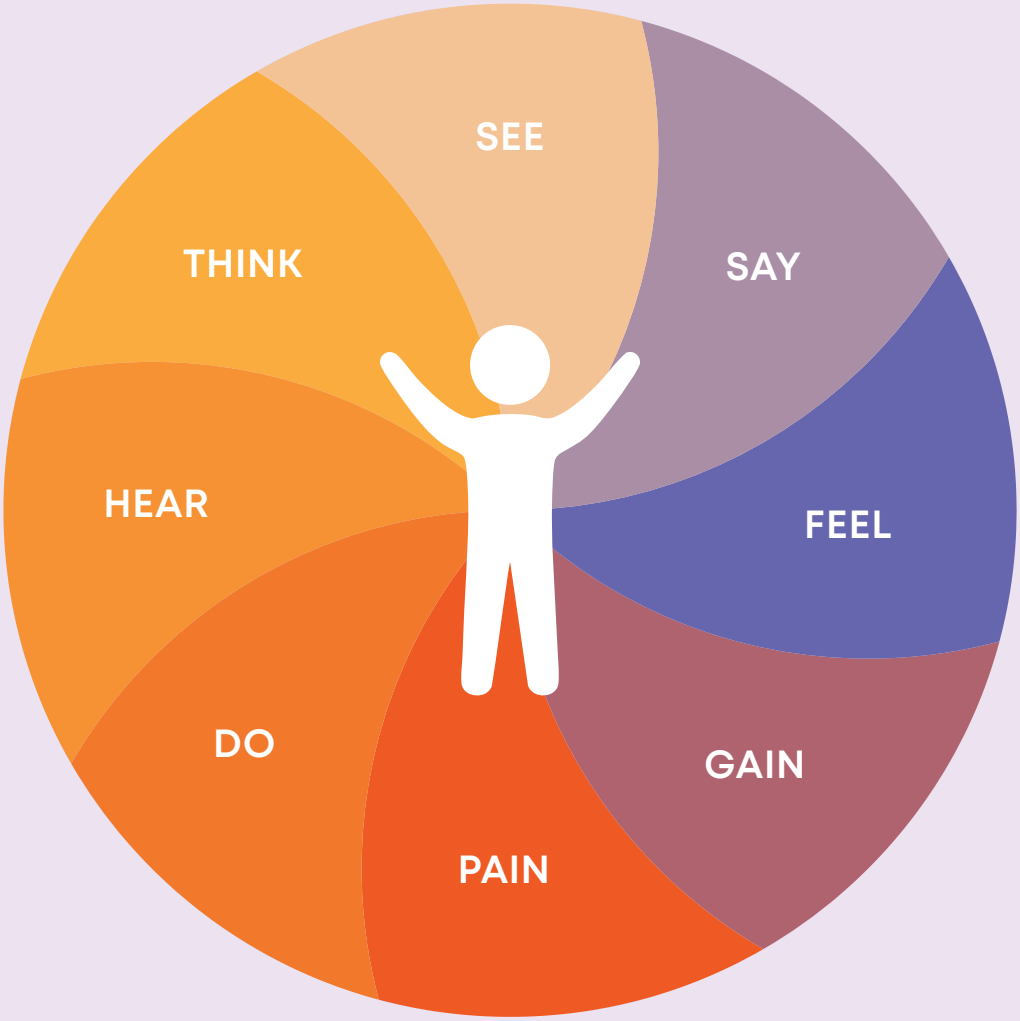
Originating in the design community and gaining momentum in the 1990s, **empathic design** emerged as a structured process to uncover people's unspoken and latent needs. This approach involves observation, data collection and analysis, and iterative prototyping, ensuring that solutions are grounded in authentic human experiences. Design empathy is more than a method—it is a mental habit that encourages continuous curiosity and openness[2]. By embedding empathy into their design processes, organizations can create meaningful, inclusive, and impactful solutions that truly resonate with the people they aim to serve.

The **empathy map** is a powerful visual tool that helps project teams step into the perspective of stakeholders—whether they are already involved or yet to be engaged—and capture their profiles in a structured way. By mapping out these perspectives, teams can better understand the diverse experiences and viewpoints that shape stakeholder interactions, from their perception of the social environment to their sense of belonging and identification with a specific place.

[2] Brown, T. (2009) Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation. *Markets Globalization & Development Review*. 04(02)

The primary aim of an empathy map is to reflect on **what stakeholders think, see, say, and hear, as well as what they do, feel, and fear**. This structured reflection enables both the project team and engaged stakeholders to empathize with the needs, desires, and challenges of the people they are designing for. By making these insights explicit, empathy maps foster alignment and shared understanding, which is essential for inclusive and human-centered design.

Empathy mapping is inherently **transdisciplinary**, bridging different disciplines and communities to create a **holistic view of stakeholder experiences**. It is not a one-time exercise but a tool to be revisited throughout the entire project lifecycle. By continuously referring to the empathy map, teams can deepen their understanding, adapt to emerging insights, and ensure that empathy remains at the core of decision-making and design processes.



EXERCISE

Describe the person or target group that you wish to work with. Try to imagine what they might:

- **SAY:** Capture direct quotes or statements that represent their thoughts or concerns
- **THINK:** Speculate on the target audience's underlying thoughts, beliefs, or motivations
- **SEE:** Register who and what they see in their environment
- **HEAR:** Imagine what they may hear from others, from friends, from colleagues, from rumours
- **FEEL:** Identify the emotions and feelings that the target audience might experience
- **DO:** Outline the actions, behaviours, and habits of the target audience.
- **PAIN POINT:** Highlight the challenges, frustrations, or obstacles the target audience faces
- **GAIN:** Identify the desires, goals, or outcomes the target audience wants to achieve

CHALLENGE

"Despite being more educated than previous generations, many young people face high unemployment rates, job insecurity, and limited opportunities for meaningful career development"

PHASE 2

IDENTIFYING NEEDS THROUGH A SAFE SPACE

After working on positionality, identifying stakeholders and empathising with people, youth workers need to start identifying and exploring youth's challenges and needs. In particular, they need deepen their understanding of the problems that affect youth's wellbeing and start imagining solutions through participatory techniques that centre youth voices, emotions, and creativity. At this stage, the overarching goal is to create a space where youth workers, youth leaders and other professionals feel safe to express their lived experiences, and where their contributions are not only welcomed but actively shape the direction of the work.

A **safe space** is more than a physical or digital setting, it is a relational and emotional environment where participants feel respected, heard, and free from judgment. In youth-led processes, this is especially important. Young people may carry experiences of exclusion, marginalisation, or invisibility. Creating a safe space means acknowledging these realities and actively working to counter them. To foster such a space, facilitators must set clear intentions and use inclusive tools that support equal participation. This includes offering multiple ways to contribute **speaking, writing, drawing, voting and enabling anonymity when needed**.

2.1 WHY USING CO-CREATION TECHNIQUES?

Co-creation is a **collaborative process** where diverse stakeholders—such as young people, youth workers, educators, and community members—actively participate in designing, implementing, and evaluating initiatives that affect them. Rather than being passive recipients of services or programs, youth are empowered to contribute their ideas, experiences, and creativity. This approach values shared ownership, mutual respect, and the blending of different perspectives to create more relevant, inclusive, and impactful outcomes. Co-creation can take many forms, from participatory workshops and peer-led projects to digital platforms that facilitate collective decision-making.

In youth work, co-creation matters because it fosters **agency, belonging, and trust**. When young people are genuinely involved in shaping the programs and policies that affect their lives, they are more likely to engage meaningfully and develop a sense of responsibility and confidence. It also helps youth workers better understand the real needs and aspirations of the communities they serve, leading to more effective and sustainable interventions. Moreover, co-creation strengthens social cohesion by promoting dialogue, empathy, and collaboration across generations and cultures. Ultimately, it transforms youth work from a service delivery model into a dynamic space for empowerment and social innovation.

According to the **New European Bauhaus (NEB)**[3] co-creation ensures that resulting solutions reflect the real needs, aspirations, and experiences of the people who will interact with the project. The NEB Toolbox offers practical guidelines based on lessons learned from 20 local initiatives across Europe as well as **design thinking methodologies**, which typically include steps such as **discovery of needs, definition of challenges, and delivery of solutions**. In this context, the NEB Toolbox proposes a structured process built around three key phases.

[3] New European Bauhaus (NEB). 2024. *Toolbox*

A DIGITAL SPACE FOR CO-CREATION: MIRO

Miro is an online **collaborative platform** designed to facilitate co-design, brainstorming, and visual project management in real time. It provides a digital whiteboard where teams can work together regardless of location, using tools such as sticky notes, diagrams, flowcharts, and templates to organize ideas and processes. Its intuitive interface and integration with other productivity tools make it ideal for workshops, design sprints, and agile planning sessions, enabling participants to contribute simultaneously and visually structure complex information.

The platform supports a wide range of use cases, from strategic planning and needs assessment to creative ideation and remote training. By allowing multiple users to interact on the same board, Miro fosters inclusivity and engagement, ensuring that all voices are heard during the design process. Its flexibility and scalability make it a popular choice for organizations seeking to enhance collaboration, streamline workflows, and co-create solutions in a dynamic and interactive environment.

MIRO can be used throughout training on participation and inclusion in policies and practices. This tool indeed shows how digital environments can support genuine interaction and collaboration, when tools are used thoughtfully and inclusively. Past experience indicates the **great value of visualizing problems in a simple and accessible way**, which helps co-creation participants brainstorm and engage with complex topics more clearly. At the same time, as MIRO is a digital tool, youth **workers should be conscious that digital literacy can vary significantly**, even among young people. As a result, offering a brief tutorial or trial activity to help everyone become familiar with collaborative platforms before starting the exercises can be useful. This would ensure that all participants feel confident and included from the beginning.

2.2 INCLUSIVE FOCUS GROUPS AS A TOOL FOR EXPLORATION

Focus groups are a qualitative research method designed to generate rich, in-depth data through guided group discussions. Led by a moderator, these sessions encourage participants to share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives on a specific topic, while also interacting with one another. This dynamic exchange often reveals insights that might not surface in individual interviews. For youth practitioners, focus groups are particularly valuable tools for conducting **needs assessments**, breaking down complex problems, monitoring ongoing practices, and evaluating interventions both during and after implementation. These discussions allow practitioners to capture the voices of young people and other stakeholders, ensuring that programs remain relevant and responsive to real needs.

Focus groups play a crucial role in youth practice by providing a structured yet flexible space for dialogue and reflection. They can serve both **deductive purposes**, such as testing existing theories or breaking down specific practice-related problems, and **inductive purposes**, such as generating new theories or identifying emerging issues based on participants' lived experiences. Depending on the context, practitioners may use focus groups to define research questions (inductive approach) or to explore pre-defined questions (deductive approach). In both cases, focus groups are a qualitative research method, emphasizing interpretation and meaning-making rather than numerical measurement.

Central to the success of focus groups in youth practice is a commitment to **inclusivity and participation**. Creating an environment where all participants feel heard and respected not only enriches the quality of the data but also empowers young people as active contributors to the decision-making process. This participatory approach strengthens trust, fosters engagement, and ultimately leads to more effective and equitable practices.

To ensure meaningful participation, researchers must establish clear **eligibility criteria**—guidelines that define who should be included in the focus group based on factors such as age, background, experience, or relevance to the research topic. Once these criteria are set, **recruitment strategies** come into play. These may include outreach through community organizations, social media, flyers, or personal networks, all aimed at generating interest and ensuring a diverse and representative group. A well-prepared **focus group guide**, consisting of open-ended questions and prompts, helps the moderator steer the conversation while remaining flexible to follow emerging themes.

Youth workers should remain aware of their **positionality**—the ways in which their own identities and social positions may influence the research dynamic, particularly in terms of power and privilege. This awareness is closely tied to **research ethics**, which demand careful attention to participant safety, informed consent, confidentiality, and minimizing potential harm. Ethical focus group research not only respects participants' rights but also fosters trust and openness, which are essential for collecting authentic and valuable data.

KEYS TO INCLUSIVE FOCUS GROUPS

When planning and conducting focus groups, it is essential to go beyond standard procedures and intentionally design the process to **capture and amplify the voices of those who are disadvantaged or marginalized**. This means embedding equity considerations at every stage—from recruitment and eligibility criteria to facilitation and analysis. Focus groups are not just tools for data collection; they are opportunities to create inclusive spaces where diverse lived experiences can be heard, respected, and valued. The following steps outline a comprehensive approach to organizing and facilitating focus groups, with a consistent emphasis on equity, accessibility, and ethical engagement.

PART A: PLANNING

STEP 1 – ASSESS THE NEED AND FEASIBILITY OF A FOCUS GROUP

- Decide whether a focus group aligns with your research goals. Focus groups can generate rich, nuanced insights and foster mutual understanding among participants and researchers
- Evaluate your capacity to manage a focus group, considering available financial resources, staffing, and the necessary expertise to support planning, facilitation, and analysis

STEP 2 – DEFINE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Identify which roles, experiences, or perspectives are most relevant to your research question

- Consider practical limitations that may require eligibility restrictions for feasibility and relevance
- Reflect on shared characteristics that could enhance group dynamics (comfort and safety foster interactivity)
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Ensure your criteria account for how marginalization and systemic barriers shape the relevance and diversity of perspectives

STEP 3 – DEVELOP INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

- Choose appropriate recruitment methods (e.g., direct outreach, public calls, stakeholder networks)
- Align recruitment with your eligibility criteria
- Aim for diversity to enhance the reliability and richness of data
- Weigh the cost and benefits of different approaches
- Make participation appealing through accommodations or incentives.
- Consider the impact of prior relationships on confidentiality and openness
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Select recruitment channels that are accessible to varied audiences, especially those who may face barriers to participation

STEP 4 – DECIDE ON GROUP SIZE AND NUMBER

- Aim for 6–10 participants per group, with eight being ideal for balanced interaction
- Consider splitting groups based on relevant criteria to ensure safety and comfort
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Be mindful of how identity factors (e.g., race, gender, immigration status) affect participants' sense of safety and willingness to share

STEP 5 – CREATE A THOUGHTFUL FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

- Prepare a set of open-ended, clear, and unbiased questions to guide discussion
- Ensure prompts are relevant, nonthreatening, and encourage curiosity and reflection

- Include nudges to support participants who may need help articulating responses
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Frame questions to uncover how different social locations may influence responses and experiences

STEP 6 – SELECT QUALIFIED AND SENSITIVE STAFF

- Include both a Moderator and a Notetaker to ensure effective facilitation and data collection
- The Moderator should guide the conversation, while the Notetaker captures context and depth
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Choose staff who understand their own social positions and how these relate to participants. Prioritize safety through shared lived experiences where relevant

STEP 7 – ADDRESS ACCESSIBILITY NEEDS

- Ensure participation is possible for all by considering:
    - Financial barriers
    - Time constraints
    - Geographic location
    - Digital access
    - Language needs
    - Physical and intellectual accommodations

STEP 8 – UPHOLD RESEARCH ETHICS

- Protect participants from harm and ensure ethical standards:
    - Guarantee anonymity and confidentiality
    - Ensure voluntary participation
    - Obtain informed consent

STEP 9 – FINALIZE LOGISTICS

- Confirm all necessary elements:
    - Participant list
    - Staff roles
    - Venue or platform
    - Materials and equipment

PART B: FACILITATING

STEP 10 – ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

- Promote respectful, honest, and inclusive dialogue
- Encourage balanced participation
- Reinforce confidentiality among participants
- EQUITY CONSIDERATION: Ground rules should reflect awareness of participants' diverse backgrounds and how these influence group dynamics and relational safety

STEP 11 – BUILD RAPPORT WHILE MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

STEP 12 – FOLLOW THE GUIDE WHILE REMAINING FLEXIBLE TO GROUP NEEDS

STEP 13 – PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING WHILE STAYING NEUTRAL

STEP 14 – FOSTER OPEN AND EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION

2.3 EXPLORING PROBLEMS: THE PROBLEM TREE TECHNIQUE

The Problem tree analysis is a widely used methodology in participatory processes. It helps groups **understand complex issues by mapping out the anatomy of cause and effect around a central problem**. This visual and collaborative technique supports participants in breaking down a challenge into its root causes and observable consequences, making it easier to identify where interventions might be most effective. This tool is particularly valuable because it helps participants explore why a problem exists at all, and what kinds of outcomes or consequences result from it. By mapping the causes, participants gain insight into **what needs to change** in order to reduce or eliminate the problem. By mapping the consequences, they begin to see what positive results could emerge if the problem were addressed, creating a bridge between analysis and hope.

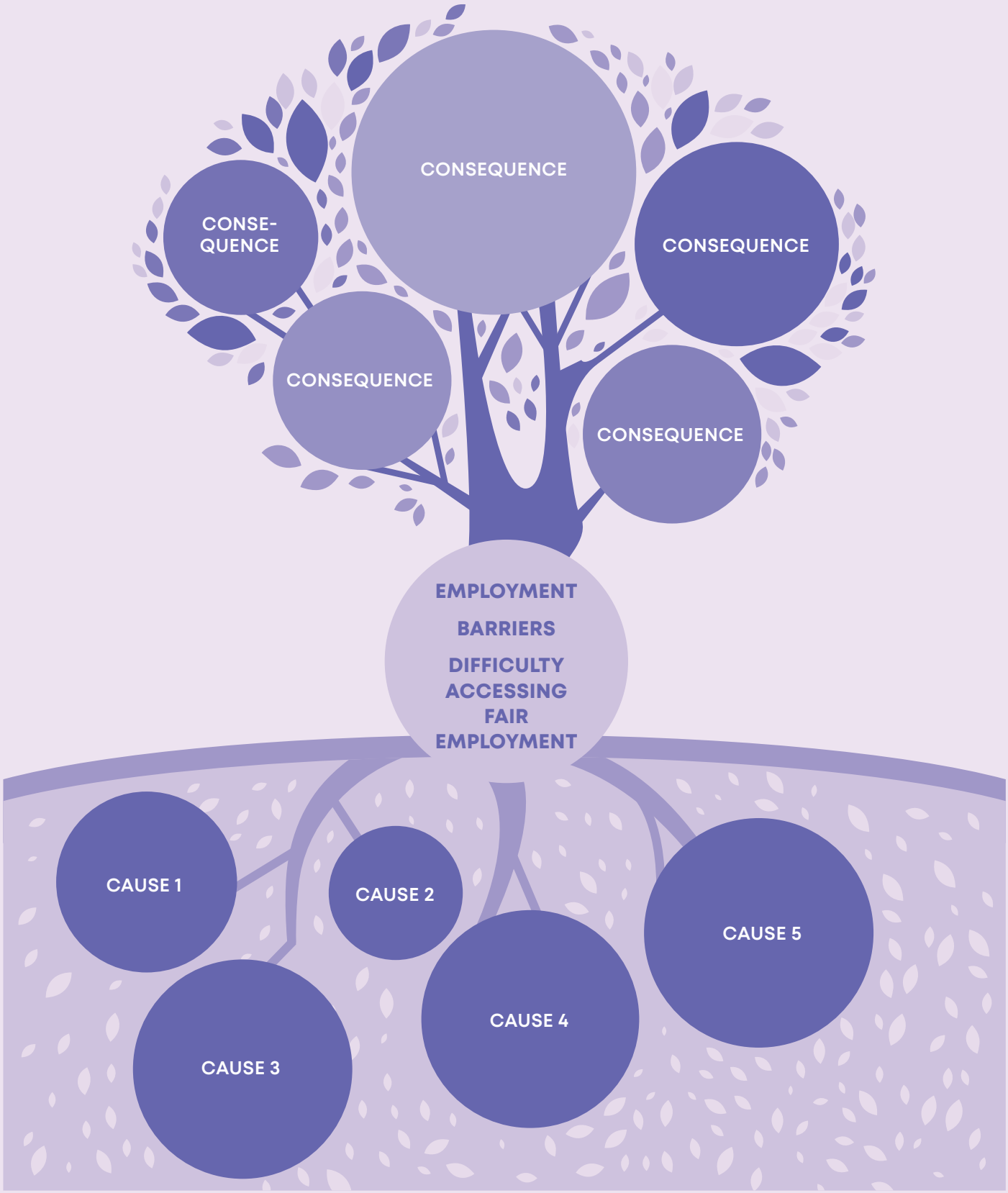
The main goal of the problem tree is to elaborate, in an inclusive way, a structured view of the causes of a problematic situation. It supports a shared understanding of the issue and lays the foundation for imagining meaningful and context-sensitive solutions. A problem tree can be developed using a small focus group. Working in a small group helps foster a sense of shared purpose, mutual understanding, and collective action. Participants begin by identifying a central problem (the “trunk”), then collaboratively explore its underlying causes (the “roots”) and consequences (the “branches”).

This structure encourages systems thinking and helps participants **visualize how different factors are interconnected**. It also creates space for emotional and experiential insights to emerge, especially when used in youth-cantered contexts.

CAUSES, PROBLEMS, AND CONSEQUENCES

Sometimes, the causes of a problem are not easy to see and often "lie beneath the surface".

Using this diagram, think of and identify potential causes and the main consequence of a problem.



EXERCISE

CHALLENGE

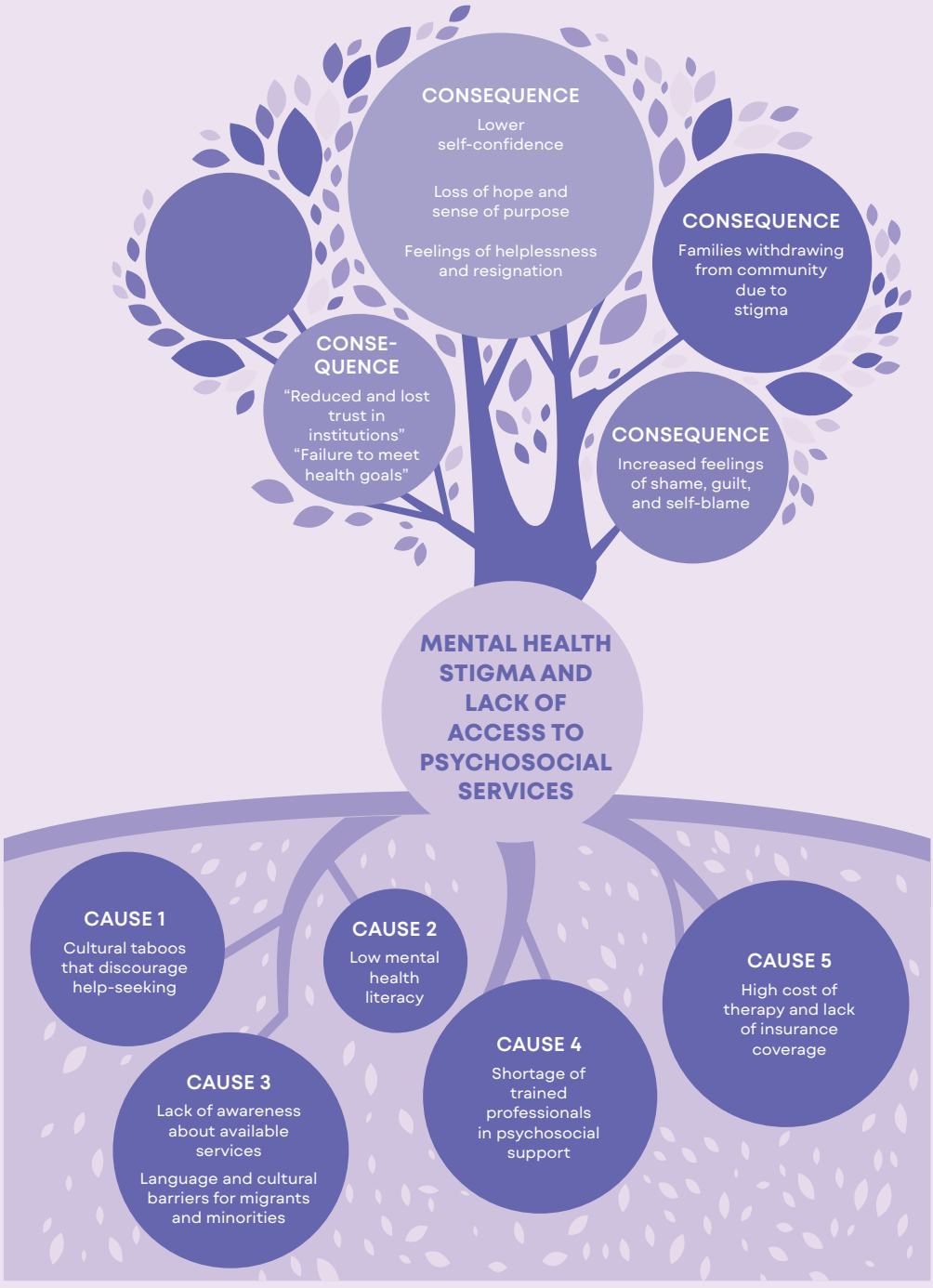
"Young people are experiencing increasing levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, yet many lack access to adequate mental health support and safe spaces to express themselves"

ABOVE THE CORE PROBLEM, WRITE THE MAIN CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROBLEM

- How does stigma affect youth's willingness to seek help?
- What impact does untreated mental health have on education, employment, or relationships?
- How does this contribute to isolation or dropout rates?
- What are the long-term effects on community well-being?

BELOW THE CORE PROBLEM, WRITE THE MAIN CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

- Why is mental health still considered taboo?
- What beliefs or cultural norms contribute to the misunderstanding of conditions like depression or other mental health issues?
- What role do schools, families, and media play in shaping attitudes toward mental health?



2.4 GENERATING SOLUTIONS: THE BACKCASTING TECHNIQUE

Backcasting is a strategic planning method that begins with a vision of a desirable future and works backward to identify the steps needed to achieve it. Unlike forecasting, which projects current trends forward, backcasting starts from a place of aspiration and imagination. It invites participants to envision what they want the future to look like, and then collaboratively determine how to get there. This technique has become a cornerstone of participatory planning, especially in contexts involving complex social challenges.

Backcasting is particularly well-suited for:

- **Complex social issues** that require systemic change
- **Long-term planning** where short-term fixes are insufficient
- **Creative, systems-level thinking** that engages diverse stakeholders in imagining and shaping the future

The **Backcasting technique** involves a structured, step-by-step process that begins with envisioning a preferred future and then works backward to identify the actions needed to achieve it. Here are the key steps typically involved:

1. **DEFINE THE DESIRED FUTURE:** Start by collaboratively imagining a future scenario that reflects shared values and goals—this could be a socially just, sustainable, or inclusive community
2. **ASSESS THE CURRENT SITUATION:** Analyze the present context, including existing challenges, resources, and systems that influence the issue at hand
3. **IDENTIFY THE GAP:** Compare the envisioned future with the current reality to understand what changes are needed
4. **MAP OUT STRATEGIC STEPS:** Work backward from the future to the present, outlining the milestones, interventions, and decisions required to bridge the gap
5. **PRIORITIZE ACTIONS:** Determine which steps are most feasible, impactful, and urgent, considering available resources and potential barriers
6. **IMPLEMENT AND MONITOR:** Begin executing the plan while continuously evaluating progress and adapting as needed

Based on the outcome of the Problem tree analysis, participants can start backcasting by exploring **future scenarios** and then move back to translate these future visions into actionable pathways. This can be done through two key steps:

1. IDENTIFYING PRECONDITIONS

Participants can ask themselves: *What needs to be in place before this vision can be achieved?*

- What policies or reforms are necessary?
- What kinds of support systems or services must be available?
- What cultural or societal shifts are required?
- What roles do schools, employers, communities, and governments play?
- What infrastructure or resources are needed?

This step encourage participants to think systemically, identifying the foundational conditions that must exist to make the envisioned future possible.

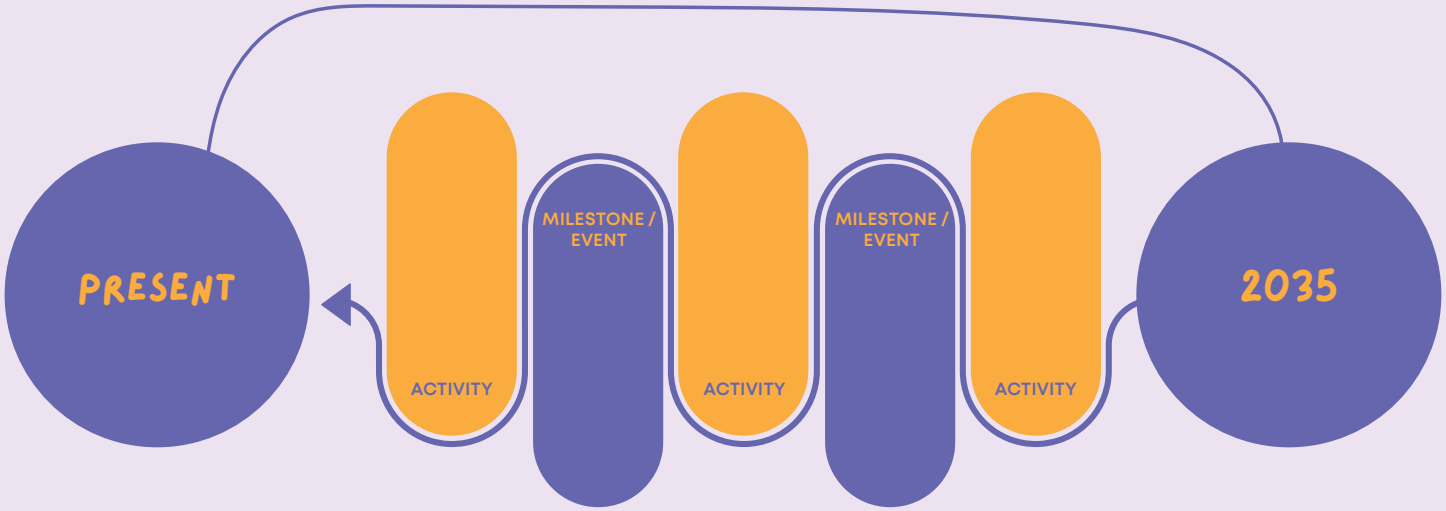
2. MILESTONES AND ACTIONS

Participants can work backward from the preconditions to identify **concrete actions** that must happen in the next few years:

- What can be done now to start moving toward the preconditions?
- What pilot programs, trainings, or campaigns could be launched?
- What kind of funding or partnerships are needed?
- How can youth be engaged in designing and leading these actions?

This part of the exercise emphasize **agency and practicality** and helps participants move from abstract visioning to tangible planning.

At the end of the backcasting session, participants can be invited to pause and reflect on their experience. They should be encouraged to think about what surprised or inspired them during the activities—perhaps a new perspective, a moment of connection, or an unexpected insight. This moment of reflection helped consolidate learning and allowed participants to connect their insights to future work. Sharing is optional and can be done via chat or spoken word, reinforcing the safe space that had been cultivated throughout the session.



EXERCISE

Start by envisioning the year 2035. In this future, mental health is treated with the same seriousness and compassion as physical health. Youth have access to consistent, community-based psychosocial services. Schools, workplaces, and public institutions actively promote mental well-being. Seeking help is normalized, and mental health literacy is widespread. The pressure to succeed is balanced by a culture that values emotional resilience, self-discovery, and diverse life paths.

PHASE 3

ADOPTING STRATEGIES TO RESPOND TO NEEDS

After identifying salient needs and exploring concrete issues and potential solutions together with youths and other stakeholders, youth workers can develop strategies to respond to those needs and implement the agreed solutions. Youth participation plays a central role in this phase too, as it ensures that actions remain relevant, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experiences of young people. Involving youth in decision-making and implementation not only strengthens ownership and accountability but also enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of the outcomes. This collaborative approach empowers young people as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries, fostering skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging throughout the process.

One way to provide responses and shape concrete solutions can be through **strategic communication**. To ensure participation, youth workers should engage youth to co-create campaigns that are inclusive, impactful, and rooted in real-life challenges faced by young people. Communication should indeed be seen not just as a tool for disseminating information but also as a vehicle to raise awareness, enabling people and sustain participation in initiative and, more broadly, society. Communication campaigns can indeed shift public perception, influence policy, and foster youth-led change.

3.1 COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

A **communication campaign** is a structured and intentional plan of activities designed to inform a specific target group about something important and to raise awareness around a social issue. Its ultimate goal is to deliver a message using the most appropriate tools to make a meaningful impact on the identified audience. Whether through print materials, social media, press releases, or videos, a campaign blends strategic thinking with creative expression. It is not simply about broadcasting information, it is about shaping perception, fostering engagement, and inspiring action.

In the context of youth participation, communication campaigns serve as bridges between young people and the institutions, communities, and policies that affect their lives. They offer a way to amplify youth voices, challenge stigma, and promote inclusive narratives. Designing such a campaign requires a thoughtful and participatory process, beginning with a deep understanding of the audience.

A successful campaign is a **blend of strategy and creativity** and must be well-planned, audience-centered, and emotionally resonant. These are some guidelines to inform the development of campaigns:

1. DEFINE THE TARGET AUDIENCE

Understanding who you want to reach is the foundation of any campaign. This involves:

- Identifying **primary and secondary audiences**
- Exploring their **demographics** (age, location, education, employment)
- Understanding their **values, beliefs, and challenges**
- Mapping their **media habits** (platforms used, trusted sources)
- Considering their **social context** (urban/rural, migrant/native)

Creating a **persona**—a fictional but realistic character—helps campaign designers empathize with their audience and tailor messages effectively.

2. CRAFT KEY MESSAGES

Messages should be:

- **Clear and concise**
- **Emotionally engaging**

- **Relevant** to the audience's lived experience
- **Action-oriented**, encouraging participation or reflection

Effective campaigns often use:

- **Slogans** that are memorable and shareable
- **Stories** that humanize the issue
- **Evidence** that supports the message
- **Visuals** that capture attention
- **Messengers** who are trusted by the audience (e.g., peers, influencers)

3. SELECT TOOLS AND CHANNELS

The choice of tools depends on:

- The **campaign's objectives**
- The **preferences of the target audience**
- The **available resources**

Common channels include:

- Social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube)
- Websites and blogs
- Newsletters and email campaigns
- Printed publications
- Events and workshops
- Podcasts and video series

A **multi-channel approach** is often necessary to ensure broad and effective reach.

Another essential component of campaign design is **building networks and collaborations**. No campaign operates in isolation. By partnering with civil society organizations, media outlets, schools, and local institutions, campaign designers can expand their reach, enhance credibility, and access additional resources. These partnerships also foster long-term engagement and create opportunities for co-creation, where youth are not just recipients of messages but active contributors to the campaign's development.

To illustrate these principles, the trainers presented three youth-relevant campaigns that exemplify strategic and inclusive communication. The selection was intentional: each campaign represented a distinct example in terms of budget, actors involved, and thematic focus. This diversity was meant to show participants that impactful communication is not limited to well-funded initiatives—it can emerge from grassroots efforts and co-created processes as well.

3.2 EXAMPLES OF COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

Campaigns are not just about visibility, they are about strategic influence. A successful campaign:

- **Identifies a clear goal** (e.g., reduce stigma, increase access)
- **Understands its audience** (through personas and segmentation)
- **Crafts compelling messages** (using stories, visuals, and slogans)
- **Chooses the right channels** (social media, events, press)
- **Engages trusted messengers** (influencers, peers, professionals)

Campaigns can **reframe issues**, challenge stereotypes, and create pressure for policy change.

The following three campaigns provides a rich spectrum of possibilities. They demonstrate that communication can be strategic and inclusive whether it is led by a global brand, a youth movement, or a local community group. What matters the most is the clarity of purpose, the authenticity of the message, and the meaningful involvement of young people in the process.

BRAVE TOGETHER highlights how large commercial brands are increasingly engaging with sensitive social issues such as mental health and the pressures of social media. With substantial resources and access to global platforms, this campaign demonstrates how corporate actors can contribute to destigmatizing youth struggles by leveraging their visibility and influence. It offers tools, resources, and a community space for young people to talk openly about anxiety and depression, using storytelling and influencer partnerships to normalize help-seeking behavior.

FRIDAYS FOR FUTURE showcases a completely different approach, as a global movement that emerged from the bottom up. Initiated by students and led by youth activists, this campaign began with Greta Thunberg's solo protest and grew into a worldwide mobilization for climate action. It was not backed by institutions or brands but driven by conviction, consistency, and grassroots organizing. The campaign's success lies in its authenticity and its ability to connect young people across borders through shared values and digital platforms.

FREED is a local initiative developed in Milan with very limited budget. What makes it powerful is its process: it is entirely co-created by young people from vulnerable groups. From designing the logo to crafting the messages and choosing the formats, youth participants leads every aspect of the campaign. This example shows that even with minimal resources, a campaign can be deeply relevant and resonant when it is built from the ground up, with the target audience actively shaping its content and direction.

3.3 HOW TO USE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Inclusive language in youth-focused communication campaigns is essential as it ensures that messages are accessible, respectful, and representative of the diversity within youth communities. Using inclusive language helps avoid stereotypes, biases, and assumptions related to gender, culture, ability, or socioeconomic background, creating a sense of belonging for all young people. This approach not only amplifies marginalized voices but also builds trust and engagement, as youth are more likely to connect with campaigns that reflect their identities and experiences. Ultimately, inclusive language is a powerful tool for equity, fostering participation and dialogue in ways that empower every young person to feel seen and valued.

Inclusive language can be used, for instance, in terms of gender–not only as a matter of style but as a commitment to gender equality and non-discrimination. **Gender-inclusive language** refers to a way of speaking and writing that includes everyone by avoiding expressions that perpetuate stereotypes, disregard, or humiliate people of any gender. Even when we do not hold discriminatory or hurtful assumptions, our expressions may still imply cultural stereotypes. As a result, our subtle linguistic choices contribute to reinforcing exclusionary norms and limiting the visibility of diverse gender identities.

The **ECAS guidelines** offer practical recommendations for the use of gender-inclusive language in English, particularly in written texts. These guidelines are grounded in one of the pillars of the **Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union: the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds.**

Key principles include:

- Using **gender-neutral pronouns** (e.g., singular "they")
- Avoiding **gendered job titles** ("firefighter" vs. "fireman")
- Replacing **exclusionary terms** ("chairman" → "chair", "mankind" → "humanity")
- Avoiding **trivializing language** ("girls" for adult women, diminutives like "usherette")

Youth workers can reflect on their own communication habits and consider how to actively avoid language expressions based on stereotypical or discriminatory cultural attitudes. A critical and intentional approach to language, with small changes such as using gender-neutral pronouns or avoiding gendered job titles, can significantly affect how messages are received and understood.

3.4 PERSONAS

In user-centered design and marketing, "personas" are semi-fictional characterizations or representations of typical customer segments or end users. Youth workers can engage in the definition of personas for their own youth-focused campaigns through a creative and strategic exercise.

Participants create a fictional character representing their target audience choosing between relevant categories of stakeholders, e.g.,

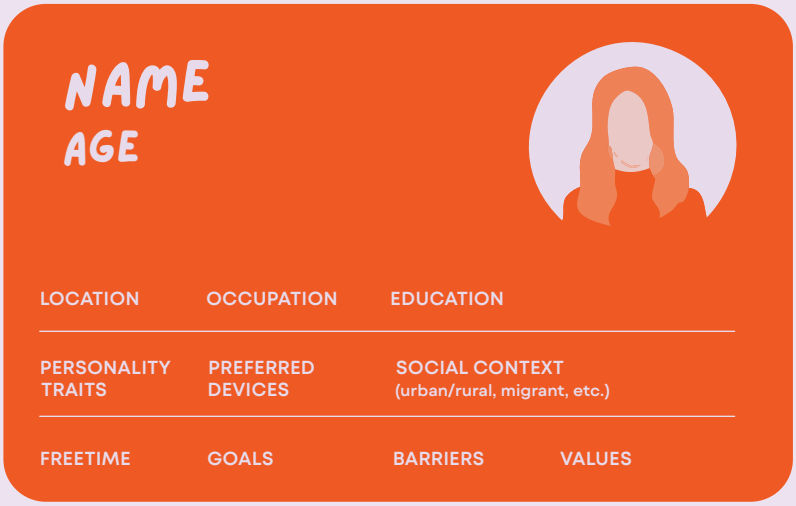
- A high school student
- A sport player
- A journalist
- A local Policy maker
- A member of a local NGO

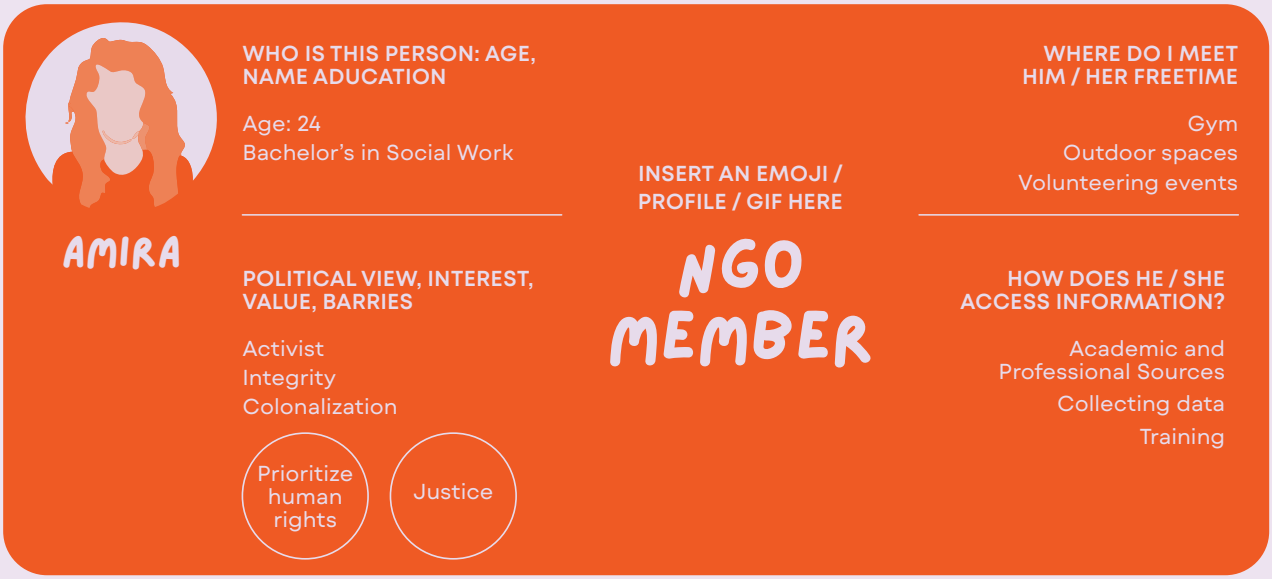
They then proceed to compiling some information, including:

- **Demographics:** Age, location, education, employment
- **Social context:** Urban/rural, migrant/native, digital access
- **Values and attitudes:** Beliefs, aspirations, fears
- **Media habits:** Preferred platforms, trusted sources
- **Storyboards:** A day in the life, challenges, dreams

This exercise helps participants **step into the shoes** of their audience. It lays the foundation for designing messages that resonate authentically and respectfully.

GROUP WORK – PERSONAS DEFINITION





3.5 SCENARIO-BASED CAMPAIGN STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Scenario-based campaign strategy development is a planning approach that prepares campaigns for multiple possible futures rather than relying on a single prediction. It involves identifying key uncertainties—such as political, social, or economic shifts—and creating a set of plausible scenarios that describe how these factors might evolve. By exploring these scenarios, organizations can anticipate challenges and opportunities, ensuring that their strategies remain relevant under different conditions.

This method enhances adaptability and resilience by designing flexible strategies that can be adjusted as real-world events unfold. Instead of reacting to change, campaigns using this approach proactively plan for it, reducing risks and improving decision-making. Scenario-based strategy development is widely used in advocacy, marketing, and policy work, where external environments are complex and unpredictable.

As part of this method, participants are first presented with realistic scenarios in order to **create a communication strategy tailored to real needs**. By basing the scenarios on lived challenges among youth and youth workers, the exercise ensure that the campaign strategies are be both relevant and empathetic. Scenarios serve as a guiding framework that helps participants think creatively and strategically about how their campaign might need to adapt depending on how these issues evolve. They encourage forward-thinking and help **avoid one-size-fits-all solutions**, fostering **campaigns that are more inclusive, responsive, and impactful**.

EXERCISE

SCENARIO: RURAL AREAS – "DISCONNECTED YOUTH"

BACKGROUND

Sarah is 19 and lives in a small village in the mountains. She finished high school but has no access to higher education or job opportunities nearby. Public transport is limited, and digital infrastructure is poor. She feels isolated and uninformed about available support programs.

CHALLENGE

Despite national programs targeting rural youth, Sarah and her peers are unaware of them. Local institutions struggle to communicate effectively, and young people feel excluded from decision-making.

YOUR TASK

Design a communication strategy that:

- Reaches rural youth like Sarah
- Builds trust and engagement
- Promotes available opportunities and services
- Encourages participation in local initiatives
- Identify Stakeholder Focus (journalists, NGOs, policy makers…)

EXERCISE

CREATE YOUR OWN CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

YOUR VOICE, YOUR FUTURE

DIRECT APPROCH - VERY SIMPLE TOOLS

Strategy: Direct contact easy and simple	Word of mouth	Flyers for events	Round table event (to listen)	Enhance dialog and increase level of democracy	LOCAL INITIATIVE (for youth)

STAKEHOLDERS

Municipality	NGO's	Sports Club

AMIRA

3.6 GLOBAL CITIZEN EDUCATION (GCE)

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is a **transformative educational approach** that empowers individuals to become active, engaged, and critical citizens in their local, national, and global contexts. This methodology is directly used by **SOLIDAR**[4], a European network of civil society organizations (CSOs) that works to advance social justice through education, social affairs, and international cooperation. SOLIDAR organises its work for lifelong and life-wide learning for democratic participation through the SOLIDAR Foundation. The purpose of the Foundation is to advance our common policy and advocacy work while addressing internal learning needs in what we consider a learning hub for the network.

SOLIDAR's work on Global Citizenship Education illustrates the transformative potential of education when it is grounded in popular education traditions, critical thinking, and collective action. By promoting a shared framework, supporting innovative projects such as the AKA project, and engaging in sustained policy advocacy, SOLIDAR contributes to building societies in which young people, especially those in challenging contexts, can exercise their rights, challenge injustices, and actively shape their futures.

This section outlines SOLIDAR Foundation's work on GCE, with a particular focus on its efforts in challenging contexts, its conceptual and methodological framework, and its concrete projects such as **the Awareness, Knowledge, Action (AKA) Active Citizens Project**. The narrative draws from training content delivered in September 2025 and illustrates how SOLIDAR Foundation brings together members, partners, and learners to co-create educational practices and policy initiatives that foster inclusive, democratic, and transformative participation.

WHY GCE IN CHALLENGING CONTEXTS?

SOLIDAR emphasises the importance of **fostering active citizenship** particularly in challenging contexts: those characterized by structural inequalities, weak democratic institutions, and limited access to educational opportunities. In such environments, young people often experience:

- Less access to citizenship education and knowledge about democratic participation
- Barriers to active participation in civic and political life
- Poor political representation, leading to marginalization
- Higher risks of exclusion, creating a distance between communities and institutions

[4] SOLIDAR Foundation is partner of the EMPASY project

Civil society organizations (CSOs) frequently play a vital role in filling these gaps, engaging with communities that public institutions neglect. However, this work is not politically neutral. As SOLIDAR Foundation stresses, fostering active citizenship means **empowering individuals and communities to critically analyse, resist, and transform the structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion**. Education in this sense must go beyond the transfer of knowledge. It must revolve around liberation, critical thinking, and transformation, enabling learners to participate meaningfully in society. GCE is therefore not only an educational strategy, but also a political and social project.

SOLIDAR'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GCE

Recognizing the diversity of contexts across Europe and beyond, SOLIDAR Foundation and its member organisations sought to develop a common conceptual framework for GCE. Through collective analysis of practices, challenges, and experiences, SOLIDAR adopted a shared definition inspired by Vanessa Andreotti (2014[5]):

"Political education on a global scale which prepares learners to develop a sense of belonging to the global community, to get involved and to take an active role in society in order to contribute to a peaceful, just world in which ecological resources are preserved."

This definition underlines several key dimensions:

- **Belonging to a global community**
- **Active participation**
- **Justice and sustainability**

To operationalise this vision, SOLIDAR Foundation promotes a participatory, co-created approach, bringing together learners, educators, and CSOs in a continuous cycle of dialogue, reflection, and practice.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF GCE IN ACTION

One flagship example comes from SOLIDAR Foundation's member, the **Centre for Peace Studies (CPS)** in Croatia. For over 25 years, CPS has run a six-month non-formal education program known as Peace Studies, which trains "restless citizens" committed to non-violent social change.

[5] Andreotti, V. (2014) Soft versus Critical Global Citizenship Education. In McCloskey, S. (Ed.) *Development Education in Policy and Practice.*

The program combines lectures, workshops, and mentored work to explore themes such as:

- Critical thinking and human rights
- Conflict transformation and structural violence
- Diversity and anti-discrimination policies

The aim is to deconstruct the causes of social injustice and develop strategies to resist direct and structural violence, oppression, and exclusion. Hundreds of young citizens have graduated from the program, many of whom continue to shape civic and political life in Croatia and beyond. This example demonstrates SOLIDAR Foundation's emphasis on combining theory and practice, connecting abstract concepts of justice and equality with tangible skills, experiences, and activism.

THE AKA PROJECT: AWARENESS, KNOWLEDGE, ACTION

A major project that was coordinated by SOLIDAR Foundation is **the Awareness, Knowledge, Action for Active Citizens (AKA) Project**. This project spans eight European countries, each with its own specific local realities, but united by a common methodology and goals.

The AKA Project aims to develop a shared pedagogical approach to GCE grounded in co-creation and active participation. It builds Community Centres where young people, educators, and project partners co-lead activities designed to foster critical thinking, solidarity, and civic engagement.

The project addresses a wide range of urgent social issues, including:

- Understanding diversity and promoting tolerance
- Intergenerational solidarity
- Climate justice and ecological transition
- Sustainable economics
- Gender equality
- Active citizenship and democratic participation

The **AKA Project produced a Booklet of Methodologies for Fostering Social Action and Democratic Engagement**, which collects tools and practices from across the participating countries. Available in eight languages, the booklet serves as a practical guide for educators and practitioners, offering methods such as artivism, world café discussions, and workshops on urban mobility and accessibility. These methodologies

are designed to be inclusive, participatory, and transformative, particularly for young people from vulnerable backgrounds.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY WORK

SOLIDAR Foundation's engagement with GCE extends beyond practice to policy development and advocacy. Through initiatives such as **the Civil Society Alliance for Global Citizenship Education**, SOLIDAR Foundation and its members contribute to shaping educational policies at national, regional, and European levels.

This involves: publishing policy papers and discussion materials, contributing to policy consultations with European institutions and national governments, supporting members' advocacy efforts, bridging different stakeholders to strengthen the recognition and implementation of GCE.

A creative example of this advocacy work is the production of **"Policy Pills"**, short and accessible learning materials that make complex GCE concepts more engaging and understandable for wider audiences.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING GCE

From its extensive experience, SOLIDAR has identified several key strengths of transformative learning approaches in GCE:

- They create inclusive and participatory spaces
- They combine critical reflection with action
- They foster solidarity across generations, backgrounds, and communities

At the same time, SOLIDAR acknowledges the challenges of implementing GCE:

- Navigating political resistance or lack of recognition from institutions
- Ensuring sustainable resources and long-term support
- Balancing local specificities with a shared global framework

These challenges reinforce the need for continuous dialogue between practice and policy, as well as for strong alliances between CSOs, educators, and communities.

EMPASY

EMOTIONAL LITERACY &
YOUTH PARTICIPATION

EMPASY.PROJECT

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