
INCLUSION

HIGHLY VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

A GUIDE TO THE DEFINITION,
WITH EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD



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INTRODUCTION TO THE DEFINITION OF HIGHLY VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

During the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Associazione Joint network, our focus was on developing a Position Paper aimed at enhancing the inclusion of highly vulnerable young people in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps mobilities. The objective was to advocate for policy changes that would enhance the quality of inclusion throughout the various stages of mobility projects. This document was intended for dissemination to EACEA, National Agencies, organizations actively engaged in youth mobility, and other pertinent European stakeholders.

26 organizations from 14 different countries collaborated to establish a shared definition of "Highly Vulnerable Young Person." Preceding the gathering, a needs analysis was undertaken through an online survey, which garnered responses from 73 international organizations spanning 23 countries. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 organizations operating at the local level to further support this definitional process.

This process led us to the creation of the following definition:

A highly vulnerable young person is a person that is living in a situation of vulnerability and who is facing an overlapping of potential exclusion factors, of which at least one is a long-term or permanent condition. Their involvement in mobility activities implies a need for a long term structural support system to be put in place by all partners in the project and promoted by National Agencies and European stakeholders.

This definition does not want to be an alternative or in competition to the definition of "Fewer Opportunities", as defined in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, but we imagined it as complementary to it. Inside our network, we felt the need to create this category, because the young people falling within in the definition of HVYP need a level of support and the creation of specific systemic changes, local and transnational networks, methodologies and approaches, that are usually not required for those falling within the definition of fewer opportunities. Within the "classical" category of "Fewer opportunities", indeed, it is very difficult to enclose multidimensional, intersectional and systemic barriers that young people can face, as well as is almost impossible to give an account of the weight that a given barrier may have in a specific socio-economic context and situation. More specifically, we reach out to young people that face high risks of long-term marginalisation in their community, and we provide them with the tools and competences to become empowered, resilient and able to fulfill and protect their rights.

WHY THIS GUIDE?

The following guide to the definition of "Highly Vulnerable Young People" is one of the products developed during the annual meeting of the Joint Association network, held in Galbiate (Italy) from November 27 to December 1, 2023.

The guide aims to shed light on the definition of "Highly Vulnerable Young People" through concrete AND OPERATIVE examples derived directly from the field, based on the experiences of individual organizations involved in the process.

In addition to identifying profiles that could give concreteness to the definition, we focused – through a critical analysis – on the limitations of the Erasmus+ program and the organizations working within it, and on the obstacles that these limitations pose to the effective inclusion of these target groups in youth mobility activities. Furthermore, during the same process of analysis, we examined the benefits that their involvement could have both on the young people themselves and on the Erasmus+ program as a whole.

The main objective of this guide is to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the complexity of being young and highly vulnerable. Through this deepening, we hope to strengthen advocacy strategies at both local and international levels to promote the inclusion of these target groups, ensuring greater access to youth mobility programs funded by the Erasmus+ program.

Before getting into a detailed view on what are the barriers and benefits that a youth exchange can bring in the development of a highly vulnerable young person, we have identified a few barriers that can be general to all the below described groups. We do not pretend these examples to be exhaustive, but we do believe it is important to state them here, in order to show how we, as a network, give an operational definition to the concept of highly vulnerable participants.

General barriers:

- lack of social support and social networks
- risk of discrimination
- risk of violence, including sexual violence
- lack of motivation
- fears, anxiety linked to traumas
- lack of self-esteem

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

- Lack of co-financing on a local level.
- Lack of abilities of young people in this situation to fill in, in a proper way, an application form and succeed in a competitive selection process.
- Little or no organisation competences to be able to work with disadvantaged participants and not enough capacity building opportunities.
- No verification of the capacity of the partners organisations on a practical level.
- Not enough partnership building activities organised for the inclusion of highly vulnerable young people.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Giving them the opportunity to experience a safe space, supportive environment where no matter how bad the situation is in your life back home, you can still be appreciated for who you are.
- It is a break from daily realities, a bubble in time that can provide an opportunity to develop new mindsets.
- Increased confidence, and opportunities to create social networks, both in national and international groups, new friends.

YOUNG PEOPLE FACING SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY BARRIERS, IMPACTING THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

A young person struggling with a socio-economic issue could face one or more of the following barriers: extreme poverty, bullying, sexual/gender identity, domestic violence, living in a very conservative society/isolated area (i.e. geographical barriers), lack of family support, having been separated from their family, living in institutionalised settings, etc. They are more likely than other young people to be deprived of social connections and therefore, they are usually developing mental health issues as an emotional response: depression, anxiety, social anxiety, compulsive behaviours, self-harming behaviours, intrusive thoughts, lack of emotional intelligence, low self-esteem, lack of motivation. What is more, social isolation has a great impact on the health of young people, comparable to smoking or excessive drinking.

According to the definition of the World Health Organisation, mental health is not only the absence of mental illness, but a general state of emotional well-being that allows young people to cope with stressful situations, learn, work and build healthy social connections.

Permanent barriers:

- Lack of social support in early childhood affecting their long-term development
- Extreme poverty traumas
- Instable or lack of a family environment

Other temporary barriers:

- Social isolation
- Emotional or mental struggles
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of motivation

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

The longer the time between the moment they apply for taking part in a mobility and the mobility itself, the bigger the risk of dropping out, as young people struggling both with socio-economic issues and emotional stress are rapidly changing their mind and get demotivated. There is a need for extra support in communicating with them constantly during the preparation phase and this implies extra effort on the side of the partner organisations.

A fully charged activity schedule in international mobility could become overwhelming for young people that are not always comfortable in being with a big group or meeting new people and socialising. Sometimes the Programme's standards for activity schedule and results expected from the project are unrealistic and not effective with these specific profiles of participants.

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YOUNG REFUGEES, INTERNALLY DISPLACED YOUNG PEOPLE, MIGRANTS AND NATIONAL MINORITIES

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

Young refugees are people fleeing life-threatening events, for whom denial of asylum has potentially deadly consequences. In fact, their situation is often so dangerous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as "refugees" with access to assistance from different states & organisations. Many of them are under aged or very young and the vast majority are unaccompanied by an adult.

Internal Displaced Young People are people that have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, due to life-threatening events, but have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.

Migrants are people who choose to move from their home country not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly for a better quality of life. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government.

National Minorities are non-dominant groups which are usually numerically less than the majority population of a state or region regarding their ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics and who (if only implicitly) maintain solidarity with their own culture, traditions, religion or language.

Permanent barriers:

- Risk of discrimination linked to ethnicity, nationality and sometimes religion or culture
- Emotional traumas linked to displacement or discrimination

Other temporary barriers:

- Financial and professional struggles
- For migrants, legal recognition
- Language barriers

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

One of the most difficult to overcome barriers for some of the categories listed above is the lack of the needed documents to travel to another country and, therefore, be part of an international mobility. Their only opportunity to take part in such a project is to engage in a locally organised activity.

Another difficulty to access international mobilities is language barriers. Nationally, most of the project opportunities are promoted in local language and, therefore, many times young refugees or migrants do not speak it properly and lack access to information.

Covering the transportation costs in advance or having enough pocket money for the trip is usually a challenge for this specific profile of young people. They might give up on opportunities because they lack financial resources.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Having a positive international, intercultural, interreligious experience can be empowering for young people with this profile.
- Promoting diversity, tolerance and breaking down stereotypes as European values.
- Raising awareness on the importance of inclusion, tolerance, peace, adaptability, diversity, equity will strongly contribute to their personal development.
- Access to a certificate that states for transversal competences (YouthPass) can reinforce their professional integration.
- Building their resilience.

ROMA YOUNG PEOPLE

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

The Roma community faces significant vulnerabilities in different countries in Europe, particularly among its youth. Many Roma youths experience permanent or systemic challenges, such as limited access to quality education, discrimination and racism, economic marginalization, difficulties to access a decent job and many more. The historical marginalization of the Roma people contributes to a systemic vulnerability that affects their social integration and opportunities for personal development. Additionally, factors like poverty make the Roma youth highly vulnerable.

Permanent barriers:

- Risk of discrimination linked to ethnicity, culture, appearance and economic status
- Historical marginalisation

Other temporary barriers:

- High risk of school drop-out and associated educational barriers, including illiteracy
- Extreme poverty
- Unemployment or precarious employment
- Forced marriages and early parenthood

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

While ERASMUS+ aims to facilitate international mobility and collaboration, certain barriers may impede the participation of marginalised groups, including the Roma community, in Youth Exchanges. These barriers often include socio-economic factors, language barriers, and limited access to information. Also, a lack of cultural sensitivity in program design and implementation may deter Roma youth from engaging in ERASMUS+ activities, namely youth exchanges and, also the lack of tailored support, ensuring accessibility, and promoting awareness pointed out to the ROMA community needs.

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

For example, some of the specific barriers that we identified are:

- Roma youth are not informed and made aware of the fact that they can access a youth exchange.
- They do not consider themselves eligible or able to engage in such activities.
- Their families, parents/guardians or communities are not made aware of the benefits of the programme and are reluctant to allow their participation.
- Early parenthood responsibilities.
- Lack of other Roma youth, role models and promoters of the benefits of international mobilities.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- An opportunity for cultural exchange and mutual understanding, fostering tolerance and breaking down stereotypes.
- Exposure to diverse perspectives can contribute to combating discrimination and promoting social inclusion.
- For the youngsters from the Roma community international mobilities offer skill development and personal growth opportunities.
- Engaging in activities such as workshops, language courses, and collaborative projects enhances their employability and broadens their horizons.
- Participation in youth exchanges increases visibility, advocacy for Roma rights.
- Youth exchanges will also be a platform to prevent school abandonment, empower the Roma community and contribute to their social integration and long-term well-being.

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN REMOTE, ISOLATED AREAS AND FACING FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

While living in remote, isolated geographical areas, such as isolated rural villages, small islands or peripheral regions can constitute an important barrier in participating in international mobilities, when this vulnerability is associated with poverty and lack of essential services (such as electricity, clean water, safe transportation, internet), it becomes even more challenging for young people to access a stable life.

This profile also addresses young people living in poor urban suburbs, where the rates of youth delinquency are high and quality public services are not provided enough.

Permanent barriers:

- Geographical isolation
- Lack of public services and infrastructure
- Social struggles

Other temporary barriers:

- Extreme poverty
- Educational challenges
- Exclusion

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

- Lack of access to information about international opportunities.
- Lack of organisational capacity to support financially young participants in extreme poverty situations.
- Lack of co-financing on a local level.
- Lack of abilities of young people in this situation to fill in, in a proper way, an application form and succeed in a competitive selection process.
- Little or no organisation competences to be able to work with disadvantaged participants and not enough capacity building opportunities.
- No verification of the capacity of the partners organisations on a practical level.
- Not enough partnership building activities organised for the inclusion of highly vulnerable young people.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Obtaining/enhancing/developing personal competencies and skills, especially soft skills, like autonomy, self-awareness and confidence, leadership, teamwork, open-mindedness.
- Becoming aware of multiculturalism.
- Travelling, sometimes for the first time, outside their geographical region and developing independent life skills.
- For some of them it will be one of the little opportunities they have to take a hot shower or eat in a proper way.
- It is a chance to be out of their comfort zone and experience learning in a different way.
- Creating friendships, contacts as well as professional opportunities nationally and internationally,
- Empowering them to become local youth leaders and promoters.

YOUNG PEOPLE FACING DISCRIMINATION BASED ON THEIR GENDER IDENTIFICATION OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

This category includes, on one hand, young people that identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, but, also, young people that are being discriminated against in their local communities because of gender biases and stereotypes that socially apply in that specific community.

Some specific, but not exhaustive examples could be: young Roma girls living in very traditional or patriarchal communities, lesbian, gay or trans youth living in very traditional communities, queer or non-binary youth being discriminated against in school environments or in foster care settlements, etc.

Permanent barriers:

- Legal recognition and underrepresentation
- Exclusion based on stereotypical approach

Other temporary barriers:

- Social isolation
- Mental health issues
- Lack of self-esteem
- School drop-out

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

Very often, when participating in international mobility, these young people face similar discrimination or even bullying as they would do in their home environment, when partner organisations do not focus on creating a safe environment for everyone and raise awareness about diversity. In order for highly vulnerable young people to feel comfortable in joining such mobilities, there has to be a clear mechanism for ensuring safety and capacity building of organisations on the topic.

Moreover, at this moment there are no clear consequences for organisations that have shown a discriminatory behaviour towards participants or that have failed to create a safe learning space.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Representation, feeling of community and safe space
- Discovering new possibilities and perspectives
- Active participation
- Safely exploring sexuality and identity

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND CARE LEAVERS

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

Alternative care are settlements or arrangements for children and young people to be taken care of, when their family is unable to do so in a proper way or refuses to. Forms of alternative care include foster families, family like care in small settlements or big institutions or shelters for children and young people. In some situations, children and young people are still in contact with their family of origin, in others not at all. Also, in alternative care settlement most of the children and young people are below 18 years old, but in some countries they can be overaged if they are still in school.

Alternative care is provided both to children and young people born in the country where they reside, but also to unaccompanied minors facing different challenges as newcomers in the country.

Care leavers are young people that have been in alternative care but, because of their age or education status they are now without State protection and entering independent life. For most of them this entrance into independent life happens at very early age (around 18 years old).

Permanent barriers:

- Extreme traumas
- Unstable or absent family environment
- Risk of discrimination because of the status of alternative care beneficiary or care leaver

Other barriers:

- Lack of support and social networks, loneliness
- Vulnerable to risks: drug addiction, sex work, homelessness, criminal career
- Mental health issues and emotional distress

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

Some of the barriers that limit their access to international mobilities are connected to the bureaucracy that is needed in order to have an alternative care young person travel abroad, especially when they are minors, as they are under State protection. As for the unaccompanied minors it becomes even more complicated and difficult to address in the time provided for selection and preparation of participants.

Also, young people living in alternative care are often not aware of the opportunities they could have within Erasmus+ and ESC programmes. They also do not feel confident in joining such projects because of their lack of self-esteem or language challenges. Some of them don't even speak the language of their hosting country. Care leavers also experience the pressure to manage their life on their own and to have one or two jobs in the same time to be able to survive. This does not allow them the time to engage in mobilities.

For the organisations it is sometimes hard to foresee the risks and be able to mitigate them, especially when working with alternative care beneficiaries. Also, there is little capacity building opportunity on the topic of trauma informed care, needed when working with this category of youth. Organisations also have to work in making institutions and educators aware of the benefits of such projects and in finding trustful international partners for such a target group.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Change of self-image, not being labelled to feel normal
- Change their mental horizon, in terms of future life possibilities, having connections in their country and abroad
- Learn new competences, in NFE context in which they are not necessarily less equipped than other participants
- They can feel useful in the group

Through engaging in such projects they identify with a new role: they are not anymore beneficiaries, receivers of services, but with the role of participant or volunteer.

YOUNG PEOPLE FACING EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES AT THE SAME TIME

A highly vulnerable group of young people, because:

This definition includes young people facing a combination of permanent or non-permanent learning difficulties (that leads them to fail in school and/or to drop-out) and also face the challenge of having been raised in an environment preventing and/or negatively affecting their educational development, as well as preventing the assessment of the nature of the learning difficulty.

Examples of such environment can be:

- Working class suburbs that, being often the cheapest housing solution in big urban centres, end up being a jumble of possible exclusion factors: population in state of poverty or facing economic issues, population with migrant backgrounds and/or from minority groups, higher consumption of drugs etc.
- Family contexts that are absent or unstable, characterised by non-supportive behaviours and/or domestic violence.

Permanent barriers:

- Trauma and mental issues
- Unstable or absent family environment
- Potentially permanent learning disabilities

Other barriers:

- Unable to obtain a decent job
- Social isolation
- Risk of criminal behaviour or addictions
- Risk of violence

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

- Lack of information about the EU programmes in certain environments, as well as difficulty for this target group to access the information autonomously.
- Difficulties, for the organisations to reach this target group without the mediation of other figures, like street educators.

Limited access to international youth mobilities due to:

- Lack of financial, human and material resources, on the side of the organisations active in Erasmus+, to start “grounded” processes and long term processes that would be needed to fully involve this group.
- Lack of possibility, for the organisations granted with a Youth Exchange project, to ask for extra money for special support after the approval of a project. This prevents and/or makes more difficult the involvement of this group in projects that require a long time between the planning and the approval, given the difficulty for the operators to engage in long term processes.
- Lack of knowledge, among the youth workers, about the neural development of teenagers.

International mobilities could benefit them by:

- Possibility to get a different perspective on the world, by getting out of the usual environment and experiencing a different community model.
- Broaden their horizons, by living in a multicultural context.
- Having the possibility, through non-formal education, to discover new talents and interests, increasing their own self-esteem.
- Taking the responsibility for their own learning path.
- A positive impact on this target group could produce a “domino effect” at a local level, having these young people promoting and multiplying the YE experience among their peers, locally.

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