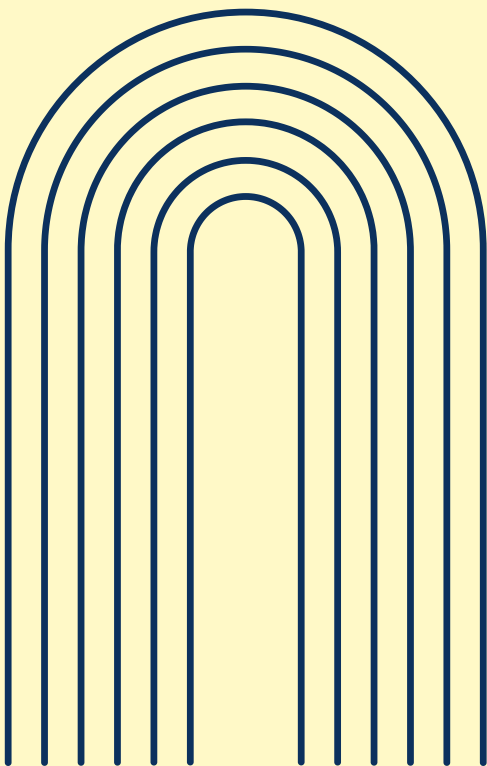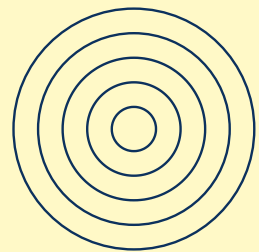# T.A.L.E Research Report on Perceptions of Vulnerability

Summary & analysis of Interviews with Empowered Youth Representatives and Youth workers in Norway and Croatia

Dkolektiv

LØVETANN AKADEMIET

Erasmus+

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Introduction and Methodology:

This research aimed to analyze the current practices and needs for supporting organisations and experts working with vulnerable youth. We wanted to get an enhanced understanding of how vulnerability is perceived among the youth from these groups and understand and address the needs of vulnerable groups in partner countries, with a focus on empowering young people and shifting community perceptions.

The data collection was conducted through individual interviews, enabling participants to share their experiences in a confidential setting. We interviewed 5 representatives from organisations working with vulnerable youth groups in each partner country, and 10 young individuals, who are representatives of vulnerable groups in each country.

The data from the interviews is analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves coding the transcriptions and identifying common themes related to the empowerment of vulnerable youth and the perception of their vulnerability. We have then synthesized the findings to identify effective models for sharing personal stories of vulnerable youth. Additionally, we have selected compelling stories to be featured within the TALE curriculum and platform.

We would like to thank all the young people and youth workers who have shared their perspectives and stories with us**.**

Findings:

1. Perceptions of Vulnerability

This first section explores how participants understand the current issues facing young people and how they perceive the concept of vulnerable youth.

1.1 Current challenges that vulnerable young people face

When asked to discuss the challenges that vulnerable young people face, the answers from youth workers were highly varied, encompassing the diverse areas of expertise represented in the study, this included reflections of difficulties for LGBTQ+, NEET, Roma, refugees, and varied ethnic minority youth.

In addition to insights into the barriers and challenges that young people face, the responses from participants also revealed how youth workers understand and construct the concept of vulnerability themselves.

Some key themes that came up within discussions of societal context and challenges for young people:

Youth workers:

- Discrimination, including experiences of invisibility and violence
- Difficulties specific to young ethnic minorities - cultural differences, language learning, differential treatment, and racism
- Family struggles - including topics such as care responsibilities, lack of parental support, financial problems
- Mental health and self-confidence - this included discussions of trauma and difficulties with individuals taking on a victim role
- Problems with seeking employment - accessing jobs without work experience, difficulties thriving in educational settings, and knowledge of workers' rights
- Navigating structural inequalities - state processes, education, health care, difficulties with unfair bureaucratic processes
- Youth is a diverse and disadvantaged group within society
- High expectations

"I would also say vulnerability in the context of how the system made them vulnerable. These are not the people who came here any more vulnerable if we put this trauma aside, but somehow the system has made them such that they are treated… unequally, thus making them marginalised… the system made them so, society somehow distanced them from young people with a refugee past, so in that way, it somehow made them vulnerable"

- Youth worker, Croatia

"Young LGBT people are primarily exposed to a fairly high percentage of violence and discrimination… 4% of young people are open about who they are in our schools, which actually tells us how insecure they really feel and don't have the necessary support, and that's that kind of segment of the feeling of insecurity due to one's identity is very pronounced."

- Youth worker, Croatia

"I think that we should work on some additional education to understand that young people are not one homogeneous group, but when we work with young people we should keep in mind that they have different identities, that we need to create a safe space"

- Youth worker, Croatia

T.A.L.E. Reflections:

- Vulnerability was seen to impact youth differently depending on their position within society. For example for LGBTQ+ young people, discussions focused most on difficulties within the family and social settings such as schools whereas refugee and ethnic minority youth were seen to face financial difficulties as well as problems with bureaucratic systems and structural discrimination.
- Within the Croatian interviews, there was a large focus on the issues within the country's education system and a perceived lack of support for particular young people or education that could create a more culturally inclusive society.
- Challenges were perceived at the macro and micro level with some professionals pointing out more structural or systemic issues while others focused on the need for attitude shifts within families or young people themselves.
- There was therefore discussion of the limitations and benefits of the types of youth work practices that organisations used. If issues existed on a community, structural, or legal level, work that was focused on supporting individual young people would always be battling with the same problems.
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To understand how young people understood their own experiences and that of other marginalised youth, young people were asked to define vulnerability.

Some key themes included:
- Intolerance: discrimination, violence, stereotypes, prejudice
- Societal sympathy: some marginalised groups were seen to garner sympathy from communities
- Bullying: this included personal experiences for several participants while at school
- Ultra-conservatism and religion were mentioned
- Lack of rights and discriminatory systems
- Isolation, disownment - some participants talked about their personal struggles in feeling like they didn't belong to a community or nation
- Hyper-focus on identity labels and not seeing young people as multifaceted

"They are not interested in my studies, but they are (only) interested in my life because I live in a Roma settlement."
- Young person, Croatia

"...sometimes you have to be in that situation to really understand the whole picture. Those who are supposed to help don't always understand or have empathy and experience, like those who have been in the situation themselves."
- Young person, Norway

"...what I experienced was really more verbal violence. Maybe not so much directly addressed to me, but collectively to my minority identity."
- Young person, Croatia

"I have been afraid sometimes, how in a way, people take it, if you are a little open, about what the situation in your life is like. It's like sometimes I've been a little afraid to talk about it because I'm a little afraid of what they really think, or that they judge or something like that."
- Young person, Norway

T.A.L.E. Reflections:

In contrast to the youth workers, some of the young people struggled to talk about the wider societal contexts of perceptions of vulnerability. Most talked about their own small-scale, personal, lived experiences whether within friendship circles or school contexts. However, some young people discussed a need for critical thinking education and safer public spaces and discussed more national and local level problems.

1.2 Suggestions for improving societal perceptions:

Young people were asked about their solutions to societal perceptions of vulnerable youth Some key suggestions:

- Story sharing and the need for varied perspectives
- Inclusive teaching within formal education
- Informal education/activities
- Changes in state policy /educational reform - some talked about the need for young people to be part of the conversation and involved in policy decision-making
- The need for everyone to develop better critical thinking skills and media literacy
- Safer public spaces
- Stop the sensationalization of issues in the news
- Advertising youth events through more official channels
- Teaching more empathy and understanding of other people's reality

"I believe that it is important not to put so much emphasis on theoretical frameworks for improving the position as on practical steps to include young people outside of their circles"

- Young person, Croatia

"The best way to meet me: People should listen more before they start telling you what you should do. That they actually see you as a person, and not just think that because you are here, this and that are the difficulties and you are like this and that. But that I can define what the problem is."

- Young person, Norway

"…increasing the activities within the city, within non-governmental organisations… because even when there are some activities that are specifically aimed at young people (they) … do not get this information."

- Young person, Croatia

T.A.L.E Reflections:

- In the Croatian context most of the responses from young people when asked for solutions to perceptions of vulnerability centred around changing narratives in some way. Whether this was through sharing personal stories, changing the media representation of minority groups, or shifting the perspectives of others through inclusive critical thinking education. This potentially shows an agreement with the premise of the project's focus on story sharing as a tool to change narratives of vulnerability.
- In the Norwegian context, most young people talked about the need to create a space where different people can share their stories and not be judged. Empathy for one another was a keyword.

1.3 Differences and Similarities Between the Two Countries

There was a large overlap in barriers and challenges discussed within both the Croatian and Norwegian contexts for example language learning, parental involvement, and struggles in finding employment. However, there were many examples of more country-specific issues. For some participants within the Norwegian context, vulnerability was perceived as a common but vague concept and there was some discussion about the ways that attention to an issue does not always create relevant and beneficial action to address it.

"Education and awareness can go a long way. Maybe having community events, school programs, or local media stories that highlight different young people's experiences and successes could help. It's important for people to see us as individuals with potential, not just as our circumstances or challenges. Workshops or meetings where people share their stories in a supportive environment could also help everyone understand each other better. These kinds of efforts could build empathy and make our community more inclusive and supportive of people like me. Hehe, it sounds weird, but That's what I think.."

Young person, Norway

T.A.L.E Reflections:

- T.A.L.E Reflections: In the Croatian interviews, there was less discussion of the issues with the term vulnerability with more immediate concern given to the lived experiences of discrimination and disadvantage of particular youth. For several youth workers in Norway, vulnerability was synonymous with specific groups, particularly ethnic minorities. This may be because of the areas of work that certain participants were involved in but it may also be related to a racialization of the concept of vulnerability that may create assumptions based on ethnic background.

2. Current practices

To gain a better understanding of what successful empowerment youth work looks like and what resources are needed to support it, we talked to participants about their experiences with previous and current youth projects.

2.1 Examples of Current Practice:

Youth workers were asked to explain their work and the practices they felt were most beneficial. Young people were also asked to talk about activities or projects that they were involved in, where the focus was on empowerment and what they had gained from being involved.

Youth workers gave examples of their current practices including success stories
- Support through education, training, and employment
- Mentoring, self-advocacy work, and youth leadership
- Mental health support
- Cooperation with other organisations
- Creation of safe spaces and activities Integration (support in understanding rules and laws)
- Staff training

"Design Thinking. Creating frameworks for young people where they can develop their own strategies to solve their problems creates ownership and motivation."
- Youth worker, Norway

"…we work on cooperation because no teacher can know everything and one civil society association cannot always have all the resources, and sources. But then I think that cross-sector cooperation is important in order to reach the vulnerability of young people as best as possible"
- Youth worker, Croatia

"Time Givers: One of our most important resources is our volunteer time givers. Spending time with a time giver creates a sense of safety that is necessary when trying out new things, and building "a desired life". Meeting new people can help to further develop an individual's personal identity and self-understanding allowing participants to see themselves in a new light."

- Youth worker, Norway

"… we had a meeting with three people, two of them with refugee status, and one with foreign student status… We held a meeting about the difficulties in higher education where they presented their stories and the obstacles they encountered and representatives of the Ministry of Education, universities, and different faculties were also present there… a long-term activity that we do in the direction of empowering people to advocate for themselves"

- Youth worker, Croatia

Young people were asked about the types of programs that they had been a part of and the ways that they benefited from these:

- Development of communication and interpersonal skills, including conflict management
- Cultural exchanges - meeting others from similar and different backgrounds
- Mental health/ distraction - attending events and activities that helped to distract them from difficult circumstances or offered psychological support
- Critical thinking training - help to navigate political issues and media
- Having someone who listens, understands, supports, and gives constructive feedback
- Opportunities for activism, volunteering, and ownership of projects
- Safe spaces and opportunities to connect with others
- Educational activities: art therapy, short courses, stem workshop
- Importance of mentors and peer-to-peer support
- Feeling less alone, by being a part of a community with others in the same situation

"The content of these activities was sometimes directly related to empowerment, and sometimes, although not at first, by gaining new knowledge, experience and acquaintances"

- Young person, in Croatia

"Being involved in an organisation that supports young people with care experience has been a transformative part of my journey. It's not just about finding a community of people who understand what I've been through, but also about channeling my experiences into something positive."

- Young person, Norway

"... my mentor helped me the most because she showed how much she believed in me... I believed in my ambitions. My mentor helped me a lot with the realisation of that project... she always gave me some freedom, and she never imposed her ideas. She knew I had an idea, I just had to get it out there... she highly praised that idea and then I myself started to believe that this idea was very good... it helped me a lot to increase my self-confidence"

- Young Person, Croatia

"...my mentor is the only one who for the first time involved me in something that is not strictly related to the Roma community."

- Young Person, Croatia

T.A.L.E Reflections:

- The responses from participants showed the wide variety of approaches to youth work from both the projects and activities organized by youth workers to those experienced by young people.
- Youth workers also included the importance of activities that happen more in the background such as administrative practices, training, and cooperation with other organisations as central to keeping programs running.

- Many young people highlighted the extra benefits of social activities, especially in terms
of soft skills such as self-confidence and communication.
- Feedback was generally very positive from young people about particular projects that had helped them. Those who felt they had gained something from empowerment programs focused on activities where their voice was heard and where they were able to be an active participant.
- There was a common theme of increasing involvement for several young people and this was mentioned by some youth workers. Several said they had first become involved in empowerment projects after attending a more informal social offer and that this progressed into being involved in more skills development training and later volunteering/ advocacy work.

2.2 Areas of improvement

Although there was lots of positive feedback on successful projects from many participants, there were many areas where youth workers and young people felt they needed more support.

Youth workers were asked what kinds of support they needed to better assist vulnerable youth. Key themes:
- More stable financial support
- Training for staff on specific experiences of vulnerable groups
- A need for systemic and societal change
- Mental health support both for young people and youth workers
- Better cooperation between the state and nonprofit sector
- Anti-violence programs Empowerment programmes and change on an individual level as one aspect of a broader picture

"...we have a document, the National Program for Youth, 2023... (it) prescribes some goals for the next period, but it's written as if the youth are one body... and it seems that all young people have the same needs. And I think it is important ... that public policy work ... includes and recognizes vulnerable groups.. young people (who) have different identities not only in terms of sexuality but also some other things, people with disabilities, young people with developmental difficulties... There should be parallel work on changing public policies. That they are more inclusive."

- Youth worker, Croatia

"I think that often when people migrate here, a lot of emphasis is placed on what they should do, and that's why I'm trying to break that certain narrative, I think that the first things that should be done is to touch those systemic obstacles, because only then are we on to that one, I mean similar starting points and then we can only talk about the general empowerment of young people with a refugee past in the context of empowering all young people."

- Youth worker, Croatia

"We might actually benefit from some education and better information about exactly that and the specifics of working with young people. I believe that the associations that are specialised in this have that knowledge, and on the other hand, maybe those associations do not have as much knowledge about working with members of vulnerable groups, as, say, we have some kind of greater knowledge in working with people from different cultural areas, languages, and so on."

- Youth worker, Croatia

Young people were asked if there was any kind of support that they wished they had access to. Key themes:
- Education that was supportive and relevant
- More spaces where cultural exchanges could take place
- Creation of safe spaces for dialog, and regular social events for those with diverse identities
- Mental health support
- Opportunities to find community and be an active citizen
- Job opportunities for youth
- LGBT-specific support such as workshops, trans healthcare, self-love, sex, and relationships

"Somehow I was able to come to terms with the fact that for real change it is necessary to start from scratch every time, building in accordance with the needs of the group that needs that change."

- Young person, Croatia

" …Meeting others with the same background that have made it or are successful adults. That really motivated me to keep going and become a role model myself. "

- Young person, Norway

"Maybe more communication with young people, that somehow adults share their experiences with young people and that different groups of young people come and talk to each other, simple communication in an informal form that we have some groups because currently I think that most young people do not feel safe in a community, they have some complexes and think that no one will understand, so they keep silent about some problems."

- Young person, Croatia

T.A.L.E Reflections:
- Some participants emphasized the importance of a varied approach to challenges faced by young people that doesn't purely focus on changing young people but also involves advocacy work, and broader societal change.
- Some participants emphasized the importance of a varied approach to challenges faced by young people that doesn't purely focus on changing young people but also involves advocacy work, and broader societal change.
- Financial support was a key aspect of many responses from youth worker participants.
- Several examples of short-term projects were given where funding had stopped but there had been a need to keep it going in some form.
- A need for more mental health support was a recurring theme both in the interviews with youth workers and young people.
- Interestingly the requests of some young people for certain workshops or support was the lived experience of others within the empowerment programmes they were a part of.
  - Eg. mental health support, opportunities to find community, creation of safe spaces, etc. This shows that certain youth work is offering the support that many young people feel they need but that the offer isn't always available everywhere.

2.3 Differences and Similarities Between the Two Countries

Several young people in the Norwegian context were unable to name programs in which they were involved in great detail. This may be because the programs are often more social or sports-based activities which participants may not see as relevant when asked about empowerment.

3. Models for sharing stories

To inform the next portion of the project on how to present stories of empowerment, participants were asked to give examples of ways to share stories. In addition, we also received feedback on ethical concerns for those involved in sharing stories depending on the method or context.

3.1 Story sharing methods

Key themes suggested by both young people and youth workers
- Living library/in-person events
- Social media campaigns
- Surveys and research Advocacy work
- Legal representation

"I am inspired by stories of people who have overcome significant obstacles to achieve something meaningful. Like those of people who have come from challenging backgrounds, yet managed to succeed in their education or careers, really motivate me."
- Young person, Norway

"Maybe something that is similar to my story, so a little egotistical I like to listen to those stories, but they inspire you especially because I can imagine someone who is currently in such a situation and then I feel like, aha, this person has come out, so there is a chance for me to be able to succeed. That what I am in right now, no matter how the situation looks, is not forever and it can get better, I just must not lose hope, this is not forever."
- Young person, Croatia

"We often do living libraries as a kind of concept where young people are happy to respond because it's such a direct conversation with people who are interested, but don't know how to really ask questions let's say young people, LGBT young people often contact us and then everyone from the position of their identity and some of their own the stories are passed on"
- Youth worker, Croatia

T.A.L.E Reflections:

- From the interviews with young people, many were positive about the power of sharing stories and reflected on feeling empowered by telling their own stories to others.
- Participants were keen to hear the stories of people with a similar background to themselves, especially stories of getting through challenges.
- In the Croatian context, there was more positivity from the young participants about sharing stories in more intimate contexts, one-on-one, through mentorship, or living library events.

3.2 Ethical and Practical Concerns:

"I think it is important to create a safe space that is supportive and non-judgmental. Like a small group or online in a closed room. I also think it is important to focus on the strengths of the person. Anonymity should be an option if it makes the storyteller more comfortable."

- Young person, Norway

"What I mean is that someone is waiting for you to share your story just because of one need and activity, as we have that activity, we have to fulfill that activity, they could call that person to share their story. In my five years, when I was studying and when I was called to share my story, I did not see any advantage, except for them to fulfill their activity."

- Young person, Croatia

"And as for sharing stories, I would say that this is one of the problems of this sector in which I am, that until a long time, refugees, young refugees, but not only young people, were used as some kind of tokens that come somewhere and tell some sad story of his own to make people feel sorry for themselves and that was it. So yes, we need to move away from that approach of victimisation and work with people to make them aware of the goal of telling their stories."

- Youth worker, Croatia

T.A.L.E Reflections:

- Several participants emphasised the difficulties and dangers of sharing personal stories and the need for informed consent, creating trust and a sense of safety, media training, and support.
- Several participants spoke positively about the use of living libraries but also negative experiences they had. Some experiences related to difficulty knowing their boundaries about sharing personal stories.
- One participant was concerned about the context of sharing some stories, they worried about how stories could become sensationalised, or seen as entertainment by others, something that they felt embarrassed and uncomfortable about. Youth workers and young people were concerned that story sharing without support or a goal could often become tokenistic.
- Most of the Norwegian young people talked about their desire to share their stories in a way of helping others like themselves. They had positive experiences with sharing stories and listening to others' stories.

3.3 Differences and Similarities Between the Two Countries

In the Norwegian interviews, there was more focus on digital platforms, social media, and podcasts as the preferred way to share stories. In comparison, those interviewed from Croatia had a stronger focus on physical events, although social media platforms were mentioned by some participants. There was also more focus on ethical concerns of story sharing from Croatian participants, potentially due to more experience with story sharing and experiences of discrimination.

Conclusion

The T.A.L.E research provides a nuanced understanding of how vulnerability is perceived among young people and youth workers in Norway and Croatia. It highlights the diverse and intersecting challenges faced by marginalized youth; including discrimination, financial struggles, barriers to education and employment, mental health concerns, and difficulties navigating bureaucratic systems. The study also reveals that vulnerability is often shaped by societal structures rather than inherent personal traits, reinforcing the need for systemic change alongside individual empowerment.

One of the key findings is the role of storytelling as a means of transforming perceptions of vulnerability. Both youth and professionals recognize that sharing lived experiences can help challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and shift public narratives. However, the study also emphasizes the ethical concerns associated with storytelling, particularly the risks of tokenization, re-traumatization, and exploitation. While some young people feel empowered by sharing their stories, others express concerns about being reduced to their struggles rather than being seen as multi-dimensional individuals with potential.

The research also sheds light on best practices in youth empowerment, such as mentoring, peer support, education programs, and safe spaces where young people can express themselves freely. While these initiatives have proven beneficial, the study identifies several areas for improvement. Youth workers highlight the need for more stable funding, mental health resources, and better collaboration between the public and non-profit sectors to create sustainable support systems for vulnerable youth. Additionally, young people express a desire for more opportunities to engage in cultural exchanges, community-building activities, and employment programs that offer long-term impact.

In comparing the two countries, the study finds both commonalities and differences in how vulnerability is perceived and addressed. Norwegian participants tend to view vulnerability as a vague concept and often do not personally identify with it, despite facing systemic challenges. In contrast, Croatian participants more explicitly acknowledge discrimination and structural barriers, particularly within education and employment. Additionally, while digital platforms and social media are favored for storytelling in Norway, Croatian participants show a stronger preference for in-person events such as "living libraries" and mentorship programs.

Ultimately, the research underscores that vulnerability is not a fixed state but a condition that can be mitigated through supportive relationships, inclusive policies, and opportunities for self-determination. When young people are given the space to share their experiences on their terms, in environments that prioritize dignity and agency, vulnerability can transition into empowerment. The study calls for a holistic approach that combines individual support with broader systemic reforms to ensure that all young people, regardless of their background, have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

"I think we need to talk about it and create communities to go somewhere and share our own memories, both beautiful and difficult ones that we have made. I think it is quite important that you feel safe in the community"

- Young person, Croatia

"I would say that there is a change in vulnerability that people who have their safe circle of people, this vulnerability is reduced and turns into empowerment."

- Youth worker, Croatia

"By understanding the purpose of sharing and explaining - that this can help others, remove prejudices and influence those who make decisions - and can motivate individuals to contribute their own story. Then they may be willing to tell their own story and show themselves as more than someone who is "marginalised". The focus when the stories and videos are shared should be that these young people are so much more and have so much more to contribute than "marginality". With the right support and adaptations, there is a place for everyone - and we need everyone."

- Youth worker, Norway