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YEA Youth Empowerment through
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Making Young People's Voices Heard Through Photo Stories



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Abstract

This article explores the use of the Photovoice method within the Erasmus+ funded YEA (Youth Empowerment through Co-creative Activity Development) project, which aimed to amplify the voices of young people in vulnerable situations across Belgium, Italy, and Finland. Photovoice, a participatory research method, enabled youth to express their experiences, challenges, and sense of belonging through photography. The method proved especially effective in engaging diverse groups, including those with migrant backgrounds, disabilities, or mental health challenges, by offering a non-verbal, creative way to communicate.

The article highlights how Photovoice fostered trust, inclusion, and dialogue between young people and professionals, while also revealing cultural and linguistic nuances in how concepts like “community” were interpreted across countries. Through images and interviews, participants shared deeply personal insights into their lives, aspirations, and the environments they navigate. The project demonstrated that visual storytelling can be a powerful tool for empowerment, reflection, and social connection – especially when traditional forms of communication may fall short.

Keywords: photovoice, participatory research, co-creation, collaboration, youth empowerment

Making Young People's Voices Heard Through Photo Stories

RECENT GLOBAL CONFLICTS and crises, including COVID-19 and the energy crisis, have exacerbated existing social challenges and created new ones for young people in general, while disproportionately affecting teenagers and young adults in vulnerable situations—such as LGBTQ+ youth, young people with disabilities, and refugee or migrant youth. Examples include increased mental health challenges, weakened social connections, economic difficulties, and health and safety concerns (Volkin 2020; Biraaro 2020).

These groups often struggle to connect with their communities due to insufficient support from public services or because they do not feel that the available services and activities are suited to them. Community representatives and support staff can play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating collaboration among youth, especially when empowered and guided. By offering sustainable and engaging leisure activities, youth can become active participants in building social bridges and a sense of community.

Erasmus+ funded [*Youth Empowerment Through Co-creative Activity Development \(YEA\) project*](#) (06/2023-05/2025) aims to share the experiences of young people in vulnerable situations, highlight the strengths of community organizations in promoting inclusion, and empower youth to build connections and identify meaningful, inclusive activities that support both individual and community growth.

The YEA project was implemented by a European consortium consisting of partners from Belgium, Italy, and Finland. The Belgian partner, UCLL University of Applied Sciences, coordinated the project. The Italian partner, CESIE, is a non-profit organization based in Palermo that specializes in educational innovation and social inclusion. The Finnish partner, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, contributed expertise in social services and youth participation.

Our aim in the YEA project was to give young people - especially in vulnerable situations - a voice and make their experiences visible to professionals and public authorities who work directly or indirectly with this group. Including young people in the project was our main priority, as the YEA project focuses on youth participation and strengthening their sense of inclusion.

In the YEA project, the Photovoice methodology was used to explore the perceptions of youth in vulnerable situations regarding their sense of community, belonging, and participation. Photovoice is a method where participants take photographs to highlight their experiences related to the research topic. The topic is usually predetermined by the research team and/or the community. The photographs are then shared with researchers and/or participants for individual or group discussions aimed at building a shared narrative around the research topic. (Bergold & Thomas 2012.)

The voices and opinions of young people are not always heard, or there may be no means for youth and professionals/authorities to communicate with each other. This article introduces the Photovoice method, as well as our experiences in using it with the project's target group – teenagers and young adults, including those in vulnerable situations.

PHOTOVOICE AS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Photovoice is a method rooted in participatory research approaches, particularly in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR emphasizes the active involvement of community members as co-creators of knowledge and agents of change. It values the diversity of perspectives within the community and promotes co-learning between researchers and participants, aiming to generate sustainable and actionable outcomes that benefit the community (Wallerstein & Duran 2006, as cited in Andersen et al., 2023).

Photovoice offers a concrete tool for implementing these principles. It provides a platform for communities to elevate their voices, raise awareness of pertinent issues, and drive action at both community and policy levels (Wang & Burris 1994, 1997). Developed by Wang and Burris in the 1990s, Photovoice has since become a foundational method in participatory research.

In practice, Photovoice involves participants being given a camera, taught how to use it, and invited to take photographs that reflect their lived experiences in relation to the project topic. The topic is usually predetermined by the research team and/or the community. These photographs are then shared in individual or group discussions to build a rich, shared narrative. Key insights are often disseminated through exhibitions, reports, or articles to raise awareness and promote change (Wang & Burris 1994 & 1997).

Photovoice serves three primary purposes: 1) empowering individuals to document and reflect on their community's strengths and challenges, 2) fostering critical dialogue and deeper understanding of key community issues through discussions centered around photographs, and 3) engaging policymakers by bringing these perspectives to their attention. (Wang & Burris 1997.)

The theoretical foundation of Photovoice draws on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of empowerment, which emphasizes the co-production of knowledge through critical reflection on community issues. Additionally, feminist theory informs the method by aiming to empower marginalized populations and recognize local expertise that cannot be fully understood from an external perspective (Budig et al. 2018). Thus, Photovoice is not only a method of data collection but also a means of self-expression, collective learning, and social transformation.

Photovoice is a participatory tool for needs assessment that prioritizes community engagement and recognizes local knowledge as a vital source of expertise. Through conversations around the photos, participants add context and meaning to what they have photographed, enriching the overall understanding of the issues at hand. This approach avoids imposing predefined ideas and instead allows the community to define what is important to them (Wang & Burris 1997).

Photovoice helps connect needs assessments with community engagement, encouraging individuals to advocate for their own well-being. It provides a platform for people to express concerns, prioritize issues, and discuss solutions, fostering social action. (Budig et al. 2018, Anderson et al. 2023.) The use of photographs is particularly powerful, offering a simple yet impactful way to convey meaning and emotion – even without language proficiency, which was the case for many participants.

This visual approach proved especially effective for diverse groups and helped unite young people in a shared experience of exploring and discussing their local community – and themselves – as individuals with feelings, interests, and vulnerabilities. It encouraged reflection, awareness of local dynamics, and participation in improving their own quality of life, and by extension, that of those around them. (Anderson et al. 2023; Bergold & Thomas, 2012.)

PHOTOVOICE IMPLEMENTATIONS IN THE YEA PROJECT

Our aim in the YEA project was to give young people in vulnerable situations a voice and make their experiences visible to professionals and public authorities who work directly or indirectly with this group. In this context, young people in vulnerable situations refer to those who may face additional barriers in society due to factors such as disability, mental health challenges, migrant or refugee background, or belonging to a sexual or gender minority. Including young people in the project was our main priority, as the YEA project focuses on youth participation and strengthening their sense of inclusion.

Leading up to the execution of the photovoice method within each of the partner countries, there was a brainstorming session held among the project partners to discuss the potential themes of the photovoice. We landed on selecting the topics which fell under two main themes of Opportunities and Challenges.

Photo Instructions

Young people were asked in advance to take pictures related to various themes (Table 1), such as a place or community where they feel a sense of belonging or something they would like to change in their lives:

"YEA project is collecting stories from young people about belonging, leisure activities, and things that are meaningful in their lives. The stories are collected in pictorial form – participants take pictures of important things to them and briefly explain them. If you want, you can also use pictures to tell your own story: where you feel you belong, how and with whom you spend your free time, and what kinds of things (or people) are important to you. You can take the pictures alone or with a friend/small group."

Participants we asked to take at least three pictures – or as many as they wanted. We were prepared to provide young people with disposable cameras, but all participating youth had smart phones they used to take photos. Later, we met with the participants and conducted interviews based on their photographs.

Table 1. Photo instructions for the Youth.

<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p>	<p>Take a picture...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ...of a place or community you feel like you belong to. ...that tells about you and the things that are important to you. ...that tells about you and your communities. ...of a place you feel welcome to. ...of a place that feels like you are not welcome or it's not for you. ...that shows what kind of things you like to do with others in your free time ...of something that brings you joy. ...of something that brings you a sense of security.
<p>CHALLENGES</p>	<p>Take a picture...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ...of something you would like to have more of in your life. ...of something you would like to change in your life. ...of something that would like to change in your community. ...of something that would like to change in your area or in the society at large.

KEY SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE PHOTOVOICE PROCESS ACROSS COUNTRIES

The aim was to gain insights into young people's lives through the photos they took, and the interviews conducted with them. The interviews explored what young people find meaningful in their lives. Participants took photos of, for example, their free-time activities and places that are important to them. Participants also had the chance to take photos of places where they didn't feel they belonged or things they would like to change. We called these Challenges (in Belgium, this was a less popular choice than the focus on "Opportunities"). The process of taking photos helped them prepare for the interview, which was conducted using their own images as prompts.

Belgium

Before getting started, work was done on the trust process with young people in vulnerable situations. This consisted of many contacts without an in-depth explanation of photovoice and research. These contacts took place at the OverKop house in Pelt and at the Valkenhof Red Cross refuge centre. An OverKop house is an informal safe place where young people between the ages of 12 and 25y can have fun, hang out and meet friends. They also find a listening ear they want to talk about any problem. The participating youths were all recruited from visitors to the OverKop house and the Valkenhof Red Cross refuge centre.

The various vulnerabilities faced by these participants, with regard to the sense of belonging, was, on the one hand, the fact that a number of the youth (2) had a migration background that for some was not yet completed and therefore did not yet feel at home in the community. On the other hand, we also see that a number of young people (3) are struggling with personal problems and mental health at some point in their life. From both organizations, OverKop and Valkenhof, a total of 5 young people participated in the photovoice. The youth did the photovoice independently, with explanations and support from the Yea project leaders who facilitated the entire process.

These were the preparatory activities, which then turned into a more in-depth explanation of photovoice and encouragement to take photos as part of their sense of belonging in the city of Pelt. The project considered the diverse backgrounds of the young people and a safe and inclusive environment was created. An approachable way for sharing the photos was used and the young people were brought together to share their experiences. In this way, the photos became even more meaningful and similar experiences were found and shared. Many frequent examples were about sports facilities/ hangouts in the city and their accessibility. In addition, the green character of the city was highlighted as an important factor in young people's sense of belonging experience.

Italy

Prior to the Photovoice activity, CESIE's team initiated a trust-building process for young people in vulnerable conditions with and without a migrant background, to get to know each other and facilitators and encourage them to explore their sense of belonging in Palermo through the power of photography. These first getting-to-know activities, consisting of reflecting upon the meaning of photography for each of the participants, involved 3 young people in vulnerable situations without a migrant background (one on the autism spectrum, one with mental disabilities and one belonging to LGBTQI+A with autism spectrum) and 4 young people with vulnerabilities from Tunisia, being unaccompanied minors living in residential centers (such as Consorzio Umana Solidarietà in Palermo

hosting unaccompanied minors in Palermo and in other cities in the region of Sicily), who were accompanied at CESIE ETS's office by an intercultural mediator.

Preventive measures were adopted by CESIE ETS to create a safe and inclusive environment to host young participants, where everyone could feel included, heard and valued for their specific characteristics and needs. In particular, in the preparatory workshops, CESIE's trainers decided not to mix the young person on the autism spectrum and the LGBTQI+A person also on the spectrum with the Arabic-speaking young people who needed simultaneous interpretation, and therefore this would have created exposure to multiple stimuli to the autism spectrum.

The two introductory workshops were aimed to raise awareness of the role of pictures in expressing daily life and encouraged participants to identify areas for improvement in the city's community, such as better services for homeless people and more accessible leisure activities. Among the challenges shared by young people, it is possible to highlight sense of loneliness, rubbish management, lack of safety in some areas of the city and of leisure spaces where to hang out in cosy atmospheres.

Finland

Laurea's YEA project team contacted several organizations working with teenagers and young adults – such as Kulttuuripaja Kide, the Hyvä arki project, Girls' House, Boys' House, and youth living room activities – to explore their interest in participating in the YEA project. Initial meetings were held with staff members to introduce the project and the Photovoice method. These professionals then shared information with young people and explored their willingness to take part in the Photovoice process.

Photo instructions were primarily provided to participants through these professionals, who played a key role in supporting and guiding the youth throughout the process. Once the young people had their photos taken, individual interviews were conducted by YEA project staff. The aim was to create a safe and respectful space where the interviews proceeded entirely on the participants' terms, allowing them to decide how much or how little they wished to share. During the interviews, the young participants openly shared their experiences and the things that mattered to them.

In Finland, in addition to Laurea's YEA project team also students participated in conducting Photovoice interviews as part of the Exerting Influence in the Social Care Sector course. They received training on the Photovoice method and interview techniques from YEA project staff and carried out interviews in their respective workplaces or internship settings.

THE IMPACT OF TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Photovoice photo guidelines and interview questions were originally written in English, after which each partner translated them into their own language. It wasn't until well after the Photovoice interviews had been conducted that we realized how the interpretation of the word "community" had influenced the translations. Community can refer to people who share similar backgrounds or interests, but it can also refer to a physical place. In the Belgian version, the instructions encouraged young people to focus more on their physical surroundings, whereas in the Finnish and Italian translations, community was interpreted more as referring to connections between people.

Belgium

In the activity, young people from Pelt were asked to take photographs and later view them together. The group was diverse: it included a young person living in a shelter, a young person born in Pelt, and another who had moved away later in life. This diversity brought out different perspectives during the Photovoice presentations. The photos were discussed only among those who had participated in the Photovoice activity.

The pictures showed the importance of a green environment and how this can have a calming effect for many young people. This is not only about fields and forests, but also about the municipality's efforts to provide more green spaces in the center. A negative topic discussed was the accessibility of soccer fields in the community. Young people indicated that sports can be an outlet. There are many soccer fields in Pelt, but not everywhere is allowed and free to play soccer with friends when there are no practices or games. There are no small soccer fields in the community where they can go. Several youths indicated that the existence of an OverKop House, a low-threshold space organized by several organizations for vulnerable youth, holds a very significant meaning for them. People experience a sense of hospitality there and different cultures come together.

Italy

At a later stage, following trust-building workshops, Photovoice and interviews on the pictures, the 7 young people participating were involved in a second round of activities with other 5 young people who are well integrated into the local community of Palermo, with whom pictures taken by young people were shared and commented. The new group of participants were invited to observe all the photos captured by young people in vulnerable situations from very diverse backgrounds and to identify potential connections, common interests, and emerging themes within the images and to share their observations at the end of the presentation.

Once all the Photovoice presentations by young people in vulnerable conditions had been completed, the group responsible for identifying "bridges" shared their reflections. They noted several recurring themes across the images. One such theme was the need to find a peaceful space in a busy city like Palermo. This was reflected in photos of the sea, parks, natural environments, and even mosques. Another recurring idea was the concept of "home" and its many contradictions. Home appeared in different forms: as a link to one's country of origin, as a residential center, or as a sense of belonging to certain people. At the same time, feelings of disconnection from others were also expressed. A more negative but prominent theme identified by participants was the issue of garbage in Palermo. This stood in stark contrast to the calm and beauty conveyed through nature-themed images. The theme of community also emerged through photographs showing public demonstrations, as well as personal activities, hobbies, and passions.

One young woman involved in identifying these shared elements posed a thought-provoking question about the very meaning of "a sense of community." She wondered whether it refers to the time and space shared with others – meeting and connecting with people – or rather the comfort and stillness one might feel with close individuals, or even alone. It was also emphasized that community can mean "people" with similar backgrounds or interests, but it can equally refer to a physical place – an environment where individuals live, interact, hope to create positive change, and express themselves.

Finland

During the interviews, the young participants shared their own photos and spoke about their communities, the things they wished to have in their lives, and the places and communities where they feel welcome. Through their images, they shared deeply personal aspects of their lives and the things they consider worth striving for.

Through the photos and quotes, the young people highlighted how important it is to feel a sense of belonging – to a family or a group of friends – and how painful it is when one doesn't feel part of any community. Their dreams were often very concrete: one hoped for a dog and someone to go to concerts with, another wanted to travel and see the world, and a third longed for a time when regular drug testing would no longer be part of their routine.

In many of the photo stories, the youth described places that held deep personal significance and were closely tied to family. These included, for example, a family summer cottage and a rocky beach where they enjoy the first outdoor coffee of the summer, or a childhood home that always felt loving and safe. At the same time, the images and interviews also revealed a lack of community or close relationships, and a strong longing to share experiences and moments with others.

In Finland, a video was created based on the Photovoice stories, combining photographs taken by young people with interview quotes related to the images. The video premiered at a YEA project workshop held at Laurea, which brought together both young participants and professionals working with youth.

INSIGHTS FROM THE PHOTOVOICE EXPERIENCE

During a project meeting in May, we presented the Photovoice images collected in different countries. At this stage, we realized that the Finnish Photovoice material focused more on communities as relationships between people rather than as physical places.

When translating the questions from English to Finnish, we didn't initially recognize that the meaning shifted slightly. In English and Italian, the community-related questions were understood as referring to physical neighborhoods and living areas. However, in Finnish, the phrasing led respondents to reflect more on social relationships rather than physical locations. As a result, the Finnish Photovoice stories delved deeper into interpersonal relationships and their significance. Similarly, in the Italian photo stories, home, friends, and family – or the absence of them – played a central role. While the young participants' photos depicted physical places, their narratives emphasized the importance of close personal relationships.

The Belgium Photovoice stories were more focused on the topics that fell within the theme of "Opportunities" within their community. Many of the photos were of places. The sense of belonging was demonstrated through coming together with friends, playing sports, eating, and hanging out. The community offered these places for the youth. As a result, the conversation revealed the meanings of those places and why they were chosen. The place is more a means of coming together than an end in itself.

Young People's Perspectives

Young participants enjoyed taking part in the Photovoice project. One participant gave positive feedback, saying that reflecting on their photos helped them think about what is important in their life and what they want for the future. There was one participant (a refugee) who took photos of things that they missed from their home, or of what is different in their new environment.

Some youths had ideas that instantly popped into their heads. Others were initially unsure of what they would take pictures of. Eventually, through some discussion and guidance, these youths were also able to begin the process.

There was a youth who seemed to take us on a tour of their small town, pointing out many of the places they liked to visit and hang out with friends. They were also pictures of initiatives the city had implemented, many of which they took advantage of or knew youth who took advantage.

The differences between countries, as well as translation nuances, influenced how the assignment was interpreted. While in Belgium and Italy, the photo stories were more focused on physical communities, in Finland, the wording guided participants to reflect more on communities in terms of human relationships.



Picture credits: The young participants of Photovoice. The photo collage was compiled by Johanna Kurki.

Project Staff's Perspectives

When language is difficult for various reasons – linguistic, social, emotional – finding ways to be heard becomes more complex. Many young people in vulnerable situations cannot always sit around a table and discuss what matters to them. Sometimes, something needs to be put in between, and that something can be Photovoice. The method allowed young people to express themselves without the pressure of talking directly to professionals or social workers.

By giving a simple assignment – to capture a feeling in a photo – young people responded with raw honesty. The result was unfiltered and authentic. With a camera in hand, they could express what they saw, felt and meant without having to find the right words. You cannot fake or overthink what a photo silently communicates.

Specialized staff and project managers working in youth participation often face a double challenge. First, young people are in a transformative life phase, where identity, values, and emotions are in constant motion. Second, they may face various forms of vulnerability – cognitive, socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, gender-related or psycho-physical – which can make participation even harder.

In this context, the YEA project focused on creating safe spaces and engaging activities that respected young people's specific needs. With the support of non-formal education methods and trust-building exercises, staff actively took part in activities like collecting pictures around Palermo, alongside the youth.

Photovoice turned out to be a vital bridge. It connected professionals and young people, but also the young people with each other – across different vulnerable conditions. The photos captured places in the city that symbolized home, danger, safety, belonging – allowing participants to reflect on where they felt seen and where they felt invisible. It made them protagonists in their own narratives.

Photovoice facilitated smooth, authentic exchanges around complex topics, such as identity and sense of community. What we learned is that emotions and belonging don't always speak in words. Sometimes they need to be seen. Visual expression gave young people space to express themselves freely – at their own pace, in their own way. It helped them feel closer to each other, respected, and genuinely heard.

CONCLUSION

The Photovoice method offered a powerful way to explore the lives and experiences of young people. Through the images, discussions were sparked, and young participants were able to share their stories in a deeper and more open way. The photographs became windows into their lives – revealing what is meaningful to them and what they dream of.

Given the positive impact Photovoice had on young people, we will definitely consider using this methodology in future activities aimed at building trust and safety. It is particularly valuable in promoting youth participation, encouraging their agency, or fostering connections between peers and the local community.

In addition to the photographs, we created photo stories based on the images and interviews. These stories are available on the [YEA project's website](#). A video compilation of the Finnish Photovoice images and interview quotes can be found at Laurea's Youtube Channel: [Photovoice - Stories and Perspectives from Young People](#).

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The young participants of Photovoice. The photo collage was compiled by Johanna Kurki.