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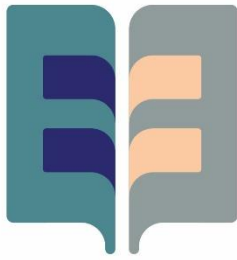
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ERASMUS MUNDUS INTERNATIONAL MASTER  
**ADULT EDUCATION  
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Youth workers' experiences of engaging "young people with fewer opportunities" in European international volunteering: policy and practice

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## Abstract

Social inclusion has been a priority of the European Union's youth policy for decades. However, young people from underprivileged backgrounds are underrepresented in Erasmus+ youth initiatives and European Solidarity Corps, although the latter programme sets further involvement of young people with fewer opportunities as one of its major objectives. The responsibility to enact social inclusion objectives set by policymakers tends to fall on youth workers, who coordinate international educational and volunteering projects funded by the European Union and support young people through mobilities. This study explores the professional experiences of six youth workers, who perform these roles in a French association of popular education. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals that the practitioners strongly believe that broadening access to mobility opportunities is socially important work, as they consider mobility experience to be highly valuable for young people. At the same time, involving young people with fewer opportunities, especially in long term mobilities, is a challenging task, due to lack of time and appropriate funding reported by the youth workers. In this situation the practitioners tend to rely on local social workers, who are in direct contact with young people in difficulties, and as findings suggest the cooperation between these two groups of professionals is essential for enhancing the inclusivity of mobility programmes. Based on this I argue that it is crucial for policymakers and funders to recognise the role of professionals and the wider network of actors, contributing to the engagement of disadvantaged young people in the mobility programmes.

*Keywords:* youth work, learning mobility, volunteering, young people with fewer opportunities.

*Abbreviations and key terms:*

- **EVS – European Voluntary Service**, a volunteering programme funded by the EU, allowing young people between 17 and 30 from the EU and neighbouring countries to engage in a short-term (up to 2 months) or a long-term (up to 12 months) volunteering project abroad. Some features of EVS were incorporated in the new EU initiative – European Solidarity Corps (ESC), and the EVS as an independent initiative does not exist now.
- **ESC – European Solidarity Corps**, a programme building on European Voluntary Service. It offers short- and long-term volunteering and occupational projects to young people between 18 to 30 years old from the EU and neighbouring countries, who want to engage in the solidarity sector.
- **EU – European Union.**
- **Accompagnement** – a French term that means guiding, helping or coaching someone, it is widely used by educators in France, throughout various areas of practice. Since the English term “accompaniment” does not transmit all the nuances of its French equivalent, in this paper I will replace it with “support”, “follow-up”, “help”.
- **Young people with fewer opportunities** – a term used in the EU youth policy documents to define disadvantaged young people, the extended definition, given in the *Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the Field of Youth* (European Commission, 2014, p. 7), can be found in Appendix A.

## Introduction

### a) Research Rationale

#### *a.1. Knowledge gaps in youth mobility scholarship*

Academic literature exploring intra-European youth mobility, and more specifically European mobility schemes, such as Erasmus+, tends to focus mainly on exchanges within formal education (especially undergraduate exchanges), and mobilities aimed at gaining professional experience (see, for example, Cairns et al., 2017; Cairns, 2017b; Grabher et al., 2014; Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2018; Lörz et al., 2016; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Souto-Otero, 2008). Although Erasmus+ encompasses more than the activities within formal education, and despite the existence of specific EU initiatives tailored for young people and based on non-formal and informal learning, the scholarship on youth mobilities in this area remains marginal (Krzaklewska, 2016, p. 4). Significant contribution to fill this gap in knowledge has already been made by few research networks. For example, at the European level the most notable are RAY network (Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes), supported by Erasmus+ National Agencies<sup>1</sup> all over Europe; and PEYR (Pool of European Youth Researchers) and EPLM (European Platform on Learning Mobility) operating within Youth Partnership between the European Commission and Council of Europe (see, for example, Bárta et al., 2019, Devlin et al., 2017; Friesenhahn et al., 2013a). In France, INJEP (*fr. Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire*<sup>2</sup>), is part of the Ministry of National Education and Youth (see, for example, Bouchaud, 2012; Labadie, 2017a; Talleu, 2016).

In *Future Agenda for Youth Research* (Krzaklewska, 2016, p. 4), members of PEYR listed research on the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities in learning mobility as one of the priority areas of inquiry. Studies that have been conducted on this topic tend to focus primarily on experiences of young people, possible obstacles preventing them from opting for mobility and their learning outcomes (see, for example, Bouchaud, 2012; Geudens et al., 2017; Labadie, 2017a; Labadie & Talleu, 2017b; Talleu, 2016; Souto-Otero, 2016). Although the opinions of youth workers, who support young people throughout mobility

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<sup>1</sup> National Agencies exist in most Erasmus+ programme and partner countries, these institutions are responsible for the implementation of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps and for the distribution of the EU funds to organisations coordinating these projects locally.

<sup>2</sup> English translation - National Institute for Youth and Popular Education

journeys, are often consulted in the afore-mentioned studies, their professional practice per se remains under-researched. This lack of attention to practitioners' realities and experiences continues to be the case, even though various studies emphasised the role of youth workers in the enhancement of civic engagement of disadvantaged young people (Brady et al., 2020, p. 9; Chaskin et al. p. 52, 2018; Talleu, 2016, p. 87). Therefore, exploring experiences of practitioners, their perspectives on the EU initiatives in the field of youth mobility and the struggles they encounter, when trying to engage young people with fewer opportunities in mobility projects, is important in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of how social inclusion can be enacted in the European learning mobility. This study makes a small contribution to enhancing our understanding of this issue, using qualitative inquiry to explore the professional practice of six youth workers in a French association of popular education, which will be described in more detail below.

#### *a.2. Research interests grounded in my personal experience*

My motivation to explore the experiences of youth workers and their efforts to engage young people with fewer opportunities in international mobility is guided not only by the academic interest explained above. In fact, it is profoundly grounded in my personal experience and for this reason, in the following paragraphs, I would like to introduce to the reader some elements of my biography, that motivated me to work with this topic.

Learning mobility experiences (e.g., international workcamps, Erasmus+ youth exchanges, AIESEC<sup>3</sup> Global Volunteer) entered my life during the years of my undergraduate studies (2013 – 2017). Since the graduation, mobility became the major element organising my life: at first, I moved to France for a year project in the framework of European Voluntary Service, which was subsequently extended for one more year, this time thanks to the French *Service Civique*<sup>4</sup> programme, and now I am an Erasmus Mundus student, which entailed two more years of moving between three countries. Considering these experiences, it has become natural for me to reflect regularly on the issues related to the value and outcomes of international mobility, access to it, challenges it can engender for participants and its

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<sup>3</sup> AIESEC - *Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques*, a global youth-run non-profit organisation, offering international volunteering and internship opportunities for young people (often higher education students or graduates). For more information follow [this link](#).

<sup>4</sup> French National volunteering scheme for youths of 16 to 25 years old, for more information follow [this link](#).



management within specific mobility schemes. Therefore, the current research is based on my experience as a long-term international volunteer and is made possible thanks to my second experience of long-term mobility – IMAESC.

For two years I was a full-time volunteer in a French association of popular education, specialised in international volunteering. Historically the core activities of the association have been short-term international volunteering workcamps. The development of European mobility schemes for youth (EVS, Youth in Action Programme, Erasmus+), as well as French volunteering programme *Service Civique*, was one of the factors allowing the association to expand its activities and develop long-term individual projects, international youth exchanges and training courses.

I was hosted in one of the regional delegations of the association and my key activities were promoting international volunteering among local young people and assisting the employees with coordination of volunteering projects carried out by the delegation. Working closely with the employees allowed me to observe some of the issues they encountered while coordinating volunteering projects funded by the European Commission. In particular, I noticed that my colleagues had more chances to have their funding applications accepted by the Erasmus+ National Agency<sup>5</sup> if they managed to include young people with fewer opportunities in their projects. At the same time, young people, whose life experiences entered in this category, would rarely contact the association independently, to express their interest in international volunteering.

The period of my volunteering was also coinciding with the transition from European Voluntary Service to European Solidarity Corps. When my colleagues started working with the latter programme, I remarked that the emphasis on the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities became even more prominent. For example, in the framework of ESC, the association had a possibility to apply for extra funding in order to provide more personalised support for disadvantaged young people (although the need for specific support and its extra cost would have to be duly justified).

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<sup>5</sup> Full name - Erasmus+ Youth & Sports Agency (*fr. l'Agence Erasmus+ France Jeunesse & Sport*), since 2016 it is part of *Service Civique Agency (fr. l'Agence du Service Civique)*.

On the one hand, encouraging grassroots organisations to make mobility projects more inclusive, seemed like a positive development to me. On the other hand, some situations that I encountered during these two years made me realise that this policy objective was often difficult to attain due to external factors, beyond the control of my colleagues. For example, I met young people, who had the possibility to take part in a volunteering project abroad but could not leave their homes for a long time, since their families needed their help. I saw situations where places reserved for young refugees in a volunteering camp were taken by participants with EU citizenship because the former were denied their visas. I also saw that my colleagues often had to manage overwhelming workloads and sacrifice the time they would normally spend working with young people to complete grant applications or other administrative tasks. These observations and interrogations arising from them provoked my interest in exploring interactions between policy and practice in the area of learning mobility for youth. Therefore, this interest, combined with the need to expand the knowledge about the professional practice of youth workers, who support young people with fewer opportunities in mobility projects provide the rationale for the current study.

## b) Research Aim, Questions, and Key Concepts

The broad aim of this research is to explore the experiences and perspectives of youth workers, who coordinate volunteering mobility projects within ESC and Erasmus+ and work with young people with fewer opportunities in the context of these programmes. More specifically, the guiding research questions are the following:

- 1) How the increased emphasis on social inclusion within the EU youth policy has been influencing the youth workers' professional practice?
- 2) What are the strategies they use within their local contexts to engage young people with fewer opportunities in international volunteering?
- 3) How do youth workers view their contribution to the enactment of social inclusion in international volunteering?

As an adult education researcher, I view youth work as an educational practice, underpinned by non-formal, informal, and experiential learning, allowing young people to situate their life experiences in a larger social and historical context (Ord, 2009; de St Croix,

2018). Youth workers are informal educators (Jeffer & Smith, 1999) and within the current researched context they work mainly with young people between 18 and 30 years old, since ESC and Erasmus+ youth projects are oriented principally toward this age group<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, youth workers, whose experiences and perspectives are explored in this study are members of an association of popular education and mobility projects they coordinate always have an explicit educational dimension. Within their professional responsibilities, the practitioners support young people during their long- or short- term mobilities. It involves some pedagogical activities, for example, explaining the modalities of various types of projects, preparing young people for handling intercultural communication and eventual cultural shock related to going abroad or advising volunteers, when some problems arise during their projects. Finally, the youth workers also take the role of learning facilitators, as they deliver training courses for volunteers, in particular, for those participating in *Service Civique*.

In order to properly frame and contextualise my research, in Chapter 1, I will provide an overview of the academic literature and policy documents related to youth work and learning mobility in the EU, as well as social inclusion discourse in these two areas. In Chapter 2, I will explain my methodological choices, describing in detail how the research was conducted. In this chapter, among other things, I will also expand on my positionality, as an insider researcher and its influence on the data collection and interpretation; I will equally provide more information on participants' professional roles and context. At this point, it is important to note that this research was conducted inductively, without a predefined theoretical framework and the links between the empirical data and larger theoretical concepts were established in the process of analysing data and writing findings report. Therefore, in Chapter 3, I will focus on presenting the research findings and discussing them only in relation to other empirical studies related to the topic. In Chapter 4, I will draw selectively upon the concepts of ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015) and cultural and social capital in order to explain some of the findings. Hence, a brief explanation of theoretical concepts will be integrated in Chapter 4, emphasising that the data predated the theory.

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<sup>6</sup> Some Erasmus+ youth exchanges can be available for young people starting from 13 years old (European Commission, 2020a, p. 80), however the association works mostly with young adults. For European Solidarity Corps young people can register and start applying from 17 years old, but at the moment of the beginning of their mobility they must be 18 (European Solidarity Corps, n.d)

## Chapter 1 - Literature Review

### Introduction

The youth workers, whose experiences are studied in this research, coordinate projects in the framework of European mobility schemes, precisely ESC and Erasmus+. These projects are situated at the intersection of youth work and learning mobility; they are expected to have a social inclusion dimension, as Erasmus+ and ESC emphasise the importance of engaging disadvantaged young people. Since these project benefits from the EU fundings, youth workers' practice is strongly exposed to the influences of the EU policies, in the fields of education, youth and youth work. Therefore, in this chapter, by reviewing relevant academic and policy literature on youth work, mobility, and social inclusion, I will provide an overview of the context in which youth workers' practice is situated. In the first section, I will discuss the definition of youth work in European context and the larger policy and social influence that frame the field. In the second section, I will proceed with reviewing the EU's efforts to promote intra-European learning mobility, touching upon the accessibility of the mobility opportunities for young people. In the last section, I will discuss the promotion of social inclusion within the EU youth policy, focusing, in particular, on the term "young people with fewer opportunities" and the actions aimed at inclusion of this group of young people in intra-European volunteering.

#### 1.1. Youth Work in Europe: Definitions and Context

Defining youth work is a challenging task, as there is no unanimously accepted definition of the term in Europe and its meaning often depends on national traditions and policies related to youth action (European Commission, 2015, p. 12; Loncle, 2009, p. 131). Youth work encompasses multiple types of educational activities underpinned by informal and experiential learning, organised by, with and for young people (Ord, 2009; Ord, 2020; de St Croix, 2018). Some of the forms youth work takes nowadays are the following:

purpose-built youth centres, youth clubs in community buildings or schools, detached youth work on the streets and in parks, groups drawing on shared identity (e.g. girls work, LGBT groups) and projects based on activities such as sport, art or drama. (de St Croix, 2018, p. 417)

Youth work is delivered by a variety of actors, such as “voluntary organisations, social enterprises, local government and religious organisations” (de St Croix, 2018, p. 417). Among the defining characteristics of youth work the following are most frequently cited: dedication to informal and experiential learning; focus on the needs of youths and importance of dialogue with them to negotiate the activities and desired learning outcomes; voluntary participation, meaning that young people can decide when and in what activities they want to engage and be free to leave at any time (Ord 2020 p. 3, de St Croix, 2018, pp. 417 - 418).

These characteristics are consistent with the definition of youth work used across the official documents and research/expert publications issued by the Council of Europe and European Commission (in all the documents the wording of the definition remains almost the same) (Basarab & O’Donovan, 2020, p. 4; Council of Europe, 2017, p. 3; Council of the European Union, 2010, pp. 2 - 3; Dunne et al, 2013, p. 53; European Commission, 2015a, pp. 11 - 12; European Commission, 2015b, p. 11). The highlights of this definition are the following: (1) youth work activities take place in the extra-curricular areas and are based on non-formal and informal learning; (3) voluntary participation of young people in these activities is crucial; (4) youth work may be delivered by young people themselves or managed and co-managed by paid or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders; (5) youth work should contribute to the personal and social development of young people. The emphasis on voluntary participation and contribution to young people’s personal and social development seems to be especially strong at the European level. In the publication on quality of youth work (European Commission, 2015a), the expert group uses these two indicators to draw the boundaries between youth work and such areas as leisure work, cultural work, social work and sports activities for youth (pp. 13 - 14). For example, in relation to social work the report states the following:

Youth work often has aims regarding prevention and social inclusion. These are also the objectives of social work. But as long as young people take part voluntarily, non-formal education methods are used and the aim is personal and social development, it is still youth work. If the same work is done but the young people are obliged to participate it is social work using non-formal education methods. (European Commission, 2020a, p. 14)

These boundaries of youth work may be contested. For example, Coburn and Gormally (2019) argue that even in non-traditional settings, where participation of young people is mandatory (e.g., compulsory employability programmes, prison education), professionally-qualified youth workers “can still be doing youth work by framing practice as an educational methodology which offers an alternative perspective that is based on values of equality and social justice” (p. 3). Hence, they give higher importance to the values and professionalism of youth workers (both in terms of training and in terms of experience) than to the principle of voluntary participation.

This is only one example showing that the practice of youth work is more complex and diverse than what can be captured in definitions in policy documents. However, the fact that the same definition is adopted in expert publications informing EU youth work and youth policies (Dunne et al. 2013; European Commission, 2015a) demonstrates that there is a trend of how youth work is conceptualised by the policymakers and researched at the EU level. It is important to take this into consideration in the current research since the professional reality of the research participants is to a large extent shaped by the EU policies and initiatives in the field of youth and learning mobility.

Moreover, there are other trends influencing youth workers’ practice across Europe. For instance, recent studies report the increased emphasis on “measurable outcomes and standards” (Dunne et al. 2013, p. 6; de St Croix, 2018) and orientation of youth work activities toward developing skills necessary for the employment or formal education, especially as the concerns about youth unemployment became more prominent within the EU youth policy after the economic crisis of 2008 (Dunne et al. 2013, p. 6; Ord, 2020, p. 4). The emphasis on providing successful outcomes and evidence of success leads to the situation where youth work activities become more and more targeted toward specific groups of young people and deal with specific issues. (Dunne et al. 2013, p. 7). Hence, there is a concern that youth work is “expected to deliver what had previously been carried out by other policy sectors”, which brings about higher demand for youth work activities, not always followed by better funding (Dunne et al. 2013, p. 7).

In addition, the way how young people, along with their needs and problems, are viewed by policymakers frame the environment in which youth workers operate. Loncle (2009) indicates that across Europe, youth work is viewed as having a double purpose: on the

one hand, it is meant to “provide favourable (leisure-time oriented) experiences (of social, cultural, educational or political nature) in order to strengthen young people’s personal development and their personal and social autonomy”; on the other hand, it offers “opportunities for the integration and inclusion of young people in adult society by fostering societal integration or preventing the exclusion of disadvantaged groups” (p. 131).

Charles Berg (2017) demonstrates that disadvantaged young people historically were often viewed by those, who were trying to help them, as both extremely vulnerable populations, who needed protection, and as a threat to public order (p. 33). According to Chaskin et al. (2018), similar vision of youth prevails in current supranational (UN and EU) and national (UK, Republic of Ireland) youth policy frameworks. The authors argue that these frameworks “present a perspective of young people as both ‘a source of concern and a beacon of hope’” (Chaskin et al., 2018, p. 49). Finally, in France, as Loncle (2009) postulates, policymakers associate young people with three images: youth as a danger, that has to be detected and prevented (often concerns young people with immigrant background), youth as a vulnerable population to be protected and youth as a resource to invest in and develop (Loncle, 2009, p. 144). It is crucial to pay attention to these conceptualisations of young people made by policymakers, as it has impact on funding priorities and on the decisions as to what youth actions will be promoted and supported.

## 1.2. Learning Mobility in the Europe

### 1.2.1. *Promotion of mobility by the EU and its paradoxes*

Nowadays different mobility experiences become more and more integrated into life-courses of many young people globally and constitute an important life-stage for them, often marking a transition from youth to adulthood (Cairns et al., 2017; Robertson et al., 2018; Talleu, 2016). In the context of the European Union, where free movement of goods, capitals, or persons is one of the founding principles (European Union, 2012, pp. 59, Article 26), enhancing different types of exchanges between member states for professionals, students and other populations is a significant part of policy agenda. Naturally, learning mobility, defined by the Council of Europe as activities “consciously organised for educational purposes”, with the aim to “acquire new competences or knowledge” (Council of Europe, n.d.), has been actively promoted within the European Union and neighbouring countries (Friesenhahn et al., 2013b).

Erasmus programme, launched in 1987, was the pioneering scheme encouraging student exchanges between universities within, back then, European Communities (Mairesse, 2009, p. 13). The events of the 1990s, deepening European integration, instigated further development of mobility schemes within Europe. For instance, signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, extended the European Union's responsibility, among other policy areas, to education and social policy; it also established European citizenship, allowing EU citizens of all members-states to change their country of residence; in addition, further extension of the union happened in 1995 (McCormick, 2002, pp. 78 - 79). Overcoming obstacles to free movement in order to promote mobility for students and university staff became one of the key objectives included in the Bologna Declaration, which established the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process, which sought to harmonise higher education systems in the EU and neighbouring countries (Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education - The Bologna Declaration, 1999).

International exchanges in the sphere of higher education were in the origin of European learning mobility schemes. However, the idea of such exchanges was equally gaining prominence in other areas of education and training (Mairesse, 2009, p. 14); besides reserving mobility opportunities exclusively for individuals involved in tertiary education was limiting the number of mobile Europeans. Youth for Europe, launched in 1989, became the pioneering mobility programme for youth and professionals engaged in youth work (Friesenhahn et al., 2013b; Mairesse, 2009). *White Paper: a New Impetus for European Youth*, issued in 2001 (Commission of the European Communities) highlighted the importance of international mobility, voluntary service, and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the educational journeys of young people. Mobility programmes in this field, for instance, EVS, and the following Youth in Action Programme, were open for all young people with no requirements of qualifications or prior experience (Mairesse, 2009, p. 14; European Commission, 2007, p. 2), thus reducing, at least, formal barriers and permitting wider access to mobility. In 2014 Erasmus+ became an overarching programme regrouping initiatives previously implemented by the European Commission in different areas of education and training (e.g., school education, higher education, vocational education and training, adult education, youth work, non-formal and informal learning) (European Commission, 2020a, p.



6). Hence, Erasmus+ became a single brand associated with the promotion of European mobility across different sectors of lifelong learning.

Participation in programmes like Erasmus+ has a very strong symbolic dimension since it is viewed as a way of strengthening European identity, as Cairns (2017b) argues – an exchange participant has an “ambassadorial role of providing a symbol of integration to the European institutions and acting as a role model for peers, with the ultimate aim of establishing a new generation of less nationally oriented Europeans” (p. 728). Promotion of different types of learning mobility and learning throughout life is also linked to the ambitious goal of transforming the EU in “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”, set in the Lisbon Strategy 2000 (European Council, 2000). According to the EU policymakers, individuals, who take the responsibility to regularly update their knowledge and skills, through engagement in learning activities throughout life and develop good adaptability skills by participating in mobility, have more chances to be competitive in the labour market (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018). Therefore, except for this emblematic function of a symbol of European integration, learning mobility tends to be conceptualised in the EU policy discourse as one of the means to enhance employability skills and competencies and tackle youth unemployment; this discourse became especially prominent after the economic crisis of 2008 (Chaskin et al., 2018 p. 9; Cairns, 2017b, p. 728).

The above-discussed efforts of the EU to promote mobility demonstrate that its value as a learning tool is widely appreciated in the EU policy. Nevertheless, recognition of learning happening as a result of mobility and its promotion at the EU level is full of paradoxes. As Niemeyer (2017) notes: “While individual mobility of social elites was appreciated, supported and contributed to their personal reputation, uncontrolled crossing of borders by vagabonds, poor, unemployed and criminals has rather been threatening to societies” (p. 50). Mobility programmes supported by the EU create a framework of learning recognition, they define the organisational modalities of learning mobility activities, set expected learning outcomes and methods of evaluation for individuals and organisations. So, if we take an example of mobility undertaken by a young person in the framework of Erasmus+ and clandestine mobility undertaken by a young refugee, the value both society and a state accord to them may be very different. Both experiences provide a space for transformative learning, however, the first one is likely to be encouraged and appreciated by tertiary institutions, employers, and

the entourage of a young person, while the second one is likely to be viewed as a danger to European society. Hence, the efforts of the European Union are not simply directed at the promotion of all types of international mobility, but rather at the creation of a specific framework permitting supervision, structuring and recognition of learning happening through mobility experiences.

### *1.2.2. Access to learning mobility*

Participation in learning mobility schemes promoted by the EU is reported to produce numerous positive outcomes for individuals, who undertake it (Friesenhahn et al., 2013b; Geudens et al., 2017; Labadie, 2017; Souto-Otero, 2016). For instance, according to Friesenhahn et al. (2013b), in terms of personal gains for mobile individuals the following improvements can be observed (at least in the framework of student exchanges and internships): “increase of self-confidence and enhancement of social competences; gaining intercultural competences; improvement of foreign-language skills; sustainable significance of the mobility experience for personal development” (p. 7). While participants of mobility programmes may experience multiple positive outcomes, the questions: “Who has access to mobility?”, - remains. Indeed, mobility schemes offered by the European Union are often criticised as elitist and hardly accessible for people from underprivileged backgrounds (Cairns, 2017b; Cairns et al. 2017; Souto-Otero, 2008).

In order to analyse students’ predispositions to undertake a mobility period abroad Murphy-Lejeune (2002) employs the notion of mobility capital: “a subcomponent of human capital<sup>7</sup>, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad” (p. 51). It is composed of four key elements: “family and personal history” (for instance, being born in a mixed marriage family); “previous experience of mobility including language competence, the first experience of adaptation which serves as an initiation, and finally the personality feature” (p. 52).

The term mobility capital illuminates two important considerations about travelling abroad to learn. First of all, the decision to engage in learning mobility is likely to be predetermined by a set of attitudes and competencies that an individual had a chance to

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<sup>7</sup> The author defines human capital as the “stock of skills and productive knowledge that are embodied in people”, she indicates that it “enables an individual to improve her/his skills and earning capacity” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 51).

acquire at previous stages of their life (e.g., thanks to the resources available within their family, or public measures permitting fair access to education). As the research by Lörz et al. (2016) demonstrated, students from underprivileged backgrounds are less likely to make a decision to study abroad due to “worse performance-related preconditions and the fact that they perceive a stay abroad as less beneficial” (p. 166). This brings us to the second consideration – the mobility capital of an individual has the potential to define the extent to which an experience of learning mobility can be beneficial for their future in terms of correlation between learning mobility and subsequent social mobility. For example, in the case of Erasmus academic mobility, the gains in terms of employment for students, who go abroad, are contested – the experience of mobility does not necessarily lead to higher salaries or higher-level jobs; although it may be helpful for finding the first job (Souto-Otero, 2008, p. 141). Consequently, not everyone is equally disposed to go abroad, nor to cope with this experience, let alone make it beneficial for the future.

Access to learning mobility and its potential benefits (or losses) are problematic issues, just as promotion of going abroad as relevant for all young people is equally contestable. Niemeyer (2017) advocates for an “inclusive approach to learning mobility”, which builds on “the right to stay at home and to appreciate intercultural experiences acquired within the familiar social context” (p. 54). Such intercultural experiences can take place in multiple scenarios, for instance, when a family hosts guests from abroad, when a person participates in an international volunteering camp in their home country or when a person is involved as a mentor for international volunteers. Murphy-Lejeune (2002) uses an example of an interviewee from Belgium, for whom stays in Flemish language school represented “the most significant experience of exposure to otherness” compared to stays abroad (p. 60). Based on this example, the author concludes that “the experience of foreignness does not necessarily refer to movements outside one’s own national borders but should also include experiences sustained at home between parallel linguistic or cultural systems” (p. 60). Therefore, intercultural learning does not always equal international mobility and as was discussed earlier, going abroad may not be equally accessible or attractive to all young people. In this case, mixing international mobility opportunities with those offering intercultural learning in a home country is necessary to enhance the inclusivity of the EU mobility schemes. In the next

chapter, I will explore in more detail the discourse around social inclusion in the EU youth policy and by extension in the mobility schemes reserved for young people.

### 1.3. Social inclusion

#### 1.3.1. *Emphasis on social inclusion in the EU youth policy*

Exploration of challenges related to social inclusion and meanings that policymakers assign to this term is well documented in the academic literature on the EU lifelong learning policy (see, for example, Borg & Mayo, 2005; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018; Nicoll & Fejes, 2011; Tuparevska et al., 2020). Nevertheless, scholarship on specific aspects of lifelong learning in the EU, such as learning mobility, youth work, non-formal education, and their inclusivity is relatively narrow (Cairns, 2017a). However, Chaskin et al. (2018) argue that youth policy's paramount consideration is the engagement of young people at risk of marginalisation and that European youth policy frameworks "tend to emphasise the importance of efforts to promote social inclusion" (p. 8). The authors note the preoccupation with the "impact of the political climate and the withdrawal of many young people, especially disadvantaged youth, from participation in formal political processes"; on the EU level, particularly prominent are the concerns about extremism and youth radicalisation (Chaskin et al. 2008, p. 51).

Although the number of policy documents included in the thematic analysis by Chaskin et al. (2018) is comparatively limited, frequent references to the importance of social inclusion in other documents issued by the European Commission establish the salience of the concept in the EU youth policy. For example, Youth in Action programme (YiA, 2007 – 2013) covering a range of activities (with no demands of prior qualifications) for young people around Europe, was guided by the *Inclusion Strategy* (European Commission, 2007). When in 2014, YiA programme (along with other EU programmes in the field of education) was integrated under a larger umbrella of Erasmus+ (European Commission, 2020a, p. 6), the new *Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the Field of Youth* was adopted (European Commission, 2014). In the framework of Erasmus+, equity and inclusion are among so-called important features of the programme (European Commission, 2020a, p. 10). The latest *Youth Strategy* (2018 – 2027) contains numerous highlights about the importance of including young people with fewer opportunities in European initiatives for youth (European Commission, 2018).

In recent years improving access of young people with fewer opportunities to international mobility in the framework of non-formal education has gradually become an important political objective not only at the EU level but also in France (Talleu, 2016, pp. 9 - 10). Experience of international mobility is believed to produce positive outcomes for those, who undertake it (Friesenhahn et al. 2013b; Talleu, 2016; Souto-Otero, 2016), although it can be contested depending on the mobility capital of participants, as I argued earlier. Nonetheless, the evaluation results of Youth in Action programme in the EU in general and in France in particular, suggest that in the framework of non-formal education, positive outcomes of participation in mobility projects are more visible among youth with fewer opportunities than among their well-off peers (Geudens et al., 2017; Labadie, 2017, p. 62). In this light, the recent creation of the European Solidarity Corps can be viewed as a new measure to improve the access of young people from underprivileged backgrounds to this type of mobility.

ESC (independent from Erasmus +, unlike its predecessor EVS) was launched in 2016 by the European Commission and conceptualised as a “single entry point for young people wishing to engage in the solidarity sector” (European Union, 2020, p. 5). According to *ESC Guide*, the programme is particularly committed to the promotion of social inclusion and one of its specific objectives is:

to ensure that particular efforts are made to promote social inclusion and equal opportunities, in particular for the participation of young people with fewer opportunities through a range of special measures such as appropriate formats of solidarity activities and personalised support (European Commission, 2020b, p. 6).

As discussed earlier, a truly inclusive approach to learning mobility should also value intercultural experiences taking place in the home countries of participants. Compared to EVS, which required cross-border mobility, ESC supports both cross-border and in-country activities (European Commission, 2020b).

### *1.3.2. Notions of young people with fewer opportunities and NEETs*

A review of the above-mentioned documents issued by the EU demonstrates that young people with fewer opportunities is a term frequently used by European policymakers to define disadvantaged youths; another term used for the same purposes in the afore-

mentioned documents is NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training) (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2018).

NEETs (not in employment, education, or training) is a narrower term, that emerged in the UK at the end of the 1980s, it is more focused on the links young people have with the labour market or their potential to enter it successfully. The emergence of the term NEETs at the end of the 1980s can be explained by “a series of technical and ideological shifts”, associated with neo-liberal turn in the UK politics, which “disqualified most young people from a range of benefits and incrementally shifted responsibility for the shortage of work to the level of the individual” (Simmons & Smyth, 2016, p. 142). The term was initially applied to young people between 16 – 18 years old; subsequently, it was extended to the youths under 25 and even 29. Today, in the EU youth policy, it may include young people up to 30 years old, since participation in all projects is open for the youth from 18 to 30 years old (European Solidarity Corps, n.d).

In their analysis of subgroups of NEETs according to the attitude and availability for employment Salvà-Mut et al. (2018) highlight the heterogeneity of this group of young people, which is oftentimes neglected in public policies (pp. 179 - 181). A broader term “young people with fewer opportunities” in this case may be viewed as a way to encompass the heterogeneity of challenging situations disadvantaged young people may encounter.

European policymakers define young people with fewer opportunities according to the situations/obstacles young people may face at certain points in their lives, which may lead to social exclusion. One of the most extensive definitions is presented in *Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the Field of Youth* (European Commission, 2014, pp. 7 - 8). According to the document, the following situations may lead to exclusion of young people: “disability, health problems, educational difficulties, cultural differences, economic obstacles, social obstacles, geographical obstacles” (European Commission, 2014, p. 7; Annex A). The strategy also introduces the categories of “comparative disadvantage” and “absolute exclusion factors”. Comparative disadvantage highlights the importance of looking at the factors of exclusion of young people in their local context – facing one of the above-mentioned obstacles does not automatically lead to exclusion if the same is experienced by the majority of youths in any given context (European Commission, 2014, p. 7). However, if person’s

fundamental rights are violated, no matter how common the situation in a specific context is, the notion of absolute exclusion factors applies (European Commission, 2014, p. 8).

Depending on their country of origin/residence young people across the EU may face very different situations and obstacles, hence creating such a broad definition may be partially explained by the necessity to find a term suitable for all member-states (Bier, 2011, p. 14). However, it is important to note that the definition of young people with fewer opportunities ignores structural factors that bring about the difficulties faced by the youths, thus these obstacles are viewed as an element of young people's profiles rather than a part of larger social issues. It is argued that mobility schemes in the field of non-formal and informal education remove formal barriers for individual participation (e.g., educational qualifications, relevant work experience), however many disadvantaged young people still do not take up their right to participate (Labadie & Talleu, 2017). Moreover, reducing formal barriers to participation does not imply the reflection on the relevance of certain initiatives for specific groups of young people, as it is assumed that the main problem is lack of access (Bier, 2011, p. 14). Conclusively, without comprehensive public action intended in tackling the underlying causes of obstacles listed in the definition, the emphasis on the wider engagement of young people with fewer opportunities simply becomes another manifestation of discourses around equality of chances and meritocracy associated with neo-liberalism: "we give a chance to everyone, and it is up to the most deserving to seize it" (Bier, 2011, p. 14). In terms of the practical application of the term, such a broad definition can be manipulated and extended to include almost any young person, if receiving funding for a project requires the participation of young people with fewer opportunities (Bouchaud, 2012, p. 22).

The discussion about the issues related to the utilisation of this term will be expanded further in the third chapter. I decided to focus principally on the term "young people with fewer opportunities" since it remains the most prominent category referring to disadvantage in the EU youth policy. Moreover, this term has to be used by the youth workers, when they apply for the EU funding for their projects, therefore directly influencing their practice and requiring reflection about its relevance within the local context.

## Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that defining rigid boundaries of youth work practice in Europe is challenging<sup>8</sup>, as its provision is quite diverse. The features of this educational practice, as broadly defined in the EU documents, are dedication to non-formal and informal learning, contribution to the personal and social development of young people and voluntary participation. Learning mobility, another aspect of projects that participants of this research work with, is actively promoted at the European level in all areas of lifelong learning. This promotion takes place within such programmes as Erasmus+, or ESC, that create a framework for recognition of learning happening through mobility. For youth workers carrying out projects within this framework implies subscribing, to an extent, to predefined values, objectives, learning outcomes and tools of evaluation. Objectives of social inclusion, especially engagement of young people with fewer opportunities, occupy an important place in the EU youth policy and grassroots youth workers are expected to fulfil these objectives. All these factors shape the environment in which youth workers' exercise their professional practice, namely coordination of volunteering mobility projects and support of young people, who opt for mobility, including those with fewer opportunities.

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<sup>8</sup> In the next chapter, discussing the participants' profiles, I will provide more details on the complexity of roles performed by the youth workers.



## Chapter 2 - Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide an in-depth account of how my research was conducted. I will start by explaining my paradigmatic considerations, which set the framework for my methodological choices. I will continue with exploring the methodological implications of my positionality, as a researcher and as a former volunteer of the association, where the participants work or used to work. In this section I will use few quotes from the data; although it is unconventional to do so in the methodology chapter, I find it necessary to illustrate some of my arguments more accurately. Afterwards, I will proceed with an overview of aspects related to the data collection process (e.g., accessing the research site, interviewing participants, ethical considerations). I will equally pay attention to the positionality of the research participants and will discuss the complexity of their professional roles. The chapter will be terminated with a description of data analysis stages and the themes that were selected for reporting.

### 2.1. Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Considerations

#### 2.1.1. *Working within constructivist paradigm*

In conducting this research, I engage with the constructivist paradigm as a framework guiding my ontological and epistemological assumptions, as well as my methodological choices (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). Rather than regarding reality as a single entity, entirely independent of the human mind, I acknowledge the existence of multiple realities that are subjectively constructed. These realities are shaped by interpretative meaning making process undertaken by individuals, in interaction with others, and within their specific contexts. In this case, truth is not universal or unvarying, that can be discovered by a researcher. Concepts of truth and valid knowledge are rather socially constructed and the agreement about their meaning “arises from the relationship between members of some stakeholding community” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018, p. 237); In the context of this research it is a community of youth workers, who are members of an association of popular education in France.

If truth and knowledge are subject to negotiation between members of a community, it is important to recognise that research findings are co-created by a researcher and

participants, in the process of their interaction, hence the importance of acknowledging the influence of the researcher's subjectivity and positionality on the production of findings, that are never neutral or objective (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018, p. 221). As Heron (1996) argues: "Findings co-created by researcher and researched members go beyond member-only views" (Chapter 9). I will dedicate a separate section to discuss my positionality in the research and will explain the factors that shape my interpretations of the data.

### *2.1.2 Subjective-objective ontology*

In this study, I explore through qualitative inquiry the experiences and perspectives of youth workers "in their own social settings" and I try to understand them "in terms of their own categories and constructs" (Heron, 1996, Chapter 2). Nevertheless, as a former volunteer, I also used to be a part of the association, hence, it would be untruthful to suggest that the studied setting is not known or experienced by me as a member of the community. Heron (1996) argues that "the more fully researchers participate in the cultures they are studying, the more it shifts in the direction of co-operative inquiry" (Chapter 2). Therefore, I consider that some elements of the participatory paradigm (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997) can be helpful to articulate my ontological assumptions more accurately. I draw on the participatory paradigm, as it offers a useful way of overcoming the limits of relativist constructivist ontology, which postulates that reality exists only within the human mind:

if reality is nothing but an internal mental construct, no warrant can be given for supposing that the other people being studied actually exist, let alone for supposing that the researcher's view of them adequately represents their own view of their situation" (Heron, 1996, Chapter 1)

To resolve this issue participatory paradigm gives importance to experiential knowing resulting from encounters, interactions, and engagement of the mind and "given cosmos" (Heron & Reason, 1997, pp. 278 - 279). Whereof, the concept of subjective-objective ontology, which "is subjective because it is only known through the form the mind gives it; and it is objective because the mind interpenetrates the given cosmos which it shapes" (Heron, 1996, Chapter 1). I believe that assuming the existence of a reality/realities, which a human mind may encounter, experience and shape, is particularly useful in the context of this research, exploring youth workers' interactions with and responses to the EU policies and their local contexts.

### 2.1.3. Qualitative methodology

The choice of qualitative methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews, as data collection method and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as a way of interpreting findings, is consistent with the overarching constructivist paradigm, within which I situate this research. More specifically these choices were conditioned by the following factors: my decision, as a researcher, to explore a particular context (professional practice of youth workers in the association where I used to volunteer), the exploratory nature of the research questions, resulting from the former decision, and a more practical concern – a small number of potential participants (Mertens, 1998, p. 160).

## 2.2. My Positionality in the Research: Space Between

Since I was conducting the research with the employees of the association, where I spent two years as a volunteer, it is crucial to acknowledge the methodological implications of my positionality, which, as I will argue in this section, is located between being an insider and outsider. In qualitative and ethnographic research discussion about the meaning of being an insider or outsider researcher is quite prominent. For example, Paul Hodkinson (2005), Sonya Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle (2009), and Lizzi Milligan (2016), reflecting on their experiences of conducting qualitative research projects, admit having struggled to identify themselves either as insiders or outsiders in relation to their research subjects. In these reflections, they describe multiple situations throughout their research journeys when their identities fluctuated between two extremities of the insider/outsider continuum. In order to overcome the limits imposed by these binary notions, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) offer a concept of *the space between*, and Milligan (2016) employs a similar notion of *inbetweenener*. *The space between* emerges through mutual influences that researchers' positionality exerts on the analysis and that the engagement with analysis exerts on researchers views in qualitative studies, which often tend to be quite personal and intimate (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). Milligan's (2016) notion of *inbetweenener* is related to researcher's agency, as she claims that researchers "can make active attempts to place themselves in between"; they can move from the initial stage of being perceived as an outsider by a studied community to the stage of "knowledgeable outsider" and finally to *inbetweenener* (p. 248). Hodkinson (2005) recognises that identities of both researcher and researched are complex, multiple, and fluid, hence irrelevance of concepts of absolute insider or outsider (p. 132), while retaining the

notion of insider research, in its non-absolute sense, “characterised by significant levels of initial proximity between researcher and researched” (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 132).

In the context of the current study, my initial level of proximity with the researched reality was quite substantial. This proximity is manifested both in my relationship with the association, as a former member, and in my experiences as a mobile young person (Erasmus Mundus student, and participant of European Voluntary Service, Erasmus+ youth exchanges and training courses, and international volunteering camps). As a former long-term volunteer in the association, who worked side-by-side with the employees, assisting them in the realisation of mobility projects and in supporting young people, who were undertaking learning mobility, I can relate to the experiences and struggles of the youth workers. As a mobile individual, who participated in different European mobility schemes and have experienced both benefits and challenges of these experiences, I have a critical view on the accessibility of mobility and its questionable suitability for all young people. These two identities were already prominent before I engaged in this research and within this process the third identity of a researcher emerged. In this new role, I had a possibility to explore academic literature on the topic and analyse data systematically, hence expanding my reflection on the studied issues and going beyond the knowledge constructed through my personal experience.

Proximity and knowledge of the research context potentially offer significant benefits and can contribute to “the achievement of successful and productive interactions with participants” (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 136). In my case it offered me numerous advantages, for instance, being acquainted with some people in the association and having their trust, understanding the functioning of most of the activities and even knowing internal jargon. This insider’s knowledge proved particularly valuable in terms of preparing interview questions and being able to “speak the same language” with the participants during the interviews. Furthermore, taking into account the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties related to accessing research sites physically and observing participant’s offline working context, being an insider gave me an important advantage of having experienced the immersion into the field reality prior to data collection. Although the interviews were conducted online, yielding limited information about participants’ working environment,

space, and context, I still could vividly imagine and visualise all these elements, having visited some of their offices and cities.

I noticed during the interviews that some respondents tended to assume that I understand very clearly their working reality, suggesting that they perceived me as an insider in the association. For example, in the following quote, the participant, before explaining her role in the association, assumes that I already know what responsibilities are attached to the post she occupies:

So, the development officers... So, you could have seen this [in the delegation, where you volunteered] [...] The activity of the association is really diversified, and, in fact, our job responsibilities too. (Sophie)

In the next quote, the participant acknowledges my knowledge of European Voluntary Service and tries to make sure that her argument is not in contradiction with my experience:

[...] the amount of money was okay for youth exchanges etc., even for EVS, you can go to France, I don't know what's your opinion of it, because you were an EVS [...]. (Alice)

The last citation is an especially illustrative example of how participants, talking with someone, who already has some knowledge and experience in the field, are more likely to make sure the information they provide is accurate to their best knowledge. As Hodkinson (2005) argues: "...in the presence of someone they perceive as already 'clued-up', respondents may be discouraged from the worst excesses of conscious inaccuracy" (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 140). However, the fact that participants expected me to understand their working reality, was also a potential pitfall, since they were likely to take shortcuts in their explanation of certain terms or situations, assuming I know exactly what they mean. Reflecting on the first interviews, I realised that it did happen occasionally. In order to mitigate against this issue in the following interviews, I often asked participants to imagine that I was someone, who knew little about the association and their work and to provide me with the most extensive explanations they could.

My experience of volunteering in the association and the links I could create with the employees were the main reasons why I was generally perceived as an insider researcher. However, there was a nuance – I was an *international volunteer*, and therefore only a temporary insider. As a volunteer, I was invited to become part of the association's activities

for a limited time, unlike most of the employees, who worked under indefinite duration contracts. As a volunteer, I also never had the same amount of work responsibilities but now, as a researcher, I was trying to understand the experiences of the full-time employees, who ultimately worked under different conditions than myself, during my volunteering project. As a foreigner I remain relatively new to the social, cultural, and political realities in France and the research participants demonstrated their awareness about this otherness. For instance, during an interview, one of the respondents, while trying to explain the interaction between the delegation, where she works, and a local public authority operating in the field of youth policy, suddenly realised that, as a foreigner, I might not know much about the organisation in question:

[...] so in particular, the DRDJSCS<sup>9</sup> [...], which is a bit of a... you know what DRDJSCS is?  
(Sophie)

The examples mentioned above demonstrate that participants were sometimes perceiving me as an insider and at times as an outsider, depending on which of my identity was in question. Reflection on the complexity of my positionality in this research brings me to the conclusion that I, in fact, occupy the space between, where my insider's knowledge of the association is helpful to understand the studied context deeply, but where I am still capable of exploring professional experiences of the research participants with an outsider's eye. (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, pp. 60 - 62). As the stages of qualitative research tend to overlap, this section has already offered a glimpse into data collection and interpretation processes. In the following section, I will expand the description of these processes, keeping in mind the methodological implications of my positionality.

## 2.3. Data Collection

### 2.3.1. *Accessing the research site*

Prior to developing my research proposal in April 2020, I had discussions with two of my former colleagues in the association. I wanted to share my initial idea and understand whether the question of engagement of disadvantaged youth in international mobility seemed relevant to them and their colleagues from other delegations. In these discussions,

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<sup>9</sup> In French, *La Direction Régionale et Départementale de la Jeunesse, des Sports et de la Cohésion Sociale* - The Regional and Departmental Directorate of Youth, Sports and Social Cohesion.

the youth workers expressed that this topic was interesting to look at in the context of their professional practice. Therefore, my motivation to pursue the research on the topic was informed not only by my personal observations, made during the volunteering, but also by what I learnt from my colleagues, who have been working with international mobility and young people with fewer opportunities for several years. In the subsequent stages of the research, specifically recruitment of participants, I realised that sharing the idea of the research in advance with my former colleagues was particularly valuable since they were willing to relay the information to other employees, helping me to find research participants.

I was aware that the association has accumulated rich experience and knowledge in the field of international volunteering since its creation in 1950, hence I decided to locate my search for participants in a single association. Furthermore, it is extensively represented in the regions of France<sup>10</sup>, working with youth both in urban and rural areas. In some areas, it is the only association accredited<sup>11</sup> to coordinate volunteering projects, host and send volunteers in the framework of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. The association is also a full member of major networks of voluntary work organisations: Cotravaux<sup>12</sup> in France and the Alliance of European Voluntary Organisations<sup>13</sup> at the European level. Participation in these networks allows the association to cooperate with numerous partners both on national and international levels. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge pragmatic considerations that conditioned my decision to contact youth workers of a single association – considering that I am a former volunteer, accessing the research site as an *insider* was easier for me than establishing new contacts with similar actors in France.

### 2.3.2. *Sampling and recruitment*

The recruitment of participants was done using homogenous and snowball sampling strategies (Creswell, 2012, pp. 208 - 209). In January 2021, the information about the research (invitation to participate and information sheet) was circulated among all employees of the association (around 40 persons in total) by one of my former colleagues, upon my request.

The invitation letter and information sheet provided a concise summary of the research topic and objectives; it was subsequently up to the employees to express their

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<sup>10</sup> The association is composed of 11 regional delegations and a headquarters in Paris.

<sup>11</sup> The accreditation in question is granted by the French Erasmus+ Youth & Sports Agency.

<sup>12</sup> A list of members can be accessed following [this link](#).

<sup>13</sup> A list of members can be accessed following [this link](#).

interest to participate in the research by contacting me or filling in an online form. Considering that I did not target employees with specific professional responsibilities (e.g., those, who are always in direct contact with young people), they had the freedom to think whether within their professional practice they worked with/encountered young people with fewer opportunities or reflected on the latter engagement in international volunteering projects and whether they wanted to share their experiences and reflections with me.

Five participants responded to the invitation over January – March. After the data collection had begun, one of the participants referred me to their former colleague, who later also agreed to take part in the research. Other participants also referred me to other youth workers: a former employee of the same association and an employee of another association, working specifically on social inclusion in international mobility. However, both did not agree to participate in the research. Thus, the data was collected from six participants in total.

During the recruitment process, I noticed that among the participants, who reached out to me first two worked on similar research topics as mine during their master studies. Henceforth, their motivation to participate in the current study was shaped not only by their professional experiences but also by their academic interests.

### *2.3.3. Interviews*

The data was collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted during the period from 28<sup>th</sup> of January to 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2021. Five interviews were conducted in French and one in English. All the conversations were carried out online and recorded, using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. The duration of each was approximately one hour, the shortest interview being of approximately 40 minutes and the longest of 90 minutes.

The interview guide consisted of four main open-ended questions and more detailed sub-questions aimed at further exploration of each topic (Annex B); the latter were asked (or not), depending on the development of the conversation with each participant. The four overarching questions were related to (1) person's experience of engagement in the association, (2) person's experience of working with European mobility schemes, (3) person's experience of supporting young people with fewer opportunities in the international volunteering, (4) person's opinion about the EU efforts to promote social inclusion in international volunteering.



The interview questions were developed based on both my personal observations (problematic areas I could identify during the volunteering) and the academic literature on the topic, that I was becoming gradually more acquainted with, since the processes of data collection and preparation of literature review were coinciding. Some of the sub-questions were readjusted depending on the knowledge I could acquire about a participant before the interview. For example, when the participants shared with me their academic papers about the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities in international volunteering, I had a chance to learn some of their ideas about the topic and formulate relevant questions; or when I interviewed participants, with whom I was already acquainted I could ask them about specific inclusion projects I knew they were involved in. Moreover, each interview was followed by a reflection, allowing me to modify, remove or add some sub-questions for the next meetings.

#### *2.3.4. Ethical considerations*

The ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by the Maynooth University after submission of a corresponding application to the committee. Throughout the research process, I was committed to respecting the responsibilities I undertook in the ethical approval form. In order to assure that potential participants can make an informed decision to engage in the research, I provided them with information about the research objectives and implications in the invitation and information sheet. Youth workers, who expressed their interest to participate had around two weeks before the interviews to ask questions or raise any concerns. The informed consent was subsequently obtained through consent forms, signed by the participants before each interview. Participants were provided with an opportunity to withdraw from the research before 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2021, even if the data had been already collected, however, no one contacted me for this purpose. All the participants received a transcription of their interviews to make sure they know what data will be used in the analysis. In order to anonymise the data, all participants are referred by pseudonyms; they were provided with an opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves, some, however, left the choice to me.

#### **2.4. Participants' Profiles**

All participants of the research were women. Four are currently full-time employees in the association and two are former employees. Three of the research participants hold or

held the position of development officer (*fr. chargée de développement*) in regional delegations; one participant is a regional project officer (*fr. responsable de projets régionaux*). These positions require direct contact with young people, including support and follow-up throughout their mobility projects. Among another two participants, one person is a regional delegate (*fr. déléguée régionale*) and another person was employed in the headquarters of the association (*fr. Siège National*). The latter positions requiring more administrative work and communication with local and international partners in order to ensure the implementation of volunteering projects. One of the participants used to combine her role in the association with her role as a member of the pool of trainers, hired by the French Erasmus+ Youth & Sports Agency to conduct trainings courses for EVS and ECS volunteers. After leaving her position in the association, she continued with her activity as a trainer. Thus, this two-facet engagement with the European voluntary programmes allowed her to experience multiple aspects of programmes' implementation.

The participants have been engaged with the association, both as volunteers and employees, for different periods of time. The longest time a participant spent in the association (at the moment of the interview) was around 8 years and the shortest was around 2 years, thus some of them had a possibility to experience the change between different EU programmes (Youth in Action, Erasmus+ and ESC), while others worked with only one of them. Interviewed employees represent four regions, where the association is present: Auvergne<sup>14</sup>, Île-de-France, Occitanie and Picardie. A summary of participants' profiles can be found in the Table 1, presented below.

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<sup>14</sup> Although Auvergne is part of larger region Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, the association has separate delegations in Auvergne and in Rhône-Alpes. The employees interviewed for this research, represent only the delegation in Auvergne.

**Table 1***Information about participants*

Pseudonym	Status <sup>15</sup> and place of employment	Engagement with the association prior to employment	Time of working in the association <sup>16</sup>
Sophie	Current employee in a regional delegation	Internship and <i>Service Civique</i>	Approx. 5 years
Chloé	Current employee in a regional delegation	Internship, mobilities outside of France in partners' organisations	Approx. 2 years
Alice	Former employee in the headquarters	None	Approx. 6 years
Emma	Former employee in a regional delegation	None	Approx. 4 years
Pauline	Current employee in a regional delegation	None	Approx. 8 years
Magalie	Current employee in a regional delegation	<i>Service Civique</i>	Approx. 8 years

**2.4.1. Fragile balance between project coordination and working with youth**

In this research, I decided to use the term “youth workers” to describe the professional roles of the participants, although their practice does not always fall neatly into this category. Basarab and O’Donovan (2020) argue that youth workers may “adopt an administrative role, particularly in terms of programme and project management, funding [and] resources”, however, their primary mission should be “to facilitate young people’s learning, motivate and support them in becoming autonomous, active and responsible individuals and citizens” (p. 8). In the case of the interviewed professionals, this balance is often very fragile, as within their professional responsibilities a substantial part of working time is given to administrative and project coordination tasks. Two participants even expressed regrets about not being able to be more in touch with young people they supported because of heavy workloads related to project coordination.

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<sup>15</sup> At the moment of the interview.

<sup>16</sup> Including volunteering, internship, and employment.

Loncle (2009) claims that youth work in France is carried out (principally) by representatives of four professions: (1) sociocultural activities co-ordinators (*fr. animateurs socioculturels*), (2) special needs workers (*fr. éducateurs spécialisés*), (3) operations managers of youth job centres (*fr. chargés de mission et animateurs*), (4) health organisers (*fr. animateurs de prévention ou animateurs de santé*) (p. 132). Only one of the participants was trained as a special needs worker (*fr. éducateur spécialisé*), however other participants also identified themselves as youth workers to some extent. For some it was due to the experience, they had in group facilitation with children or youth (*fr. animation*) (e.g., leading volunteering camps); for others due to their work in the association of popular education, involving leading non-formal learning activities for volunteers and supporting them during their mobilities. One participant highlighted that the association often works as an intermediary, helping local organisations directly engaged with youth (e.g., children's social care houses, local youth missions, social centres, residences for youth in foster care) to find international mobility projects for young people in their care. Thus, in some situations, the employees may perform responsibilities of youth workers, while in others, act as educators (*fr. formateurs*) or advisors for other youth workers. One of the participants found that her role included more administration, coordination, and communication with local actors than actual contact with young people, however, she identified herself, as a mentor of youth workers.

Considering everything discussed above, it is important to keep in mind that the term “youth worker” cannot capture the full complexity of the participants’ professional practice, however, it allows to describe the area of the association’s work and highlight the roles of the interviewees as non-formal and informal educators.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data collected through interviews, I followed the guidelines for thematic analysis, as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), and used NVivo software to realise the coding.

### 2.5.1. Transcription

It is necessary to note that the process of transcribing audio recorded interviews and organising text files was an equally important stage of data analysis. It gave me an opportunity to familiarise myself with the data, listen to and read carefully through the entire data set

numerous times. The interviews were transcribed in the same language, as they were conducted: five in French and one in English. Transcribing the data, I opted for preserving the original speech of the participants as much as possible, including incomplete sentences, pauses and some emotions (e.g., laughter). However, I omitted fillers like “um”, “mhm”, as well as expressions like “*du coup*” (thus), “*enfin*” (finally), “*voilà*” (here you are) if they were repeated multiple times and were not crucial for preserving the meaning of a sentence. While doing the transcriptions, I also made the first comments in the documents, highlighting details I found interesting and relevant in participants’ testimonies. These comments were a starting point for the coding process.

### 2.5.2. *Data coding and identification of themes*

When all the interviews were transcribed, I proceeded with coding the entire data set, using NVivo software to organise the codes. For the interviews in French, I kept the texts in the original language, while the codes’ names and notes were written in English. Therefore, only the passages selected for the findings report were translated from French to English. My analysis was data-driven, and I followed an inductive approach to coding, which means that no pre-existing theoretical framework was used to select specific passages and assign codes to them (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Reading carefully through transcripts, I was focusing my attention on explicit/surface meanings of participants’ words instead of concentrating on implicit ideas and assumptions that may shape their responses, hence analysing data at a semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that even if the data is approached inductively and semantically, the themes do not passively emerge from the data, instead, a researcher plays an active role in their identification. Hence the analysis cannot be conducted in a vacuum and be completely free from the researcher’s initial ideas about the topic, informed by the literature or personal experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 80, 84). As I mentioned earlier, in this research the process of data collection was coinciding with the preparation of literature review, so at the stage of data analysis I was already well acquainted with the literature related to the research topic, which influenced the way I identified meanings of participant’s word; my former experience as a volunteer in the association and as a mobile young person had the same effect.

During the analysis process, I regularly reviewed and renamed codes, gradually collating them into themes and sub-themes. In order to start the coding process, I selected one of the longest interviews, which, as I remarked during the process of transcription, had one of the highest numbers of elements to be identified. I did the first round of codes' reviewing after the analysis of this interview was completed, checking codes for accuracy (whether the names conveyed well the meanings I managed to see in the responses) and redundancy. Hence, the analysis of the first interview led to the establishment of a flexible coding framework for the next few interviews. I reviewed the codes again after the following two interviews were analysed, contributing new elements to the framework. The final round of codes' reviewing was done after the last three interviews were analysed. As a result, the final codes were collated in five<sup>17</sup> major themes, containing numerous sub-themes, four codes, however, remained outside these major themes. Five major themes regrouped the information about:

1. Participants' life histories and their relationship with their profession.
2. Association and participant's delegations (including collective values and commitments, and specificity of local contexts).
3. European mobility schemes and youth workers' interaction with them.
4. Respondents' thoughts about disadvantaged young people and working with them.
5. Influence of COVID-19 pandemic on participants' work<sup>18</sup>.

### 2.5.3. Reporting

In reporting the findings, I decided to focus on three themes (1, 3 and 4), instead of providing an overall thematic description of my entire data set. I selected these three themes since they provided most of the answers to my research questions. A practical consideration

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<sup>17</sup> Initially, there were six themes, one of which reflected the thoughts of the youth workers about international mobility and its value in the lives of young people. However, since it was largely related to participants' perception of the importance of their work, this theme was collated with the first one: Participants' life stories and their relationship with their profession.

<sup>18</sup> This research was planned and conducted during 2020 – 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding all over the world. Although no specific questions about the influence of the pandemic were initially included in the interview guides, this topic spontaneously came up during the first interviews, as all international mobility projects were severely affected. Although the adaptation strategies and other information the interviewees shared with me in this regard are very valuable, unfortunately, discussing this theme is beyond the scope of the research.

about word count allowed for the dissertation also influenced my decision to concentrate on reporting the most relevant themes.

It is necessary to mention that including the details provided by all the codes within the selected themes was equally impossible within the given word count and time frame. For example, describing the theme about participants' life stories and relationships with their profession I highlighted mainly their experiences of international mobility, their beliefs about the place of international mobility in the lives of young people and perceptions of social impact they produce through their work, as those elements were the most relevant to the research questions. However, the codes composing this theme contain further details about participants' educational and professional backgrounds, their entry into the association, their professional values and beliefs, relationships with other employees and youth workers from other organisations, etc<sup>19</sup>. Similar reductions were made while reporting two other themes.

## Conclusion

In summary, this research is conducted within the constructivist paradigm and follows qualitative methodology. The data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with six youth workers in a French association of popular education; the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Since I used to volunteer in the association, where the data collection was conducted, my positionality in the research was close to an insider. However, being a foreigner and adopting a new role of a researcher pushed me toward the space between insider and outsider, where I had a profound knowledge of the studied context but could still act as an external observer. The complexity of participants' professional roles was also discussed at length in this chapter, demonstrating that their responsibilities do not fit neatly into traditional youth work, as they deal with numerous administrative tasks related to project coordination.

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<sup>19</sup>In the case of the first theme, albeit not all the information about participants was mentioned in the findings report, some elements were used to describe participants' profiles in the corresponding section of the methodology.

## Chapter 3 – Key Findings

In this chapter, I will present the key findings of the research, grouped in the themes, and will discuss them with occasional references to studies that explore similar issues. I will start with the theme that explores youth workers' histories. In particular, I will argue that youth workers' personal experiences of mobility and volunteering influence their beliefs about the value of international mobility in the lives of young people they work with. These experiences equally make them aware of structural inequalities that create a situation where mobility is either non-accessible for some young people or is not perceived as valuable. This conviction about the value of international volunteering and the necessity to make it more accessible fosters professionals to see their work as socially important; although they admit that engagement of disadvantaged youths in international mobility is a challenging task.

Discussing the next two themes I will focus more on challenges youth workers encounter when they try to support disadvantaged young people in their volunteering journeys. For this purpose, I will start with an exploration of youth workers' understanding of the term "young people with fewer opportunities" and the implications it has on their practice. I will argue that in their context, professionals tend to view working with young people with fewer opportunities as social work and their main strategy to engage these young people in mobility projects is to cooperate with local socio-educational organisations<sup>20</sup>. In the last theme, I will focus on the EU influence on the professionals' practice. I will discuss mainly the effects arising from the framework of European mobility programmes and changes that happened over time, as well as from funding priorities set by the EU.

The table below presents a concise overview of the themes and sub-themes that will be discussed in this chapter.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, children's social care houses (*MECS - Maison d'enfants à caractère social*), local youth missions (*Missions locales de jeunesse*), social centres, residences for youth in foster care.



**Table 2***Reported Themes and Sub-Themes*

Themes	Sub-themes
Youth worker's histories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal stories of mobility.</li> <li>• Beliefs about the place of mobility in the lives of young people with fewer opportunities.</li> <li>• Views of the social impact of their work.</li> </ul>
Youth workers' definitions of disadvantaged young people and its implication on their practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The intersection between the terms "young people with fewer opportunities" and "<i>jeunes suivis</i>".<sup>21</sup></li> <li>• Youth workers' strategy to engage disadvantaged young people in international mobility and its challenges.</li> </ul>
Youth workers' experiences of coordinating projects in the framework of the EU mobility schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of programmes' changes on youth workers' practice.</li> <li>• The discrepancy between the objectives set by the EU and means provided.</li> </ul>

### 3.1. Youth Worker's Histories

#### 3.1.1. *Personal stories of mobility*

The information that participants shared with me about their life stories demonstrates their general openness to travelling and engagement in civic activities, such as volunteering. Two interviewees had extensive experience of living outside their home countries, for study or professional purposes. Others had experiences of multiple trips abroad, for vacations, WWOOFing<sup>22</sup>, participation in Erasmus+ training courses or youth exchanges. Overall, the interviewees expressed a strong interest in international travelling and appreciation for various intercultural exchanges.

<sup>21</sup> French term applied to young people, who are under social care. Youth workers interviewed for this research often refer to them as youths followed by socio-educational organisations, which include children's social care houses (*fr. MECS - Maison d'enfants à caractère social*), local youth missions (*fr. Missions locales de jeunesse*), social centres, residences for youth in foster care.

<sup>22</sup> WWOOF stands for Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms. In the framework of WWOOF exchanges, volunteers would temporarily offer their help to farmers, while the latter would provide volunteers with free accommodation and food.

My experience, it is a little bit personal, since I did a European Voluntary Service. It's better to have done one, to be able to talk about it too. (Chloé)

I did Erasmus during my university years; I went to Finland for a year. And then, when I finished my undergrad, I went to Dublin. (Alice)

Tomorrow you take me for a [Erasmus+] training course, even a youth exchange, although I don't necessarily have any skills in this area, well, I'll go because [...] I've travelled, it is natural for me to reach out to people. (Sophie)

These responses suggest that even before being employed in the association, the interviewees have developed a substantial mobility capital (e.g., numerous experiences of travelling or living abroad, knowledge of foreign languages, personal openness to intercultural experiences) (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, pp. 51-52). They also continued developing it during the time of their employment, since their work includes frequent communication with international volunteers and partner organisations in other countries and gives them an opportunity to participate in international training courses for youth workers in France or abroad, which in sum leads to further improvements of foreign language competences, contributes to their awareness about other cultures and provides new travel experiences.

### *3.1.2. Youth workers' beliefs about the value of mobility in the lives of young people with fewer opportunities*

This feature of the youth workers' life stories accounts for their motivation to work in the association specialised in international volunteering, while also influencing the way how they conceptualise the place and value of mobility in the lives of young people, including those with fewer opportunities. Bouchaud (2012) also indicates that coordinators of mobility projects (working in similar associations) in France usually have extensive personal stories of international mobility and volunteering, which fosters them acknowledge the significance of such experiences in the lives of young people (p. 43).

All participants broadly agreed that international mobility is valuable for any young person and identified numerous positive outcomes that this experience can produce. In the responses of youth workers, the most prominent outcomes were the discovery of new opportunities (e.g., discovering non-formal education and new ways of learning, discovering

new domains of work), gaining autonomy and life experience, acquiring competencies and experiences relevant for employment, and learning more about other cultures.

And in fact, this person... we spent two weeks [on a youth exchange], [...] I heard from him two or three months later, he had become an ESC youth leader, he continued in that domain, he went into youth work... although he was not at all in that field! [...] Then I learned that he had done an ESC himself. (Sophie)

It's acquiring autonomy, it's budget management [...] It's independence too, it depends on the age at which you decide to leave [for mobility], but young people who are 17, 18 [...] it's still... independence. (Magalie).

These are life experiences [mobilities] that will strengthen skills, increase autonomy and develop employability. (Emma)

Dunne et al., (2013), argue that youth work is subject to increasing pressure to contribute to the development of skills necessary for education and employment. Moreover, there is a tendency in the EU and French educational and youth policies to give high importance to social inclusion of young people through enhancement of their employability (Chaskin et al., 2018; European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2018; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018; Paisley, 2020). Given these circumstances, it was interesting to observe, that participants of this research generally agreed that experience of international volunteering may develop or strengthen certain skills needed for employment, especially in terms of learning foreign languages. However, they tended to start discussions on the benefits of mobility from the exploration of outcomes related to young people's personal and social development. One of the respondents specifically emphasised that developing employability skills should not be the major vocation of international volunteering programmes:

I think it's good for your CV [...] it shows a certain adaptation, flexibility, and then... you're going there to carry out a project, so depending on the [...] tasks [...] it can be professionalizing. You discover another way of working abroad. I agree with this discourse, although I think that this is not the first reason for leaving [for mobility]. (Magalie)

Interestingly some interviewees noted that the value of volunteering mobility, in terms of its usefulness for job-seeking may differ depending on young people's previous life

experiences (e.g., education, competencies, readiness to engage in a full-time job). Youth workers, who mentioned this phenomenon had the most extensive experience of long-term mobilities among all research participants and managed to use it to find jobs. Hence, they grounded their reflections in their personal experiences:

I went to do my European Voluntary Service, so I already had 3 years of studies behind me, I was already a special needs educator, I left for 7 months in Barcelona. I had all the skills that can be valued through international voluntary service [...] I really developed myself, I really evolved during that experience. (Chloé)

When you have a certain age, for example, I did my volunteering I was 26 or 27, so, you know, I wanted to work, and it was totally different [than for young people 18 or 19 years old]. (Alice)

These stories are not meant to diminish the value of mobilities that lead to other developments/outcomes than employment and, as was discussed earlier, positive outcomes of mobility are quite varied. However, they also highlight that the value attributed to international mobility may be different among young people with fewer opportunities and their more advantaged peers. For instance, young people, who are not in education or do not have a clearly defined professional project, may not even know in what areas they want to develop their competencies, let alone imagining that mobility can help them.

The personal stories of the youth workers also raise another issue – in order to be able to spare some time to engage in a volunteering project abroad young people often need a certain degree of stability and external support in their lives (e.g., financial stability, absence of fears about future to be able to make plans, absence of obligations to take care of family members), which is difficult to attain for young people living in precarity.

I was able to leave because I knew that my parents could give me money if I needed it, that when I came back, I would have a place to live [...], in fact, I had no responsibility for the person at 21. I was completely free to do whatever I wanted, which is not necessarily the case for these young people. (Chloé)

Hence, the youth workers, many of whom used to be international volunteers themselves, acknowledge that the decision to participate in volunteering mobility is not simply a matter of choice or will for many young people. Although they believe that this experience may be

beneficial for youths, they also express the awareness of more complex structural factors, that shape life-courses of disadvantaged young people in a way that mobility becomes hardly reachable for them.

### *3.1.3. Views of the social impact of their work*

This awareness about inequalities related to access to international volunteering influences the way how youth workers see their roles and the impact of their work. They perceive their efforts, aimed at engaging and supporting disadvantaged youths through mobility, as crucial in order to broaden the access to international volunteering, so all young people can freely decide whether they want to participate or not, instead of being deprived of such possibility due to social background or other difficulties.

Finally, everyone should discover this [international mobility], but young people with fewer opportunities are totally far away from it and this work is essential. (Pauline)

While the participants talked about their work as socially important, evoking its impact they focused mostly on individual outcomes of mobility for young people, rather than on a larger social/ collective significance. One of the interviewees suggested, that the impact of this work may transcend the individual dimension, when the number of participants in their projects, who (hopefully) learn to be more tolerant, open-minded, and aware of other cultures, is growing (Pauline). Another participant noted that even individual impact may be hard to perceive, since identifying it right after the mobility is difficult; rather a more long-term communication with volunteers is needed to see how the mobility had influenced their life courses:

It's difficult to see the impact right away. But maybe we should say: "Let's meet in a year or two years and you can tell me if... if you've finally chosen something else, what consequences it had on your life, what consequences it might have had on your life choices. (Magalie)

Two interviewees noted, however, that post-mobility support of young people was the most challenging phase. The reasons for this, as identified by the youth workers, are varied: some young people live in isolated areas and do not have access to digital technology; others engage in other types of activities and do not have time to stay in touch with the

association; some break all the contacts when mobility comes to an end and when they do not require association's help anymore:

I sometimes have difficulties in the post-mobility follow-up, [...] talking about geographical obstacles, because if we go and look for people who have this difficulty, who are isolated [...] it's not easy to go and see them regularly, we can't use digital means [...] these are people who have perhaps reengaged in other activities, in the best of cases, internship or employment, [...] family life is more present and [...] it's hard to carry on the follow-up, I think. (Emma)

The youth workers felt that often their individual capacity to include more young people with fewer opportunities in the projects was limited, mainly due to external factors (e.g., lack of time or financial resources, or barriers arising from the young people's personal circumstances). These factors will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. Being conscious of the limiting circumstances, they still emphasised that their responsibility, both individual and collective (as an association) is to do maximum efforts in order to offer young people with fewer opportunities a possibility to experience mobility:

So, I think that the projects themselves can be inclusive, but again, there has to be a will. [...] I think, for example, that structures like [the association] must put themselves into difficulty by welcoming volunteers [...] who have difficulties, who require more time because, in fact, it is our profession (Chloé).

## 3.2. Youth Workers' Definition of Disadvantaged Young People and its Implication on Their Practice

### 3.2.1. *Young people with fewer opportunities – an ambiguous term*

All the participants of the research reported having difficulties employing the term "young people with fewer opportunities" in their professional practice, the key criticism being related to the large scope of the term.

It's very broad because there are geographical obstacles, social obstacles, cultural obstacles, there are a lot of...how can I put it, types, typologies of young people, who can be considered as young people with fewer opportunities. (Magalie)

Two practitioners referred to the term NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training) as being more specific and easier to work with, although in the

academic literature this term was criticised for not encompassing the heterogeneity and complexity of young people life-courses (Salvà-Mut et al., 2018; Simmons & Smyth, 2016). According to the respondents, the broad definition of young people with fewer opportunities led to the situation, where it was easy to “label” almost any young person, as having fewer opportunities. This could be done either for the purpose of receiving supplementary funding or for providing “good-looking” numbers, that can subsequently be used by the European Commission to demonstrate that the projects are inclusive:

Sometimes we [...] tend to classify them too quickly [...], because we need to tick these boxes to get a bit more funding. (Pauline)

In our Erasmus + reports we can very well say that any young person we work with has fewer opportunities [...] it's complicated to put a label on a young person, just to say: "There you go, we reached a young person with fewer opportunities". (Magalie)

Overall, the data set contains multiple accounts where the scope of the term was seen as problematic. However, one of the youth workers claimed that some of the international volunteers she followed were facing difficulties that did not fit even in this broad definition. For example, being in disaccord with a political regime in a home country and finding it difficult to live there, while not facing direct political repressions. The problem, as explained by the youth worker, is that in such cases it is hardly possible to prove that these participants belong to the category of young people with fewer opportunities, and that supporting them will require additional funding:

I know people who shared with me their feeling of not being in line with [...] the political regime, or the implementation of the policy in their country of origin, to the point that it really becomes a problem, and that they feel [...] rejected, or that they distance themselves from their country of origin. So, we cannot prove that there is a threat to their lives [...] but in fact, it is very, very significant and it modifies their lives and guides their choices [...], and I have nothing to prove it [...] And also to go further, this is something you can talk about when you already have a relationship with a person, [...] that is quite deep. (Emma)

The last sentence of this account exemplifies further issues related to using the term “young people with fewer opportunities” with volunteers and in grant applications. For instance, to

know the life-courses of volunteers and the difficulties they might have encountered, the youth workers have to build a relationship of trust with the participants, which requires more time than a short interview or orientation meeting. Reaching this level of trust is particularly difficult in the case of hosting projects, when youth workers have to apply for funding and foresee a potential need for extra allowance to support the young people, few months before meeting them in person. Moreover, one youth worker indicated that potential participants may feel reluctant to reveal their difficulties during the interviews, since they may be afraid that it would impair their selection. A feeling of stigmatisation may also arise, if a youth worker overtly says that a young person, they accompany has fewer opportunities, which also explains the reluctance of professionals to employ the term.

These qualitative accounts reporting difficulties and ambiguities related to using the term in professional practice open ways to interrogate quantitative data provided by the European Commission in the *Annual European Solidarity Corps Report* (European Union, 2020). According to the report, 38.4% participants of ESC volunteering projects are young people with fewer opportunities (European Union, 2020, p. 47) and this relatively high number may suggest that the programme is quite successful in meeting its social inclusion objectives. The data for this report is collected from Mobility Tool, meaning that the information about young people's profiles comes from final reports submitted by youth workers coordinating mobility projects around Europe (Doyle & Pop, 2021). Qualitative responses of the youth workers in this research demonstrate the struggles practitioners may have while using the term "young people with fewer opportunities". In some situations, it can be manipulated for instrumental reasons, such as receiving supplementary funding; while in others, young people may face obstacles that are difficult to prove and, thus, not be counted as having fewer opportunities. Consequently, it is difficult to know, who are the young people behind the statistical data presented by the European Commission; hence these numbers may be deceiving and not always represent the success of the programme.

### 3.2.2. *"Jeunes Suivis" – a term more suitable for local context*

Since the term "young people with fewer opportunities", due to its scope and ambiguity, does not correspond to participants' definition of disadvantaged youths, the youth workers often refer to other terms, that they find more suitable. NEETs, as mentioned earlier is one of those, however the French term "*jeunes suivis*", meaning young people, who are



under social care and are supervised by socio-educational organisations, is used the most frequently.

By young people with fewer opportunities, I mean rather “*jeunes suivis*”, people who really have a problem with [...] geographical mobility, not necessarily international, because for young people to take a train from Paris to... even Noisy-le-Grand<sup>23</sup>, [...]it can be problematic [...] those for me are really obstacles. The social obstacles too, via the form of education, which you may or may not have received. (Sophie)

When youth workers discuss their practice, the terms “young people with fewer opportunities” and “*jeunes suivis*” do not simply correspond to each other, but rather intersect. Practitioners’ professional reality dictates that they should use different terms to name disadvantaged young people, depending on the types of projects and support available for these youths. *Jeunes suivis* participate in short-term volunteering work camps in France and are supported both by the social workers from their hosting organisations and by the youth workers of the association. Young people with fewer opportunities participate in short- or long-term volunteering projects in the framework of European mobility schemes, such as ESC, and receive enhanced pedagogical support from the youth workers in the association. Nonetheless, in many cases, those are the same young people, who may start their voluntary engagement with a work camp and continue in the framework of European programmes. The data shows that what makes the term “*jeunes suivis*” less ambiguous for the youth workers is the fact that these young people have been already identified by local socio-educational organisations as having certain obstacles:

I think that the fact of having young people who are accompanied by organisations, such as children's social care houses, residences, or that they are followed by associations, sometimes because of legal problems. All of these young people can be considered as having fewer opportunities, for whom we know since there is pedagogical support that will be provided by another structure. (Magalie)

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<sup>23</sup> A city in Eastern part of suburban areas of Paris, approximately 20 km distance from Paris city centre; it is located in the 4<sup>th</sup> out of 5 zones served by commuter trains RER (*fr. Réseau Express Régional*).

### *3.2.3. Cooperation with socio-educational organisations, as a key strategy to engage young people with fewer opportunities in international mobility*

Youth workers argue that disadvantaged young people face multiple obstacles that prevent them from discovering mobility opportunities and applying for them independently. Among the identified obstacles are the following: lack of access to information about European mobility schemes, financial difficulties, limited digital skills and access to technology, precarity and difficulties to make plans for the future, and limited knowledge of foreign languages. Discussing the causes of these obstacles is beyond the scope of this research, but it is important to acknowledge them, since, according to the youth workers, they hinder disadvantaged young people from even envisaging a possibility of mobility. Given that the youth workers have to manage numerous administrative tasks, their working time is only sufficient to respond to the requests of young people, who contact them independently. In this context, their main strategy to engage more young people with fewer opportunities is cooperation with local socio-educational organisations.

For me, the engagement of youths with fewer opportunities is the one facilitated by [socio-educational] organisations. [...] For me, it's not spontaneous applications like that...after a search on the website. (Chloé)

So, generally speaking, [...] we deal with the orientation, identification of young people by other partners. We don't find them by a simple call on Facebook: "Hey, are you a young person with fewer opportunities? Come and see us!" (Emma).

The social care actors, who are in direct contact with disadvantaged young people, tend to have more resources (e.g., time, human resources) and skills to accompany these youths in their everyday life. Meanwhile, the association has expertise in coordinating international volunteering projects and applying for the European Commission's funding. These factors create a situation of certain dependency, where the association has to rely on local socio-education organisations to be able to meet the objectives suggested by the EU in terms of engagement of young people with fewer opportunities; and the socio-educational organisations have to rely on associations, specialised in international mobility, to be able to provide youths in their care with an opportunity to travel.

This reliance on socio-educational organisations also shows that the youth workers, in their specific professional context, view working with disadvantaged young people as social

work; and as not all of them were trained in the domains linked to social work or even youth, they do not always feel in the capacity to provide appropriate support to the young people. This illuminates some larger issues, particularly the fact that the network of actors, who contribute to the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities in international mobility in some contexts is more complex than what is usually envisaged by policymakers.

#### Challenges of the cooperation with socio-educational organisations

It is important to note that for socio-educational organisations, providing young people with an opportunity to do international volunteering is not always a priority, since they have to deal with urgent social problems and difficult life situations encountered by young people. Moreover, youth workers, who coordinate mobility projects and employees of socio-educational organisations may assign different values to the experience of mobility in young people's lives. As discussed in the section about youth workers histories, the employees of the association tend to have extensive personal experience of mobility and civic engagement, which is one of the factors fostering them to appreciate the importance and benefits of international volunteering for young people's development. However, as Bouchaud (2012) argues, employees of socio-educational organisations do not usually share the same awareness and positive view of international volunteering (especially long-term), and, therefore, are less inclined to suggest this path to the young people they work with (Bouchaud, 2012, p. 43; Labadie & Talleu, 2017, pp. 60-61).

In the studied context, the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities in mobility strongly depends on the cooperation between the association and local socio-educational organisations. Hence, if youth workers in these two types of settings have oppositional beliefs about the value of international mobility, multiple barriers to this cooperation may arise; and as Labadie and Talleu (2017) argue, non-proposal of mobility projects by local youth and social work actors is one of the key factors preventing young people with fewer opportunities from participation. In the following quote, one of the interviewees explains, why socio-educational organisations may be sceptical about the relevance of long-term international volunteering for young people in their care:

Young people who are in socio-educational organisations and who participate in a short-term [volunteering] project, often [should] engage in a long-term project, which is "a positive outcome", as the socio-educational organisations say. It means either a

job or studies and often volunteering is not what is called “a positive outcome”. Especially, as these are often young adults, so they are under “young adult contract”<sup>24</sup>, so they really [...] can't afford to do a year of voluntary work, if their “young adult contract” says that by a certain date you must be able to find a job (Chloé)

This passage exemplifies that youth or social workers of socio-educational organisations prioritise the opportunities that are the most likely to pave the way to education or employment for young people. At the same time, as the quote demonstrates, professionals' views of appropriate opportunities are influenced by the modalities of social aid offered for young people by the state. Young people, who benefit from social aid, such as the “young adult contract”, mentioned in the quote, are in the situation where they must follow training and search for a job right after they turn 18, so they could have financial resources to be independent from the state's funding. Although participation in volunteering programmes may offer a valuable learning opportunity for young people, it does not grant immediate access to the labour market. Hence, educators of socio-educational organisations, who have to make sure that youths in their care fulfil the requirements of social aid provisions, may be sceptical about the relevance of mobility (especially long-term).

Nevertheless, it is important to note, that when it comes to short-term volunteering projects in summer (e.g., volunteering camps, short-term ESC), the association receives numerous requests from socio-educational structures, since the latter try to find interesting activities for the young people to engage in during vacation period. In some regions the association even struggles to respond to all these demands:

We are often contacted throughout the year by socio-educational organisations [...] In Île-de-France we don't need to take any steps. We even have a lot of problems responding to all the requests from all the organisations. (Chloé)

Another challenge for the cooperation between the association and local socio-educational structures arises from the way how the EU funding for the projects is distributed. The grants allocated by the French National Agency for the realisation of projects in the

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<sup>24</sup> In French *le contract jeune majeur* (CJM) – a type of social aid in France for young people aged 18 – 21, who previously benefited from child social welfare (*fr. l'ASE - l'Aide Sociale à l'Enfance*) and, who after turning 18, lack financial resources or family support. One of the aims of this aid is to facilitate the integration of young people in education or employment.

framework of Erasmus+ and ESC cover mainly the expenses of young people and partly the work of the association, while socio-educational structures are left out:

There are a lot of structures, when we proposed the project to them [...] they were really keen, [...] and, in fact, when they realised how cumbersome it could be administratively: to engage the young people, to have information meetings with them, to be sure that they could go [to take part in a project] [...] – it's a lot of work. [...] when we do a project, we [the association] necessarily gain a little bit, [...] we have a little bit of budget for functioning. The local [socio-educational] organisations, [...] gain, if you like, in terms of figures, in terms of the young person's engagement, but on the other hand, monetarily they do not gain... it can be complicated. (Sophie)

Responses of participants suggest that to enhance the participation of disadvantaged youth in international volunteering, there has to be either additional funding and support available for socio-educational organisations, who are the first to get in touch with these young people; or the association has to hire more employees, with a background in social work, who would be responsible for inclusion (which might also require more resources). Moreover, given the significance of cooperation between youth and social workers in the studied context, the distinction between youth and social work that is sometimes made at the European level (European Commission, 2015a, p. 14), may be counterproductive. Instead, wider recognition of the contribution both groups of professionals make in terms of broadening access to ESC and Erasmus+ youth projects may be necessary within some contexts. It is important to mention that even if the role of youth and social workers is adequately recognised and remunerated by the EU, the larger structural factors impeding the participation of disadvantaged young people in mobility, briefly evoked above, still remain.

### 3.3. Youth Workers' Experiences of Coordinating Projects in the Framework of the EU Mobility Schemes

Currently, employees of the association carry out projects in the framework of ESC and Erasmus+ (youth exchanges and training courses for youth workers). Only one participant was not involved in the association when EVS was gradually removed from the Erasmus+ programme and ESC was introduced instead, as a single entry for solidarity activities in the EU, between 2016 and 2018 (European Union, 2020, p. 5). Hence, five participants

experienced the transition between EVS and ESC as employees or long-term volunteers in the association. Two participants have worked in the association for over seven years and thus were able to experience the changes related to the incorporation of the Youth in Action programme under the umbrella of Erasmus+, in 2014 (European Commission, 2020a, p. 6).

### 3.3.1. *Influence of programmes' changes on the youth worker's practice*

#### **Changing brands – a challenge for communication**

The youth workers reported that throughout the years they had perceived little modifications in terms of programmes' content, funding and support available for them, or tasks they have to accomplish to implement projects in this framework. As one of the participants summarised: "The EVS model has almost been copied onto the ESC" (Emma). Surprisingly, two interviewees reported that the major influence on their practice was the fact that similar projects during different time periods belonged to different flagship initiatives (Youth in Action, Erasmus+, ESC). According to the youth workers, the fact that the names and brands of the programmes were changing, with no substantial transformation of content, created a lot of confusion among local partners and young people. Therefore, the employees had to readjust the tools of communication and promotion of these mobility schemes too often and the obligation to explain repeatedly the rationale of the European Commission behind these minor changes was often viewed as burdensome extra work.

We are not going to say: "Get involved as a European Solidarity Corps", "Get involved as a European Volunteer" it made more sense and many people did not manage to switch to this new programme, since they had already heard about EVS, moreover it was simple to say, but ESC did not mean much to them [...] So this has an impact on practice because you always have to re-explain the programme, you have to educate people about it, [...] and it's more difficult, perhaps, to work with new partners or participants, who were used to the old programme. (Emma)

#### **Youth Workers' perspectives on the changes related to social inclusion**

Although in recent years the European Union has issued new documents aimed at enhancing social inclusion in youth projects (e.g., *Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the Field of Youth* (2014), *New EU Youth Strategy* (2018)) and created European Solidarity Corps, giving a possibility for organisations to apply for extra funding to include young people with fewer opportunities in their actions, the participants of this research did not perceive

that the programmes had become more inclusive over time. Some of the new features of the ESC were seen as beneficial for the inclusion of disadvantaged youths, others as additional barriers, hence creating a certain balance leading to the absence of significant changes in terms of inclusion.

*Valuing intercultural experience at home and different ways of learning*

The volunteering team, the new type of activity introduced within ESC, was viewed by the youth workers as very suitable for engagement of young people with fewer opportunities and hence a positive development. Volunteering teams are short term projects for international groups (European Commission, 2020b, p. 23); they are similar to international volunteering camps, core projects for the association (the camps are usually implemented independently of funding from the EU funding). In the following account, one of the participants explains why volunteering teams are potentially more inclusive than Erasmus+ youth exchanges or even international volunteering camps.

A young person, who is going to participate in ESC, is not going to pay [...], even if it [the project] is in their country. [...] This volunteering team project is very, very interesting [...] because it is open to a lot of people, and even young people with fewer opportunities can participate. And all expenses [of a participant] are covered. [...] it's not like youth exchanges or training courses [...] there are young people, you ask them to do a youth exchange, you make them sit down for more than 3 hours to think about a project all together or a workshop, they'll run off [...], because they can't take it anymore, and I understand it! And in fact, it's true that the volunteering teams are more about manual work, a bit closer to a workcamp, [...] more about developing social cohesion or awareness-raising workshops, we are really mixing the two [youth exchanges and workcamps], which is very interesting. (Sophie)

This passage also highlights certain difficulties some disadvantaged young people may face on their way to mobility, in particular: (1) challenges of cross-border mobility for those with little or no prior mobility experience, (2) financial difficulties and (3) problematic relationship with traditional learning and education. The volunteering team, for the youth workers, is an example of activities that responds effectively to these obstacles. (1) While EVS used to privilege cross-border mobilities, ESC also acknowledges the possibilities of intercultural learning in a home country, which may be a start for young people, who did not travel abroad

before (Niemeyer, 2017). (3) Although, EVS and Erasmus+ youth exchanges operate in the field of non-formal education, which is more accessible to a wider audience, the above account exemplifies that some of the activities may resemble those existing in formal education (school, university). Young people who had difficulties succeeding in formal education might feel excluded in projects like this. Thus, it is beneficial to value different ways of learning, manual work, as well as intellectual, which, according to the interviewees, is done within volunteering team activities.

*Application process – an additional barrier for young people with fewer opportunities*

While welcoming this positive development, the youth workers also expressed concern about increased digitalisation of the application process, since, in order to become an ESC volunteer, all young people now have to create a personal profile in the online database and receive a Participant Reference Number. The rationale behind this change was to increase young people's autonomy by suppressing the necessity to apply through a sending organisation (which was a common practice for EVS). However, the youth workers highlighted that some disadvantaged young people they accompany do not have good access to the internet/computer, or digital skills necessary to orient themselves independently in the online database.

Indeed, the database of ESC, is not quite intuitive, and to create your account and have your [Participant Reference Number] is not quite evident, so you still need someone to help you. [...] I had done this for a young refugee with his account and it wasn't very intuitive. (Magalie)

Going beyond access to technology and digital skills, some interviewees suggest that the entire procedure of participants' selection creates additional barriers for disadvantaged young people. To apply for ESC, they are expected to orient themselves among multiple EU websites, they should be able to describe their educational and professional background, competencies (albeit concisely), indicate when they are available and where they want to do their project, which requires some planning in advance. Given that the projects are very competitive (e.g., youth workers reported receiving around 300 applications for a single vacancy for long-term individual mobility projects), young people are encouraged to send their CVs and motivation letters in order to stand out among other candidates, so the rule of "no requirements of qualification and competences" is hard to observe.



This competitiveness of long-term volunteering projects may be explained by a discrepancy that exists at the European level between a large number of highly qualified young people and a low number of rewarding job offers (both financially and personally) available for them (Cairns et al, 2017, p. 5). This creates a situation where even highly-qualified young people “know that they need to search ever harder for fewer opportunities” (Cairns et al, 2017, p. 5). In some cases, long-term volunteering projects may become a way for these people to acquire some professional experience and develop job-related skills, which is one of the factors that makes the competition quite intense.

In the situation where the application process is almost job like, young people, who have some higher educational background, who speak foreign languages, who already know how to compose CVs and motivation letters and have enough confidence to present their skills, are in an advantaged position.

I think that... the fact that the motivation is (inaudible) in writing can already be the first barrier for young people with fewer opportunities, who will perhaps write only a sentence, so it doesn't hold your attention. So... I think that there may be young people with fewer opportunities who apply, but it's not doing them any favours... I mean, the application system today is not designed to highlight their profiles (Magalie).

This quote also demonstrates that the problem has two sides. On the one hand, there is an application procedure imposed by the ESC and due to its technical characteristics, it may limit access to mobility for young people with fewer opportunities. On the other hand, the organisations decide what projects they offer, how they adapt them to the needs of young people with fewer opportunities and whom they select as volunteers. As some participants pointed out, long-term individual mobility projects for organisations are also an opportunity to develop further their activities, so they are likely to select candidates, who already have some competencies and experience and can integrate quickly into the team.

All interviewees reported that in the long-term individual mobility projects they coordinated most of the places were occupied by young people, who had high levels of cultural (Bourdieu, 1986) and mobility capital (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) (e.g., young people with a good level of education, often undergraduate or master's degree, who spoke multiple

languages, and had substantial mobility experience). For example, this volunteer, supported by one of the youth workers:

Once again, it's a young person, who comes from a higher socio-professional category, who doesn't have many difficulties, who is very autonomous, who has dual nationality, who is 18 years old, but [already] went to study in the United States, although he is German, but was born in China... well, you see the profile? (laughing) (Chloé)

Some respondents insisted that the long-term projects in their delegations are adaptable to the needs of young people with fewer opportunities, however, they still receive most applications from young people with profiles similar to the one described above. Other interviewees acknowledged that the projects offered by their delegations are quite demanding and therefore candidates with more significant experience tend to be selected. This ambiguity in responses shows once again that the issue is complex and is shaped both by the application procedure designed by the policymakers and the choices of grassroots organisations.

At the same time, youth workers reported meeting young people with fewer opportunities more frequently in short term volunteering projects. On the one hand, this situation is logical, as even in the former EVS, short-term projects of two weeks to two months were intended for young people with fewer opportunities (Bier, 2011, p. 14); and with the volunteering team projects, as discussed earlier, it continues to be the case in the framework of ESC. On the other hand, greater participation of disadvantaged young people in short-term projects, rather than long-term ones, may be a reflection of the association's priorities, as one of the participants explained:

I do think we have the capacity [to support young people with fewer opportunities in long-term projects], but I don't know if the human resources are mainly focused on this. Because [the association] even though in France it is a big work camps organisation, is not big enough itself, [...] at the time we were 30 something staff members. And the priority [...] is mainly the work camps, it's not the long-term volunteering. [...] So, [for] implementing long-term projects, I think, first the organisation like [this one] will need more human resources. (Alice)

Indeed, short-term volunteering camps is the core of the association's activities, and in other organisations in France or around Europe, that are specialised in long-term volunteering, the ratio of young people with fewer opportunities in long-term individual projects may be higher. At the same time, it does not invalidate the previously presented argument of youth workers about the ESC application system being hard to navigate for disadvantaged young people.

### *3.3.2. Discrepancy between the objectives set by the policymakers and the means offered*

Discussing the accessibility of European volunteering mobility schemes for young people with fewer opportunities, the interviewees often evoke the gap between the objectives of social inclusion, set on the EU level and the means available for the organisations. The respondents agreed that the emphasis on social inclusion and its importance was very prominent in the EU youth policy, however, they felt somewhat frustrated since it was not consistently translated into sufficient support for organisations, especially in terms of funding. The youth workers considered that ESC and Erasmus+ offered good coverage of young people's expenses, while employees' working time spent to submit grant applications/reports and support young people was poorly funded.

I think in this kind of long-term projects, and projects with fewer opportunities and etc., I think the national... even at the European level, they... the European Commission, they want to implement this kind of projects, but they don't give enough means to the organisations... Because one important thing is that, as I told you, sending and hosting volunteers, it takes time, helping them, supporting them, etc., and this time it's working time, for people working in [the association]. And sometimes this job is not paid for by these projects. So how can you make the organisation sustainable if you're working for free? (Alice).

In this situation, the association has to find other ways to finance the working time of their staff, for example through grants from local (e.g., city, department or regional councils) or national authorities. However, one of the interviewees pointed out that it is difficult to receive and accumulate both national and EU funding. According to her, French public actors may perceive financing initiatives already partially funded by the EU as double expenditures, following the logic that France already contributes sufficiently to the EU budget:

And at the moment, the big flaw of youth policies in France is that as soon as you tell them that you work at international and European levels, they tell you: "You should go and check with Europe, there's plenty of money", - which is true, but not entirely, for us it's complementary to our projects, we can't do our projects with just European money, we couldn't carry out our projects and pay the employees and all the functioning related expenses. (Pauline)

Given that the working time of the employees is not appropriately remunerated by the European volunteering programmes, some youth workers tend to think that the EU does not engage in real actions to enhance social inclusion in its mobility programmes and places too much responsibility on organisations. Although after the launch of the ESC the organisation acquired a possibility to apply for extra "inclusion" funding, related to the enhanced accompaniment of disadvantaged young people, youth workers report that obtaining it is problematic. One of the interviewees described her experience of applying for this funding as following:

To ensure [...] that this funding is used properly, access to [it] is more complicated, so we are denied [funding] envelopes that we had requested for inclusion, because we had an impression that it [the obstacles] belonged to young people with fewer opportunities category, and in the end, there is a need of... disability, I would almost say, to be able to have an inclusion funding [...]. And how can discrimination be justified? [...] Physical disability, if there is a recognition, it can be justified, and as a result, it's true that it's rather easy to put forward, but that doesn't mean that we can justify the need [of accompaniment], because that too must be justified [...] After all of this, I didn't even try to apply for this inclusion funding. I did it at the beginning and then I stopped. (Emma)

As this quote indicates, applying for supplementary funding is also an extra workload for the youth workers and the chances that this work will be rewarded with a larger grant are quite low. Provided that in any case working time of the employees is barely covered by the standard grants, they feel discouraged to spend even more time and efforts to justify the difficult life situations of the volunteers in the grant applications, especially if they cannot support it with official documents.

What is interesting to observe in this situation is that despite the lack of adequate funding, for the association including disadvantaged young people in their projects is more about values and political choices. Thus, working with these young people is an integral part of the association's activity and that any funding helping them to broaden the access to the projects for all is perceived as an incentive but not a purpose in itself:

I think it's mainly [...] the political side that we want to give to our actions too. [...] For example, we are part of the "education without borders" network [...], as an association of popular education, we don't necessarily agree with the way refugees and migrants are treated today [...] So according to political choices [...], I think that the young people we meet, the profiles will also result from these political choices. (Magalie).

It's [enhancing social inclusion] written in black and white in our educational project. (Emma)

It's really in the essence of [the association] to try to open up its workcamps to as many people as possible. (Pauline)

However, it should not mean that European Commission can exploit the dedication to values of social inclusion, that many grassroots organisations have, to show that the European mobility programmes are efficient in terms of engagements of young people with fewer opportunities. It is important to recognise that the funding is often not sufficient to cover the working time of people, who support the young people, and, who, despite the lack of resources, try to offer them an opportunity to experience mobility.

## Chapter 4 – Discussion

The findings report, presented in the previous chapter, highlights actions youth workers undertake to engage young people with fewer opportunities in international volunteering, and influences exerted on them by their professional environment and policy context. As was mentioned earlier, this research has been conducted inductively and the data analysis was not guided by a predefined theoretical framework. Therefore, the links between the findings and relevant theoretical concepts were established only after the analysis had been completed and the structure of the findings report developed. Structuring the report around youth workers actions and external factors that influence their practice helped me realise that the concepts of agency-as-achievement within particular ecological circumstances (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015) and cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are particularly useful in order to bridge major finding of this research with wider concerns in the field of adult education. In this chapter I will selectively draw on the afore-mentioned concepts, in order to interpret some findings, particularly those related to the influences that shape youth workers' practice; this approach will also allow me to pinpoint and summarise the key arguments arising from the findings. Since a theoretical overview was not included in the literature review, emphasising that the data predated the theory, I will integrate brief explanations of the aforementioned theoretical concepts in this chapter.

### 4.1. Ecological Understanding of Agency-as-Achievement

In order to structure the interpretation of the findings in the next section, I will use the model of achievement of agency, proposed by Biesta et al (2015) in the study about the influence of beliefs on teacher's agency, in which the authors argue that:

“the achievement of agency is always informed by past experience, including personal and professional biographies; that it is orientated towards the future, both with regard to more short-term and more long-term perspectives; and that it is enacted in the here-and-now, where such enactment is influenced by what we refer to as cultural, material and structural resources” (p. 627).

This idea of three dimensions of agency comes from the earlier work by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and their concept of the chordal triad of agency, which makes an analytical distinction between three temporal orientations of human agency (pp. 970 - 971):

- **iterational element** (directed toward past), refers to “selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time”;
- **projective element** (directed toward future), “encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future”;
- and **practical-evaluative element** (directed towards the present), “entails the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971)

Therefore, agency is something that can “be *achieved* in and through engagement with particular temporal-relational contexts-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, pp. 136, original emphasise), rather than simply a power or capacity that individuals possess and can use in any given moment. This interpretation is what Biesta and Tedder (2006; 2007) name ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. This concept emphasises that “actors always act *by means* of an environment rather than simply in an environment” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, pp. 137, original emphasise). It recognises that the achievement of agency “depends on the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology”, which explains why in some situations individuals succeed in achieving agency, but not in others (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

In the context of this research, engaging young people with fewer opportunities in European mobility programmes, which are mainly accessed by young people of higher socio-economic background, means that youth workers have to be agents of change. Looking at their actions from the above-mentioned ecological perspective allows recognising the external influences, coming from youth workers’ professional environment and larger social

and policy contexts, that make successful engagement of disadvantaged youth in the projects more than a matter of youth workers' will.

## 4.2. Youth Workers' Agency

### 4.2.1. *Iterational dimension of agency: influence of personal and professional histories*

As was demonstrated in the findings, youth workers' personal experiences of mobility and volunteering have a profound influence both on their motivation to work in the area of international volunteering and on their beliefs about the value of mobility in the lives of young people. These factors motivate them to dedicate considerable efforts to broaden access to mobility for disadvantaged young people. Similarly, youth workers' past experiences of mobility and volunteering play an active role in building their awareness about obstacles disadvantaged young people may face on their ways to mobility. This awareness, on the one hand, helps them understand why mobility may be not always accessible or produce the same benefits for different groups of youths; and, on the other hand, helps them to be more attentive to the different needs of young people, to be able to provide suitable support.

### 4.2.2. *Projective dimension of agency: short-term and long-term perspectives*

Considering that the participants of this research view international mobility as a valuable and beneficial experience for young people, they also perceive their work as socially important, especially in terms of broadening access to mobility for all. The latter is often challenging due to the factors shaping their professional environment, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The findings show that youth workers tend to perceive the impact of their work mostly at the individual level (in terms of benefits and positive changes experiences by individual volunteers) and in short term. They may lack the perspective of the larger and more long-term impact of their work since they often have very little visibility of how the lives of the volunteers evolve, due to the challenges in post mobility support discussed in the findings.

### 4.2.3. *Practical-evaluative dimension: enactment of agency at present shaped by cultural, material and structural resources*

The success of youth workers efforts to involve more young people with fewer opportunities in international mobility projects is strongly dependent on the resources available within their professional environment. The findings provide an extensive discussion



of multiple structural and material factors that often make the achievement of agency difficult for the youth workers in their particular contexts.

The association is mainly focused on the creation and coordination of international youth volunteering projects and the employees' working time is mainly sufficient to support young people, who decide independently, or with the support of their family and friends, to engage in such projects. As discussed in the findings, young people whose profiles are close to youth workers definition of youths with fewer opportunities rarely opt for these projects. In this context, the association and the youth workers rely on local socio-educational organisations, which are in direct and permanent contact with disadvantaged young people.

Cooperation with this type of organisations is the key strategy used by the youth workers to broaden the access to international mobility for young people with fewer opportunities. At the same time, this cooperation is far from being unproblematic and two major issues were identified in this regard within the course of this research. The funding offered by the European Union, partly covers expenses related to the association's work, as a coordinator of the projects. However, for employees of socio-educational organisations, cooperating with the association, especially for long-term projects, is an extra workload, that is not foreseen by the EU funding. This brings us to the second issue, employees of socio-educational organisations, whose role is to ensure that young people in their care are successful in their socio-professional integration<sup>25</sup>, which is often defined by policymakers as participation in employment or education, may overlook the learning potential of volunteering mobility, as it does not lead directly to job or academic qualifications.

#### 4.3. Favoured Cultural and Social Capital of Volunteers

Expanding on factors beyond youth workers' control, originating from policy and larger social context, it is necessary to mention that the way volunteering projects are framed at the European level favour participants with a certain level of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). "Embodied" cultural capital includes an individual's knowledge, acquired through formal education or informal learning, understandings of cultural codes, manner of speaking or any other cultural competence. Some of this knowledge and competencies,

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<sup>25</sup> In French – *insertion socio-professionnelle*, a term frequently used in policy documents (Paisley, 2020) and by youth and social work professionals in France.

especially those gained within formal education can be validated by academic qualifications or other certificates, forming “institutionalised” cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 17 - 20). Social capital, on the other hand, refers to the social and economic benefits an individual may be entitled to by the virtue of belonging to certain networks or groups:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...], which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21).

It is important to note that cultural and social capitals, like economic capital, are subject to hereditary transmission. In other words, an individual, who grows up in a family with the high level of cultural and social capital benefit from the possibility to start acquiring useful cultural capital and a network of social contacts from an early age. Acquisition of these capitals at later stages of life is possible but will strongly depend on the length of free time (e.g., freedom from economic necessity) available for an individual (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 19). Hence, young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds and from underprivileged backgrounds have unequal access to the acquisition of these capitals.

Although such projects as ESC or Erasmus+ youth exchanges have no formal requirement to qualifications of young people (institutionalised cultural capital), in order to apply for these projects young people still need to have a certain level of knowledge and competence (embodied cultural capital). Those may include digital skills (e.g., creating an online profile, conducting project search in the ESC database); ability to present one’s knowledge and skills (e.g., in a CV or a cover letter, or during an interview); ability to speak foreign languages, especially English; having experiences relevant for the projects one applies for (e.g., an experience of participating in a work camp, if within a project the volunteer is expected to lead one).

Even to learn about the existence of these volunteering opportunities, a certain level of social capital is also needed, for example, being part of a network of people, who already travelled abroad or participated in similar projects, being a university or high-school student to be able to attend information events organised by associations specialised in international volunteering. Moreover, participation in some projects (e.g., Erasmus+ youth exchanges) may require being comfortable with taking part in workshops and group discussions, being focused

and attentive, following a certain routine. These elements of cultural capital are often acquired through formal education. Young people with fewer opportunities, some of whom may have had poor access to education or struggled to succeed in the formal education system, might not possess sufficient cultural and social capital to discover and apply for the volunteering programmes independently.

In this situation, the role of youth work professionals is crucial, they can support the young people throughout the application process and the entire mobility journey, so the gap in cultural and social capital may be reduced. Nevertheless, in the studied context, professionals report a lack of resources, such as time and funding, to be able to support young people with fewer opportunities adequately. They often rely on cooperation with socio-educational organisations, to be able to provide suitable support together. However, as was discussed earlier, there are barriers to this cooperation. In these circumstances, the fact that the EU mobility schemes are mostly preoccupied with covering young volunteers' expenses while overlooking the cost of professionals' work, leads to the situation, where mostly young people with already high levels of cultural and social capital, who can find and apply for the projects independently, continue to benefit from these grants, especially in the case of long-term projects.

## Concluding Remarks

This research provides a detailed account of the professional practice of youth workers in relation to the engagement of young people with fewer opportunities in European mobility programmes (European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ youth projects). The research has explored a very specific context, as all six participants are or were employed in the same association in France, which is specialised in international volunteering and popular education. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised or claimed to represent the professional reality of practitioners working in similar domains in France or in Europe.

Overall, the findings suggest that in the studied context engaging young people with fewer opportunities in international volunteering projects is more than a matter of will for the youth workers, as they are subject to multiple factors originating from their professional ecology, which make this task challenging. Practitioners believe that experience of international volunteering is beneficial for young people, hence they are committed to the objectives of broadening access to mobility and involving disadvantaged young people. However, it appears that with their current workloads and insufficient funding, youth workers' view their capacity to contribute to the enhancement of social inclusion in international volunteering as limited. In this situation, their main strategy to reach young people with fewer opportunities is to cooperate with local socio-educational organisations, who are in direct contact with these youths, although, as was discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, this cooperation is not challenge-free. It is unfortunate to see that the increased emphasis on social inclusion in youth projects, that the EU has been making during the last decade (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2018; European Commission, 2020b, p. 6) was not translated into improvements within the youth workers' professional context. This research demonstrates that in addition to extra funding aimed at covering specific needs of young people with fewer opportunities, wider recognition and appropriate remuneration of professionals' work is needed.

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## Appendix A

### Definition of Young People with Fewer Opportunities

Inclusion and diversity projects should have a positive impact on the situation of young people with fewer opportunities. These are young people who are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because they face one or more of the exclusion factors and obstacles below.

The following situations often prevent young people from taking part in employment, formal and non-formal education, trans-national mobility, democratic process and society at large:

- **Disability (i.e., participants with special needs):** young people with mental (intellectual, cognitive, learning), physical, sensory or other disabilities etc.
- **Health problems:** young people with chronic health problems, severe illnesses or psychiatric conditions etc.
- **Educational difficulties:** young people with learning difficulties, early schoolleavers, lower qualified persons, young people with poor school performance etc.
- **Cultural differences:** immigrants, refugees or descendants from immigrant or refugee families, young people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, young people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties etc.
- **Economic obstacles:** young people with a low standard of living, low income, dependence on social welfare system, young people in long-term unemployment or poverty, young people who are homeless, in debt or with financial problems etc.
- **Social obstacles:** young people facing discrimination because of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc., young people with limited social skills or anti-social or high-risk behaviours, young people in a precarious situation, (ex-) offenders, (ex-)drug or alcohol abusers, young and/or single parents, orphans etc.
- **Geographical obstacles:** young people from remote or rural areas, young people living on small islands or in peripheral regions, young people from urban problem zones, young people from less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities) etc. (European Commission, 2014, p. 7)

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide

**Introduction (Purpose: To get to know the person and his/her commitment/work within the association better):**

1. *Broad question: Can you tell me about your experience of work/engagement with the association?*

*Sub-questions, Prompts:*

- What are your responsibilities within the association?
- How long have you been working on this position?
- What brought you here (your motivation)? (Were you involved in other activities of the association before becoming an employee?)
- How do you feel about your role?

**Main part (Purpose: To discover person's knowledge, experiences related to the research theme):**

2. *Broad question: Can you tell me about your general experience of working with the Erasmus + program (EVS, ESC, Youth Exchanges) and JAMO<sup>26</sup>?*

*Sub-questions, Prompts:*

- In which European projects/programmes are you involved now (have been involved since you started working in the association)?
- What do you think of these projects/programmes of international volunteering/mobility in general (what works well, what does not)?
- Were you in contact with the JAMOs during these projects? If so, who were the participants?
- How could you define the category of JAMO? What do you think of the official definition given by Erasmus +?

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<sup>26</sup> In French Jeunes Ayant Moins d'Opportunités – young people with fewer opportunities. JAMO is the abbreviation, which employees always use in the association.

3. *Broad Question: Can you tell me about your experience of accompanying JAMO?*

*Sub-questions, Prompts:*

- Do you think that the work you do (with and for these young people) has a positive social impact? (What issues are addressed by this work?)
- In your delegation, what actions do you undertake to involve JAMOs in your local (in the region or in France) and international projects (sending and hosting)? What are the accompaniment procedures?
- Do you feel that you have a capacity to support JAMOs in their mobility projects?
- Have you had access to training (or other educational resources) on accompanying JAMO? (If yes, tell me more about this experience; if not, do you find it necessary or not for you)?
- In your opinion, what is the impact of international mobility on JAMOs (what it contributes or not to their lives)?

4. *Broad Question: How do you see the role of the EU plays in promoting social inclusion in volunteering and mobility projects?*

*Sub-questions, Prompts:*

- Do you find European projects inclusive?
- During your work at the association, have you had the impression that European projects have become more (or less) inclusive?
- Have you noticed the changes in your work after the creation of the European Solidarity Corps? If so, which ones (e.g., application for grants from the National Agency)?
- Do you think ESC initiative is significantly different from EVS?
- Have the projects you organise in the delegation changed since the creation of ESC? (Have you tried to readapt existing projects to make them more accessible for JAMO or have you created new projects)?
- Are you hosting/sending more JAMOs now?
- Do you think that the delegation or association is in capacity to support the JAMOs? Do you receive enough support from the National Agency?

***Closing part (Purpose: Give participants space for free expression, wrap-up the interview)***

- Is there anything you would like to add to what have been already said?
- Maybe you have some more questions you would like to ask me (about the topic, our further communication, etc.)?
- Could you please tell me how you are feeling about the interview in general (did you find the questions relevant, maybe there are some modifications you would like to suggest)?
- If after transcribing and reading our interview, I will have few clarifications to make (can I contact you again?)