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YOUTH WILL BE FREE

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TESTED STRATEGIES FOR REACHING, ENGAGING, TRAINING, AND EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE AS LEADERS

VADEMECUM



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SOS EUROPA
Project Coordinator





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Summary

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The You(th) will be Free project aims to improve the quality of socio-educational activities in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), transforming them into tools for social rehabilitation for young ex-prisoners or youth at high risk of criminality. The initiative offers these individuals the opportunity to pursue a career as socio-educational animators, enabling them to secure dignified employment.





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Scope of the Project

→ SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Enhancing the specific skills of 24 socio educational animators from the eight partner associations in psychology, pedagogy of deviance, and cultural mediation.
- Introducing young ex-prisoners or at-risk youth from Mediterranean and MENA regions to the profession of socio-educational animation, including its goals, career opportunities, and required skills.
- Developing a pilot training program for nine young ex-prisoners to become youth workers and role models. These individuals will then train other young people, creating a cascading effect. This pilot program will be replicated on a smaller scale across all partner countries, eventually involving 30 youth from eight different nations

→ OUTPUTS

- A specialized manual for youth workers on training high-risk youth
- A report on the role of youth workers in MENA countries.
- A scalable and replicable training pathway adaptable to various contexts.



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VADEMECUM

01

Introduction

"Youth Will Be Free" believes in the power of youth — especially those who have faced systemic exclusion due to detention, legal conflict, or marginalisation. This vademecum captures tested strategies for reaching, engaging, training, and empowering these young people as leaders, not just learners.

02

Purpose

This is not a traditional manual. It is a living, field-informed toolkit for practitioners: youth workers, educators, NGO staff, and anyone seeking to work meaningfully with vulnerable youth. It draws from direct practice and aligns with best practices in non-formal education across Europe.

03

Who is for

Community organisations, outreach workers, policy implementers, facilitators, and mentors who work with young people in precarious situations, particularly those impacted by detention or systemic marginalisation.



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2. Understanding the Target Group

2.1 Youth at Risk: Definitions and Classifications (EC, CoE)

In the European context, the term youth at risk refers to young people whose personal, socio-economic, or legal circumstances expose them to heightened vulnerability and systemic exclusion. According to the European Commission (EC) and the Council of Europe (CoE), this group includes but is not limited to:

- Youth with a history of detention or conflict with the law
- Young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)
- Individuals from low-income or precarious family environments
- Migrant, refugee, or minority ethnic youth
- Survivors of violence, abuse, or neglect
- Youth living with addiction or mental health challenges

The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)7 stresses that these categories are not fixed. Risk is often the result of cumulative disadvantage — a compounding of structural barriers, such as poverty, discrimination, and limited access to rights.

Importantly, “risk” should never be equated with individual failure. Instead, the focus must be on understanding and addressing the external conditions that obstruct meaningful participation, identity formation, and civic agency.

Key Principle: Young people at risk are not inherently problematic — they are often responding to problematic systems.



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2.2 Social and Legal Realities of Detained or Criminalised Youth

Youth who have experienced detention or legal supervision encounter a unique intersection of legal, institutional, and social exclusion. Across Europe, these realities are shaped by:

- Over-criminalisation of marginalised youth for minor offences
- Discriminatory policing practices, especially toward racial, ethnic, or migrant minorities
- Inconsistent access to legal aid and advocacy, especially for underage or undocumented individuals
- Pre-trial detention, often applied without proportionality or alternatives
- Stigmatizing criminal records, which restrict future opportunities in work, education, and housing

The experience of criminalisation is rarely isolated. It is often preceded by systemic failures in education, social protection, and family services. Once involved in the justice system, young people may experience environments of surveillance and punishment rather than rehabilitation or care.

Even post-detention, barriers persist. Many youth are effectively excluded from civic life — they may not be legally barred, but the stigma of their past and the lack of social reintegration mechanisms keep them outside the margins of opportunity.

Key Principle: Programs must be designed with an understanding of how legal systems often amplify, rather than correct, social inequality.



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2.3 Psychological and Socio-Emotional Needs

The psychological landscape of criminalised youth is often marked by adversity, and shaped by systemic distrust, trauma, and disconnection. Common socio-emotional needs include:

- Rebuilding self-worth in the face of shame and public labeling
- Developing emotional literacy, often lacking due to instability or institutionalisation
- Accessing trust-based relationships, especially with adults in positions of care
- Processing trauma, which may be both acute (incarceration) and chronic (family instability, violence)

These needs cannot be addressed by traditional, top-down pedagogical models. Non-formal education (NFE) offers a more responsive, respectful approach. Within an NFE context, facilitators must:

- Prioritise emotional safety in all sessions
- Normalize vulnerability without demanding disclosure
- Avoid re-traumatisation through punitive language or power dynamics
- Use positive reinforcement, not performance assessment, as the core tool of growth

Key Principle: Emotional safety is a precondition for participation, not an outcome of it.



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2.4 The Impact of Stigma and Systemic Exclusion

Stigma is not merely a personal feeling — it is a social mechanism that reinforces exclusion. Youth who have been in contact with the criminal justice system are often perceived as untrustworthy, dangerous, or beyond help. This stigma is perpetuated by:

- Negative media portrayals
- Institutional labeling (e.g., “offender,” “problem youth”)
- Administrative practices that flag or isolate individuals
- Peer and family rejection
- Internalised shame and hopelessness

Stigma leads to avoidance behaviours: youth may stop applying for jobs, withdraw from educational spaces, or self-sabotage future opportunities out of a belief that they will not be accepted.

Effective youth engagement strategies must go beyond “welcoming” attitudes and actively dismantle stigma through:

- Language that reframes participants as leaders, contributors, and experts-by-experience
- Spaces that reflect dignity and mutual respect
- Roles that offer real agency and responsibility
- Narratives that celebrate resilience and complexity

Key Principle: Combatting stigma requires not only inclusive language, but inclusive power-sharing.



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2.5 Civic Disempowerment and Agency (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009)

In their 2009 report, *Measuring Active Citizenship in Europe*, Hoskins and Mascherini highlight a critical correlation: youth who are excluded from education and employment are also less likely to engage in civic or political life. This includes:

- Voting
- Volunteering
- Participating in community initiatives
- Expressing political opinions

This civic disempowerment is not due to disinterest, but a learned distrust in public institutions — often formed through direct experiences of injustice, surveillance, or humiliation.

Restoring civic agency begins with small, relational acts of participation. Youth work settings can provide this by:

- Inviting youth to co-design programs and set learning goals
- Facilitating community projects where impact is visible and immediate
- Providing public platforms for youth voices, such as exhibitions, podcasts, or forums
- Modelling democratic dialogue within the training space itself

Key Principle: Civic participation must be practiced in small, daily ways before it can be expected in formal, public arenas.

Understanding this target group is not about categorising deficits — it is about recognising lived resilience and designing spaces where this resilience can transform into leadership. Every activity, every contact, and every structure must reflect a belief in the potential of these young people to not only belong, but to lead.



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3. Ethical and Pedagogical Principles

Working with young people who have experienced criminalisation, systemic exclusion, or institutionalisation requires more than effective program design – it demands a deep ethical and pedagogical foundation. The following principles are essential for building inclusive, transformative, and responsible learning spaces aligned with European youth work standards.

3.1 Non-Formal Education (NFE) in the European Context

Non-Formal Education (NFE) is a cornerstone of youth work in Europe, widely promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. NFE is defined as “planned, structured educational activities outside the formal school curriculum, voluntarily participated in, and aimed at developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes.”

Core principles of NFE include:

- **Voluntariness:** Participation is always by choice
- **Experiential Learning:** Knowledge is built through doing and reflecting
- **Participant-Centeredness:** Learners co-create content and direction
- **Holistic Growth:** Addressing emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions
- **Flexibility:** Responsive to group needs and context

NFE is especially suited for engaging youth who have experienced exclusion from formal education. It replaces hierarchy with dialogue, assessment with reflection, and discipline with relationship.



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3.2 Youth-Centered, Strength-Based Approaches

A youth-centered approach means putting the experiences, needs, and voices of young people at the center of the learning process. A strength-based approach avoids framing youth as passive recipients or people in need of “fixing.” Instead, it recognises:

- Lived experience as knowledge
- Resilience as a resource
- Cultural and personal identity as strengths

Practitioners must validate existing competencies, even if they do not appear in formal qualifications. For example:

- Navigating street life may translate into risk assessment skills
- Caring for family can be reframed as leadership and responsibility
- Surviving adversity can be honoured as a form of strategic thinking

Practice Tip: Always ask, “What strengths has this experience developed?” – not “What’s missing?”



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3.3 Trauma-Informed Practices in Youth Work

Many youth in conflict with the law have histories of trauma — including neglect, institutionalisation, displacement, or violence. A trauma-informed approach recognises how trauma impacts learning, relationships, and behaviour.

Key trauma-informed principles include:

- Safety first: Physical, emotional, and social
- Choice and control: Never force participation
- Trustworthiness: Be clear, consistent, and respectful
- Empowerment: Focus on autonomy, not compliance
- Peer support: Build mutual support systems

Avoid triggering environments such as:

- Loud commands or orders
- Closed, locked spaces
- Public shaming or forced disclosure
- Authority-based power dynamics

Practice Tip: Be aware that trauma can manifest as resistance, silence, or withdrawal — respond with patience, not punishment.



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3.4 Emotional Safety, Autonomy, and Voluntariness (Compass Manual)

The Compass Manual from the Council of Europe outlines foundational principles for human rights education with young people. Among them, three are especially critical for working with marginalised youth:

Emotional Safety

- Sessions should allow for vulnerability without fear of ridicule or exposure.
- Use regular emotional check-ins, clear group agreements, and opt-out options.

Autonomy

- Youth must be given choices — in activities, in sharing, and in how they participate.
- Autonomy reinforces trust and mirrors the respect often denied in institutions.

Voluntariness

- No one should be “required” to attend or to speak.
- Voluntariness builds a space of authentic engagement, not forced compliance.

Core Message: Consent, in its many forms, is foundational to ethical practice.



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3.5 Anti-Oppression and Inclusive Facilitation

Ethical youth work must actively recognise and challenge oppression — not only in society, but within group dynamics and facilitator practices.

Anti-oppressive facilitation includes:

- Being aware of how racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homophobia show up in group settings
- Speaking up when microaggressions or exclusion occur
- Making space for multiple ways of knowing and expressing (oral, artistic, written)
- Using inclusive language and pronouns
- Regularly checking whose voices are being heard — and whose are missing

Create norms and rituals that promote equity: rotating roles, anonymous contributions, multilingual resources, visual aids for non-readers, etc.

Practice Tip: Being neutral in the face of exclusion often reinforces it — ethical facilitators intervene when necessary.



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3.6 Ethical Guidelines for Engagement (SALTO, CoE Youth Dept.)

Both the SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion & Diversity Resource Centre and the Council of Europe Youth Department provide clear ethical standards for youth engagement, especially with vulnerable or excluded populations.

Key ethical guidelines include:

- Do no harm: Activities should never risk re-traumatisation or exploitation
- Informed consent: Participation must be based on clear, accessible information
- Confidentiality: Protect the privacy of all participants
- Recognition, not tokenism: Youth should be involved in decisions that matter, not just symbolic roles
- Compensation: Where possible, value time and input through fair stipends, recognition, or employment pathways

Ensure transparency in how programs are designed, evaluated, and funded — young people have the right to know who is shaping the spaces they're in.

Ethics in youth work is not an abstract concept — it is lived daily in how we speak, listen, invite, include, and hold space. Every session is an opportunity to model the kind of just, inclusive, and healing world we hope to build.



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4. Outreach and Engagement Strategies

Successfully engaging young people with lived experiences of detention, exclusion, or systemic marginalisation is not simply a matter of recruitment. It requires a relational, ethical, and flexible strategy built on trust, relevance, and presence. This section outlines actionable methods for practitioners seeking to move from contact to connection, and from invitation to inclusion.

4.1 Understanding Barriers to Participation

Youth in conflict with law or living in vulnerable conditions often face complex, overlapping barriers to participation, which can include:

- Structural barriers: lack of transportation, unstable housing, work or legal obligations
- Emotional barriers: anxiety, low self-confidence, fear of judgment
- Cultural barriers: negative experiences with schools, social services, or “training” programs
- Practical barriers: irregular phone access, digital illiteracy, caregiving responsibilities

Moreover, many youth carry internalised beliefs that they are “not the right kind of person” for development programs — a by-product of exclusion and stigma.

Facilitator Tip: Treat every barrier not as resistance, but as information. Your flexibility is often more important than their readiness.



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4.2 Mapping Stakeholders and Trusted Intermediaries

Young people are more likely to engage when they are invited by someone they trust. This is why mapping and collaborating with trusted intermediaries is critical.

Key intermediaries include:

- Social workers or case managers
- School support staff or dropout prevention teams
- Cultural mediators and peer mentors
- Former participants
- Community-based youth organisations or sports clubs

Work with them to:

- Identify potential participants
- Provide contextual information (without violating privacy)
- Serve as bridges in early contact
- Co-host informal introductory meetings

Strategic Tip: Use stakeholder mapping tools to assess influence, access, and trust levels. Prioritise relationships over outreach scale.



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4.3 Informal Communication: Using WhatsApp, Social Media, Peer Referrals

Outreach must reflect the real communication styles of your target group. Formal emails, applications, or PDF flyers are often ineffective. Instead:

- Use WhatsApp: Voice notes, short videos, memes, or location pins to reduce formality
- Leverage Instagram/TikTok: Short content introducing the team, the space, or the vibe of the program
- Activate peer referrals: Encourage already engaged youth to invite a friend and vouch for the project

Informality doesn't mean unprofessionalism. It means meeting young people where they are, on platforms they use, in tones they recognise.

Messaging Tip: Replace “apply now for this program” with “Let’s meet for a coffee and talk about a project that could use your experience.”



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4.4 Motivational Interviewing Techniques

When building first contact, how you listen is more important than what you offer. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a powerful approach developed for working with ambivalence, resistance, and fear of change.

Key MI techniques:

- Open-ended questions: “What would you like to change in your life right now?”
- Affirmation: “It takes courage to even think about trying this.”
- Reflective listening: “It sounds like you’re curious, but unsure about committing.”
- Summarising: “So you want to help others, but you’re afraid you’re not ready.”
- Elicit change talk: “What makes this opportunity worth exploring for you?”

Relational Tip: The goal is not to convince — it’s to understand what matters to them, and help them discover their own motivation.



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4.5 Entry Points: “First Contact” Models

The first contact is crucial. It sets the tone for the relationship and defines whether a young person feels invited or assessed.

Effective entry point formats:

- 1:1 informal meeting: at a café, park, youth center
- “No commitment” info sessions: facilitated by peers or former participants
- Co-designed orientation sessions: invite youth to shape the agenda
- Intro videos or welcome kits: featuring voices of young people, not staff

Avoid early paperwork, tests, or commitments. Offer trial sessions or open workshops before formal enrolment.

Practice Principle: First impressions are not about branding — they are about emotional safety and social accessibility.



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4.6 From Outreach to Belonging: Creating Continuity

True engagement begins after the first meeting. The objective is not just attendance — it is belonging.

Build continuity through:

- Consistent follow-up: gentle reminders, check-ins, and casual invitations
- Visible recognition: celebrate small steps (e.g., “You made it today — that matters.”)
- Flexible attendance: allow for breaks without judgment
- Multiple entry points: different ways to participate — art, discussion, logistics, peer support
- Peer anchoring: assign buddies or peer mentors early on

Engagement Strategy: Every drop-off is an opportunity to reinforce care. Every return is a victory. Measure engagement relationally, not just numerically.

Outreach is not a phase — it is a mindset. It requires humility, persistence, creativity, and care. Your role is not to bring young people “into your program,” but to build a shared space where they see themselves reflected, respected, and needed.



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5. Training Content Modules

The core training phase is structured into four distinct stages over two months, with each phase contributing to a coherent pathway of growth. This modular approach ensures a balance of reflection, learning, and application, fully aligned with European principles of non-formal education and youth empowerment.

5. First Contact: Orientation and Expectation Setting

Duration: 1 day

The initial meeting lays the foundation for the training experience. It introduces participants to the project, its transnational context, and the wider purpose of their involvement. This is not a selection process — it is an invitation into co-ownership and self-discovery.

Objectives:

- Build rapport and emotional safety
- Present the framework of the pilot project
- Clarify participant roles, expectations, and opportunities
- Activate curiosity and civic imagination

Agenda:

- Welcome and introductions
- Overview of the project, partners, and European context
- Introduction to Erasmus+ and European funding for youth
- First session on the role of the youth worker in socio-educational animation
- Detailed walkthrough of the full pilot journey (research, training, follow-up)



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5.2 Personal Research and Independent Exploration

Duration: 3 days

This brief research phase serves to stimulate ownership and active reflection. Participants are encouraged to begin exploring the youth worker profession from their own perspective and context.

Research Assignment:

Participants are asked to answer the following questions:

1. Who is a youth worker, and what do they do?
2. Where does a youth worker operate in Italy, and what is their typical compensation?

The goal is not academic rigor, but activation of critical inquiry — encouraging participants to take initiative and begin seeing themselves as potential contributors to this field.

Facilitator Tip: Frame this task not as homework, but as the first step toward shaping their role in society.



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5.3 Core Training Program

Duration: 6 consecutive days

Facilitators: 3 youth workers.

The six-day training constitutes the heart of the learning journey. Grounded in non-formal education methodology, the program is active, participatory, and responsive to group needs.

Topics Covered:

- European values and human rights
- Group dynamics and teamwork strategies
- Project planning and management
- Principles of non-formal education
- Inclusion and social reintegration
- Leadership and soft skills development

Daily Agenda Overview:

Days 1–2: Youth Work and Project Design

- Reflecting on research findings: “Who is the youth worker?”
- Introduction to project management basics: setting objectives, planning, implementation, and follow-up
- Activities: timeline games, resource mapping, and role-play of project delivery

Days 3–4: Inclusion, Teamwork, and Leadership

- Working in teams and managing differences
- Inclusion as a social re-education tool
- Leadership styles, emotional intelligence, and empathy
- Activities: trust-building exercises, storytelling pairs, simulation of inclusive sessions



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Days 5–6: Non-Formal Education and Final Reflection

- What is non-formal and informal learning?
- How to facilitate inclusive educational activities
- Drafting the group's final output: a co-written report on the role of the youth worker in Italy (Deliverable D3.1)
- Personal reflection on growth from initial expectations and fears

Throughout the six days, participants are supported to track their development through group reflection and journaling. The conclusion of the module includes a dedicated space to revisit the fears and expectations from Phase 1, fostering insight into their transformation.

5.4 Follow-Up: Job Shadowing and Project Leadership

Duration: 1 month

After the training, participants enter a real-world apprenticeship phase to observe and participate in daily youth work practices. This immersive experience consolidates learning and introduces participants to European-level project work.

Activities Include:

- Daily observation of planning, facilitation, and follow-up meetings
- Participation in international and local project logistics
- Reflection and dialogue with mentors
- Co-drafting of at least three European project proposals for submission to ANG



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Learning Goals:

- Reinforce training content through real practice
- Build confidence and routine in professional settings
- Develop tangible experience in youth work processes

5.5 Co-Design of Peer Workshop

As a capstone experience, participants will collaborate to design and deliver a workshop for 24 youth workers, with a focus on how to engage youth at risk of criminalisation as future leaders.

Structure:

Participants are divided into 3 teams of 3. Each group designs 1 day of a 3-day workshop.

Themes:

1. EU Values and Human Rights — relevance for youth facing extreme social marginalisation
2. Inclusion as Social Reintegration — methods for empowering excluded youth
3. Soft Skills for Youth Workers — communication, empathy, time management, adaptability

Outcomes:

- Develop leadership through facilitation
- Apply content knowledge in a real training context
- Create meaningful peer learning environments
- Reflect on personal growth and transformation through teaching others



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Let's Work Together

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