

# **Analysis Note: How Youth Workers Foster Inclusive International Mobility**



**Co-funded by  
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## ***Glossary***

- ❖ **Youth worker (YW):** an adult supporting young people’s development through non-formal education, guidance, and empowerment, often working in youth centers, NGOs, or educational settings.
- ❖ **Young People with Fewer Opportunities (YPFO):** According to Erasmus+, young people with fewer opportunities are those facing economic, social, cultural, geographical, health-related or educational obstacles.<sup>1</sup> These barriers limit their access to mobility opportunities.
- ❖ **European Solidarity Corps (ESC):** a program by the European Union that gives young people (18–30 years old) the chance to volunteer or work on projects that help communities in Europe.
- ❖ **Peer-to-Peer method:** an outreach approach where young people who have participated in mobility share their experiences to inspire and inform others.
- ❖ **International Mobility (IM):** refers, within the framework of the European Union’s policies on youth, education and training, to the act of a young person or learner physically travelling to a country other than their country of residence in order to study, train, volunteer, undertake a traineeship, participate in a youth exchange, or engage in non-formal learning activities.
- ❖ **Non-formal education:** learning that happens outside of the traditional classroom, often through workshops, projects, or youth exchanges—flexible, experience-based, and learner-centred.

## ***Introduction***

This analysis note summarises the conclusions of the focus groups organised between March, April and May 2025 by the project partners as part of the *Skip the Barriers of International Mobility* (SBIM) project. The project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme, aims to facilitate international mobility for all young people, including young people with fewer opportunities (YPFOs).

A total of 50 youth workers took part in the focus group sessions across the different partner countries (Belgium, France, North Macedonia). Each partner produced an analysis note on its national findings, which were then consolidated to provide this European-level perspective. The purpose of these focus groups was to gather insights on how youth workers (YW) promote international mobility opportunities for young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). Discussions focused on the challenges youth workers encounter, the support mechanisms and tools they use, and their recommendations for improving the accompaniment of young people.

It is also important to underline why this analysis note matters for youth work practitioners. The document brings together insights from the daily experiences of youth workers in different countries and translates them into clear, practical recommendations. Its purpose is to help practitioners strengthen the way they inform, prepare and support all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, when exploring international mobility options.

This analysis note contributes to one of the project's main objectives: raising awareness about international mobility among youth workers, while also serving as a basis for developing tools adapted to their needs. These tools aim to better equip youth workers when engaging with all young people, and in particular to respond to the specific needs of YPFO as identified through the perceptions of youth workers themselves.

## **Methodology**

### **Target Audience:**

Focus groups were conducted with a total of 50 youth workers – professionals engaged in non-formal education who support young people’s personal, socio-educational, and professional development. Focus groups were chosen as they provide the chance to gather qualitative, in-depth insights into the practices and challenges of youth workers. The sessions were held in a mixed format, with some conducted online, and others taking place in person to allow for flexibility and broader participation across contexts. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a common discussion guide, structured around three themes. To maintain consistency in both facilitation and data collection, partners were advised to designate a moderator responsible for guiding the discussion and ensuring balanced participation, as well as a note-taker tasked with accurately documenting key points, reflections, and examples shared by participants. This division of roles helped ensure both the quality of the dialogue and the reliability of the data collected.

Following the sessions, each partner produced a national analysis note summarising the main findings, trends, and illustrative examples emerging from their focus groups. These national contributions were subsequently reviewed and synthesised, forming the basis for a consolidated European-level analysis that highlights common patterns, challenges, and opportunities related to inclusive international mobility in youth work. This method ensured comparability across the sessions while fostering collective reflection and exchange of experiences. It also allowed the project to capture both shared challenges and context-specific needs, strengthening the relevance of the findings for supporting young people with fewer opportunities.

### **Key Discussion Themes:**

The sessions were structured around three main themes (Please find the questions in Annex 1), with each theme explored for approximately 20 minutes.

The first theme focused on **experiences and challenges**, examining the obstacles faced by YWs in promoting mobility opportunities that are accessible and inclusive and the young people they support in taking part in such opportunities. The second theme addressed **tools and methods for promoting mobility**, identifying the resources YWs currently use and the gaps that need to be filled. The final theme gathered **feedback on the project’s tools**, exploring how these tools could be designed to better meet the needs of YWs and the young people they assist.

### **Data Collection Process:**

Information was gathered through notes taken during the sessions, audio recordings, and analytical summaries prepared by each partner. While the discussion topics remained consistent, the depth and focus varied, reflecting the diversity of participants in terms of age, experience, and geographical background of countries, such as France, Belgium, Greece, and North Macedonia. This diversity provided a broad, comparative perspective on the practices and needs of YWs.

# ***Theme 1: Youth Workers' Understanding and Professional Practices***

## **Youth Workers' Understanding of YPFO's perceptions**


Across the various partners involved, there is a shared understanding that international mobility represents a powerful tool for personal growth and empowerment, particularly for young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). Youth workers consistently described international mobility as more than a travel experience – it is an essential right and a transformative opportunity that can foster self-confidence, intercultural competence, and active citizenship. As Informant 1 phrased it, it is “the most powerful self-development tool we can offer to a young person who has never been allowed to dream beyond their neighborhood.”


However, despite these positive perceptions, many YPFO remain unaware of or disconnected from these opportunities, often perceiving them as reserved for “white middle-class students,” as noted by several Informants or exclusively accessible for “young scholars with proficient skills”.

The lack of representation and relatable role models in their immediate environment reinforces the belief that “these opportunities are not for them.” This perception is amplified by confusing programme branding (such as Erasmus vs. Erasmus+), institutional barriers, and systemic racism in schools, and a broader lack of mobility culture within families and communities.

## **Key Challenges faced by Young People with Fewer Opportunities**

Youth workers across different countries identified five main categories of barriers faced by YPFO when engaging with international mobility: administrative, psychological, socio-economic, cultural and geographical.

 Administrative barriers include missing documents, visa delays, unclear legal status, or lack of parental consent. One example involved a young participant forced to cancel his ESC placement because his residence permit expired a week before departure.

 Psychological obstacles such as anxiety, lack of confidence, trauma, and fear of leaving familiar environments are widespread, sometimes causing last-minute dropouts, or what Informant 2 termed “invisible paralysis,” where participants commit to a project but freeze at the last moment.



Socio-economic constraints remain a major issue, with many young people needing to prioritise jobs or family responsibilities over travel. Financial insecurity, travel costs, or delays in reimbursement can discourage participation. As Informant 3 stated: “Sometimes, for example, even though travel is reimbursed, it’s too much to buy the tickets in advance, and usually it takes about 3 months, some 90 days to sometimes to get reimbursement for the money they spend.”



Culturally, youth from migrant or conservative backgrounds face additional resistance from their families, who may see international travel as unsafe, especially for young women. Informant 4 remarked: “Coming from an underrepresented community also means you probably need to work harder, as many don’t see the value in international mobility.”



Geographical barriers add another layer of exclusion, particularly for young people in rural or isolated areas. Limited transport, fewer local networks, and logistical challenges make it harder for them to access opportunities. As Informant 5 observed: “If we organise events in the capital, it is harder to reach communities beyond the city, like in rural areas. But to go there you need more resources—research, money, time.”

Several youth workers also pointed to structural racism and the eurocentric framing of programmes that ignore diverse cultural and religious needs, contributing to feelings of exclusion among YPFO. Additionally, some organisations remain reluctant to include highly complex or fragile profiles, preferring to involve participants with fewer challenges, as noted by Informant 6: “They want YPFO, but not too YPFO.”

## Support Structures and Modalities

### → *Adapting Support for International Youth Mobility*

Youth workers across Europe recognise that international mobility cannot be approached with a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, they emphasise the need for flexible, individualized support that adapts to each person’s unique needs. Some prioritize one-on-one guidance over group activities, while others focus on short-term rather than long-term support—or vice versa. There is no single “perfect” approach, but rather a spectrum of adaptable strategies.

A key priority for youth workers is building trusting, comfortable relationships with participants. Many provide long-term support, often starting months before mobility begins. This can include regular one-on-one meetings, informal check-ins via WhatsApp, and ongoing assistance even after the experience ends. As Informant 7

explained: “We provide monthly meetings, daily support, and follow-up. We try to create a safe space where participants feel their experience is valuable.”

While individual support is widely favored, some organisations also value collective approaches. For example, French associations like Espoir 18, Mission Locale Lille Avenir, and l'ADICE organize group information sessions or collective departures. Similarly, Connect Brussels' participants use peer-learning activities to foster motivation and social cohesion. These group settings often serve as a first step in helping participants see themselves as “worthy” or “capable” of international mobility.

#### → **Collaborative Support Networks**

In complex cases, youth workers collaborate with other professionals, such as local youth centers, psychologists, social workers or host organisations, to provide comprehensive support. Informant 8 shared: “The young person was sent to a partner I knew who had a psychologist on their team. That helps quite a lot.”

Mentoring is another critical tool. Informant 9 noted: “It is very important to have a mentor during your experience. Monthly meetings help share concerns and feel supported.” Alumni can also act as mentors, offering peer-to-peer guidance and trust. Initiatives like [Mobility Ambassadors](#) exemplify this practice.

#### → **Engaging Families and Local Partners**

Family involvement is essential, especially in conservative or migrant communities where parents or relatives may act as gatekeepers. Informant 10 stressed the importance of engaging families early to address skepticism. As Informant 11 explained: “Parents might have reservations about sending their children abroad. We need to reassure them about safety and the value of the programs.” Sometimes, resistance comes from extended family. Informant 12 noted: “Sometimes it's not the youth—it's the uncle or the big brother who blocks everything. We need someone neutral to explain that going to another country for a project is not ‘becoming Western’.”

Local institutions and partners also play a practical role. Youth workers often assist with visa processes, document preparation, and eligibility issues. They collaborate with embassies, guide families, and work with local partners to provide culturally relevant support. Informant 13 highlighted: “Without the hosting partners, the experience would be much more difficult to manage from afar. They are our eyes and ears on the ground.”

## ***Theme 2: Practices and Mobility Schemes Used***

### **Diversifying Pathways into Mobility**

Across Europe, youth workers have developed a wide range of mobility schemes to respond to the heterogeneous realities of young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). The traditional long-term individual mobility is no longer the dominant model. Instead, organisations experiment with short-term, group-based, or blended formats, aiming to make mobility experiences more inclusive and less intimidating.

Several organisations rely on collective mobility projects, where a small group of young people travel together under the guidance of a youth worker. Informant 23 explained: “Group mobilities make a real difference, they reduce anxiety and build a team spirit before departure.” This format also helps maintain motivation and simplifies logistics for participants who may face administrative or emotional barriers.

Short-term experiences, such as youth exchanges or preparatory visits, serve as “first-step” mobilities that build confidence. Informant 24 noted: “It’s better to start with five days abroad than to plan six months and lose them at the last minute.” These shorter stays often act as a bridge toward longer or more independent experiences, including the European Solidarity Corps (ESC).

### **Adapting Mobility Frameworks to Participants’ Needs**

Youth workers emphasised that flexibility is essential when designing mobility schemes. Programmes are often tailor-made to accommodate participants’ social and personal contexts, for example, by adjusting duration, travel distance, or learning objectives.

Some organisations have integrated local or national mobility opportunities as stepping stones for international projects. Informant 25 described: “We started with local volunteering, cleaning a park, helping a food bank, then connected that to an European Solidarity Corps project abroad.” This progressive approach allows young people to experience civic engagement and teamwork before facing intercultural adaptation.

Digital and hybrid formats are also gaining ground. Since the pandemic, youth organisations have developed virtual exchanges, online preparation sessions, and follow-up meetings to sustain engagement. As Informant 26 explained: “We use online tools not as a replacement, but as a bridge, to make the world less foreign before they even travel.”

## **Peer Mentoring and Community-Based Practices**

A cornerstone of inclusive mobility practice is peer mentoring. Many organisations engage former participants as “Mobility Ambassadors” or peer coaches to support newcomers before, during, and after the experience. Informant 27 reflected: “When alumni share their fears and successes, it normalises the process, it tells others: ‘You can do it too.’”

These mentors often participate in information sessions, produce digital testimonials, or accompany groups abroad. Their proximity in age, language, and social background helps dismantle stereotypes that mobility is only “for others.” Associations like Connect Brussels and Eurocircle Marseille have formalised these roles through training and peer-network coordination.

In addition, many practitioners rely on local intermediaries: community educators, social workers, or family mediators, to ensure cultural and social alignment between the mobility offered and participants’ realities. Informant 28 summarised: “You need someone who speaks both worlds, the local and the European one.”

## **Collaborative Networks and Cross-Sectoral Practices**

Effective mobility schemes rarely operate in isolation. Partnerships between sending organisations, schools, local authorities, and host structures are vital for continuity and safety. Informant 29 explained: “Without strong partners abroad, the experience would be too heavy to manage, they are our eyes and ears on the ground.”

Some youth workers have also established cross-sectoral collaborations with psychologists, social services, or cultural associations to provide holistic support. This multidisciplinary approach is particularly valuable for young people facing complex socio-emotional situations.

Financially, organisations often combine Erasmus+ and ESC resources with local or private funding to cover upfront costs or emergency expenses. Informant 30 observed: “Sometimes the difference between someone going or not going is just 100 euros for a passport or a train ticket.”

## **Towards Sustainable and Empowering Practices**

Beyond access, many youth workers seek to ensure that mobility experiences have long-term impact. Post-return activities including exhibitions, community events, peer presentations, help participants transform their experiences into collective narratives. Informant 31 said: “We ask them to share their story, not as a report, but as a way to inspire the next ones.”

This emphasis on reinvestment turns individual mobility into community empowerment. By sharing experiences publicly, participants become active role models and reinforce a culture of mobility in their local environments.

## ***Theme 3: Resources and Tools - Strengths and Caps***

Across all partner countries, youth workers highlighted that resources and tools for promoting IM exist in significant numbers, yet are rarely aligned with the lived realities of young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). The discussions revealed a dual landscape: on one hand, strong human and digital practices that support motivation and access; on the other, systemic gaps in accessibility, language, format, and outreach. As one participant summarised, “The issue is not the tools, but convincing the young people of their value” (Informant 12).

This theme therefore examines three key dimensions:

- 1.** The strengths/functionality of existing mobility tools;
- 2.** The gaps and unmet needs identified by youth workers;
- 3.** The role of professionals in shaping digital mobility pathways.

### **Strengths in Existing Tools and Resources**

#### **→ Human support as the core resource**

Across all countries, youth workers identified human relationships, trust, presence, and informal guidance, as the strongest and most reliable “tool” in supporting YPFO toward mobility. Commitment, empathy, and flexibility were repeatedly described as the elements that sustain motivation and prevent dropout.

As one youth worker put it, “These are not people who followed specialised training; what matters is that we all share the same mentality and genuinely empathise with youngsters” (Informant 9). Trust-building, active listening, and informal conversations were consistently presented as prerequisites for any tool to work.

Peer-to-peer support was equally central. Returnees often serve as “mobility ambassadors,” providing relatable insight and other young people from the start, they feel more reassured. They need someone who has lived the experience to answer the simple but important questions” (Informant 10). This mirrors practices such as the “Travelmate” model in Reims, where previous participants guide newcomers by addressing concerns about daily life abroad, safety, or discrimination.

### → **Digital and institutional platforms as structural supports**

Youth workers also pointed to a series of institutional digital tools that provide databases, Eurodesk, SALTO, and National Agency websites. These platforms act as reference points for programme details, deadlines, and learning materials.

Organisations commonly use practical tools such as step-by-step guides, pre-departure checklists, infopacks, WhatsApp groups for daily communication, mobility apps, and mobility corners for on-site information.

### → **Collaborative ecosystems**

A major strength mentioned in all focus groups was the intertwined system that connects youth workers, local institutions, and international partners. These partnerships make it easier to find host organizations, share experiences, and provide support for participants with complex profiles. *"You need someone who speaks both worlds, the local one and the European one"* (Informant 28).

Cooperation also extends to family and community engagement. Several examples showed that trust is built collectively; youth workers, parents, and previous participants work together to make mobility a shared experience. This approach is seen as one of the most effective "tools" for inclusion.

## **Gaps and Needs for New Tools**

Despite the strengths described above, youth workers unanimously expressed that existing tools remain poorly adapted, fragmented, and often designed with institutional frames instead of youth realities.

### → **Need for gamified, interactive and youth-led tools**

A recurring theme was the absence of dynamic learning tools. Many young people struggle with literacy, concentration, or academic confidence, making text-heavy brochures or videos ineffective. *"Imagine a mobile game where you pick a country, navigate social scenarios, and earn points... That's how they'll learn, not by being handed a ten-page PDF"* (Informant 10).

Gamified applications, interactive quizzes, "Choose your journey" storylines, and Discord communities were frequently mentioned as examples of youth-aligned formats. Youth workers stressed that young people are more likely to engage with humorous reminders, vibrant and minimalistic visuals, memes, and short-form video formats inspired by platforms like TikTok and Duolingo.

### → **Lack of outreach tools for “going towards” youth**

Several participants insisted that tools must follow a “going towards” approach, bringing mobility information into streets, parks, sports, youth centres, community cafés, and local missions. *“These youths aren’t coming to us to ask about Erasmus—we go to them”* (Informant 2).

Youth Workers highlighted the need for mobile-friendly infographics, pocket-sized visual booklets, audio clips, and short videos formatted for Instagram Reels or Stories. Importantly, this is not only a matter of translation: *“Institutional words scare them off”* (Informant 2). Tone, format, and medium must reflect youth culture.

### **Feedback on the International Mobility Toolkit and the Digital International Mobility Pathway**

Youth workers were presented with the conceptual structures of the two following tools:

- the IM Toolkit: a set of resources (key information, visuals, and facilitation tips) to help youth workers promote international mobility.
- the Digital IM Pathway: an interactive online tool that guides users in discovering international mobility opportunities through a learning-by-doing approach.

They reacted positively to both, but consistently emphasised the need for them to be **visually engaging, mobile-first, and co-created with youth. Please find below some of the features they proposed to include :**

#### **Regarding the IM toolkit, youth workers welcomed:**

- checklists and practical steps
- a “what to say” section to families and schools
- visual, multilingual outreach tool
- a glossary with simplified vocabulary
- storytelling and testimonials
- activities involving peer ambassadors
- FAQs and concrete examples

#### **Regarding the Digital IM Pathway, YWs appreciated features such as:**

- filtering by age or programme type
- “chat with a mentor”
- an interactive map of opportunities
- localised information and contacts
- centralised and user-friendly resource hub
- a single online platform collecting validated materials, translated resources, and examples of good practices from different countries
- “an interactive map with filters and real-life stories would be ideal” (informant 8)

→ **Concerns: readability, overload, and relevance**

Despite this positive reception, many warned against text-heavy content: “If it looks and feels like homework, they won’t engage” (Informant 4).

Youth workers stressed that most YPFO rely exclusively on phones, not laptops. Tools must therefore be lightweight, intuitive, and visually oriented. “A quiz is fun once, but not four times” (Informant 7); engagement must remain varied and stimulating.

→ **Participatory processes and co-development with youth**

Youth workers insisted that YPFO must directly shape the toolkit to ensure authenticity. “It needs to feel like Instagram, not like an administration” (Informant 8).

Youth workers felt that co-creating parts of the Toolkit with young people who have already participated in international mobility would ensure more authentic language, examples, and peer-level advice that feels real.

→ **Human contact remains essential**

Participants consistently stated that digital tools require human accompaniment to work effectively.

*“Even if you are promoting a website, you still need in-person activities and info sessions”* (Informant 8).

*“There needs to be human support – tested, adapted, evaluated”* (Informant 5).

One participant highlighted that the section dedicated to trust-building and emotional safety *“reflects real needs when working with vulnerable youth”* (Informant 7).

## **CONCLUSION**

This analysis note synthesises the key insights from focus groups conducted as part of the SBIM project, focusing on the challenges, practices, and tools related to international mobility for young people with fewer opportunities. While not all findings could be included, the most relevant and actionable perspectives have been selected to structure this reflection around three core themes: understanding barriers, adapting support practices, and improving already existing tools.

This note is primarily intended for youth workers, whose invaluable feedback has directly shaped the project's tools, particularly the International Mobility Toolkit, which for instance includes a dedicated "Outreach" section with strategies on how to reach out to young people with fewer opportunities to better address the needs identified.

We truly hope this note analysis will not only raise awareness among youth workers and stakeholders, but also inspire further action to make international mobility more accessible.

## **Acknowledgments**

We extend our deepest gratitude to all the youth workers, organizations, and participants who contributed their time, expertise, and honest reflections during the focus groups. Their commitment to supporting young people with fewer opportunities is the foundation of this work. To respect their privacy and the confidentiality of their contributions, individual organisations are not named. This project would not have been possible without their dedication, insights, and willingness to share both their challenges and innovative solutions.

## **Annex:**


### **Recommendations for youth workers**

- R1.** Extend preparation timelines and maintain support after mobility .
- R2.** Build trust and emotional safety before promoting mobility.
- R3.** Involve families, caregivers and community members early and meaningfully.
- R4.** Leverage returnees and create peer support systems.
- R5.** Use simple, visual, and multilingual communication.
- R6.** Tailor strategies to individual needs and aspirations.
- R7.** Introduce gamified and mobile-first resources
- R8.** Use diagnostic tools to assess readiness and prevent burnout.
- R9.** Advocate for systemic flexibility and funding support.
- R10.** Be a cultural translator- bridge institutional language and youth realities.
- R11.** Invest in long-term preparation, not just placement.
- R12.** Maintain authenticity and grounded approaches.
- R13.** Collaborating with other grassroots actors to whom the youth already has a special connection.
- R14.** Leverage platforms that are already widely used by young people to communicate, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, for outreach.
- R15.** Role of interconnectivity in sharing the information.


## Further voices from the field

Find below some further observations by the participants of the focus groups.


“Some of them agree to everything just to please us, but deep down they are scared. We need tools that help us read between the lines.”

– Informant 8 


“Mobility shouldn’t be a reward for the brave. It should be a right with a path.”

– Informant 1 


“It’s not just about getting them there. It’s about preparing them to come back whole.”

– Informant 2 


“We cannot become part of the pressure. We have to stay part of the solution. Even when that means saying no to a deadline.”

– Informant 6 


“We asked them to draw what they think happens when someone gets off the plane. Most drew fear and confusion. Then they watched a returnee’s video. They drew hope next.”

– Informant 7 


“Sometimes I have to think more like a DJ than a social worker. That is how I reach them.”

– Informant 3 


“Mobility is not a vacation. It’s a way to grow and learn.”

– Informant 11 


“Before we talk about visas or flights, we need to talk about fear, identity, and belonging. That is where the work starts.”

– Informant 4 

“They don’t see themselves in the brochures. So we stopped using brochures.”

– Informant 5 

“Digital mobility is not Zoom. It is about dance battles, gaming, and stories across countries. It has to feel alive.”

– Informant 9 

“The problem is not just money, it’s fear. Many don’t believe they can do it.”

– Informant 10 