

# Voices of the young people in the “M”

A Study of Youth Diaconia in six  
interdiac member organisations  
in Central and Eastern Europe  
and Central Asia



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#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

interdiac	International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action, Central and Eastern Europe
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
PYD	Positive Youth Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund (orig. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Abbreviations used in the content analysis and findings.

A	Armenia
E	Estonia
G	Georgia
K	Kyrgyzstan
S	Slovakia
U	Ukraine
F	female
M	male
P	participant

# Preface

The rapid changes in Central and Eastern Europe are profoundly transforming the pattern of the lives of people and societies. They are often making them more challenging and demanding, and especially they affect the wellbeing of disadvantaged people. Over the years of constant social turbulence, the feeling of anxiety and powerlessness within people in the face of those changes has been increasing. At this point in our lives, with the impact of COVID-19 on top of everything else, we take it for granted that the research in diverse local contexts is needed in order to uncover the way in which the changes influence people's lives and to inform the new tasks they present to the work of diaconal organisations.

The need for more research was in fact already identified by interdiac partners several years ago because the deep changes and growing complexity of social life in the today's world need to be better understood to make the work of their organisations more effective. Eventually the routine professional methodologies of work have become inadequate and they often fail to grasp the diverse life worlds of people. Consequently, people, who are approached with an offer of help, often respond with aggression and lack of trust provoked by their precarious situation. Although the churches and organisations have been developing their responses to the contextual challenges there is an urgent need for more collaborative knowledge development, which should be grounded in experience and reflection on professional practice. Therefore interdiac – the International Academy for Diaconia and Christian and Social Action has launched a Research Programme with the aim of providing the space and support for new research initiatives.

The starting point for this initiative was a meeting of 13 practitioners, academics and students in diaconia and Christian social service from 10 countries in 2017, where they shared their understanding of the needs for research and the ways in which it could be supported in the future. They agreed to form the interdiac Research Platform to support networking, research and development.

In light of the discussions, five topics for future research were identified and the participants agreed to continue to work on these initiatives and to search for other partners. From the five topics, three themes were selected for immediate follow-up action:

*People on Move* – Diaconia with migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons.

*Youth on the Margins* – addressing especially the context and needs of young people facing a precarious and jobless future.

*Ecclesiology and the Theological Understanding of Diaconia*, addressing ecumenical and interfaith diversity and the need for a deeper dialogue about different traditions and contemporary applications.

Another important outcome of the discussion was a choice of the research methodology. The practitioners agreed on use of qualitative people-centred approach. It was meant to give voice to the 'voiceless' people to communicate their perspective and, at the same time, the research should closely examine the existing practice so that it would present a feedback closely related to the realities of the context and work of the organisations. Furthermore, it was agreed that the research should contribute to building the curricula for new learning programmes.

Since then, the practitioners of different denominations from 11 countries (Armenia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Estonia, Hungary, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine) have been working in collaboration in three Research Theme Groups in order to plan and gradually carry out the research process. Mutual commitment, intensive distance communication and steering of the process have resulted in obtaining rich picture from the contexts and practice of diaconal organisations. It allows us to give a better understanding of diaconia in Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia.

Moreover, interdiac hopes that this research will facilitate international discussion among practitioners to deepen the knowledge about diaconal practice and contribute to development of more creative and effective diaconal initiatives. interdiac also expresses hope that this research programme will contribute to the development of the interdiac Research Platform. The Platform aims to support the task of developing good practice and achieving recognition of diaconia in a context where faith-based actions are insufficiently acknowledged. We invite you to join our growing learning community and welcome your feedback and comments!

Janka Adameová  
Director, interdiac

# Introduction

Youth diaconia is defined in this publication as Christian social practice with children, adolescents, and families that need extra support. Youth diaconia finds its motivation from the Christian love of one's neighbour. Because God has created and redeemed us all, everybody has an equal right to find a meaningful life. This work has different names in different Christian churches. Youth diaconia will be the term used to refer to the phenomenon in this study. The reader can easily use another concept in the stead of "youth diaconia" if it helps them understand this report.

The motivation for this study originates from the fact that an ever-increasing number of adolescents find it difficult to find meaning in their lives due to personal, social, cultural, or economic reasons. Herein lies the call for youth diaconia: it develops new working models to aid these adolescents achieve social inclusion and build positive social connections with their peers as well as adults.

In the network of the International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action (Interdiac) a data set has been collected from young people in Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The research was conducted in collaboration with diaconal organisations in six countries:

**Armenia:** St. Mariane Social Centre

**Estonia:** NGO Bethel Centre of Pastoral Care of Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

**Georgia:** Caritas Georgia

**Kyrgyzstan:** Children of Tien-Shan

**Ukraine:** Living Hope NGO

**Slovakia:** Relevant NGO

The six countries involved in this research project are all former communist countries, where NGOs and diaconal activities were banned before the collapse of the totalitarian system. With this socio-political background, voluntarism and civil society were unable to flourish as in other regions. Moreover, volunteering was compulsory for children and adults alike, and therefore it carries a stigma in some post-communist countries. (Voicu & Voicu 2009, Sillo 2016.)

Using individual and focus group interviews in order to hear the 'voices' of these people, we gave space for the young people's experiences of life in these six countries, thirty years after the collapse of the totalitarian system. In this research report, the findings of this project will be reported and analysed. There are several grounds for considering the young people in the study: many of them live or have lived a criminal or street-connected life. Many of them were born in families afflicted by poverty, alcoholism, and other challenges which have influenced their way of living, their studies at school, and the friends they spend time with. However, marginalisation is only a concept for researchers and social workers to describe the circumstances the young people must deal with. In many cases, the young people do not consider themselves marginalised. Therefore, we only use the letter M – the reader is free to give their own interpretation to the title while reading this report.

The aim of this study is to describe the present state of diaconal youth work in different contexts, to present good and innovative practices and to formulate suggestions for further improvement of youth diaconal approaches in their specific regional contexts. In order to do this, both young people and some of the professionals or the youth diaconal organisations have been interviewed for the project.

The data collection of this study used triangulation to maximise the validity of the data and to reduce inappropriate certainty therein. By using multiple data collection methods, the answers may differ from one another, which reduces the risk of drawing hasty conclusions and making unfounded generalisations. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 39.) Thus, the data for this study was collected with both focus group and individual interviews.

The project started in spring 2019 and many different people have participated in the process. The interviews were conducted in autumn 2019 and spring 2020. The data collection, transcription, and translation into English were conducted by the local researchers employed by some of the organisations participating in this study project. The members of the research group were Marek Ilenin and Ihor Kornii (Slovakia, Prešov), Avo Uprus and Kadri Keskula (Estonia, Tallinn), Nicole Borisuk (Ukraine, Odessa), Teona Gotsiridze (Georgia, Tbilisi), Irina Trofimova (Kyrgyz Republic) and Knarik Martirosyan (Armenia, Yerevan).

The interview data of the young people consists of 22 individual interviews and six focus groups interviews. All the young people either are or have participated in the activities, services, or programmes arranged by the six organisations featured in this study. Altogether 55 young persons were interviewed.

The majority of the young people interviewed were in the age group of 14-28. In Estonia the participants of the focus group interviews were 28-48-years old making them significantly older than other interviewees. The data related to the professionals consists of six focus group interviews with the professionals and adult volunteers of the organisations in this study. Altogether 32 professionals and adult volunteers participated in the focus group discussions. The organisations will be introduced in the next chapter.

In this study an inductive approach has been used. The data has been analysed using content analysis during summer 2020, by three Finnish researchers Dr. Pekka Launonen, Dr. Jouko Porkka, and youth work leader Riikka Hillebrand who has participated in this research project as a part of her master studies in the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. Eventually, the research report has been written by Dr. Jouko Porkka, Riikka Hillebrand, and Oksana Prosvirnina (Ukraine). Riikka's text is also part of her master's thesis that was published in November 2020. Jouko and Riikka have never visited any of the organisations of this study. All the findings of the research project are based on data only. However, in order to avoid mistakes two online-seminar days were organised with the representatives of the organisations and comments from the local researcher have been used in order to avoid misunderstanding and mistakes.

As should be apparent, this research report is a product of the joint work of an international team. In the core of this effort lies the will of the professionals in youth diaconia to hear the voices of the young people, with whom they are actively engaged in their workplace, and reflect on their working methods and approaches. A study of this scope could of course never cover even all the basics of youth diaconal practice. Therefore, the findings and insights from the data invite those, who are interested in the development of youth diaconia practice with the young people, to read and think what can be done differently so that youth diaconia can sustain itself as an active, enabling, and vivid practice. Feel free to contact us with your feedback and ideas after you are done with the paper!

Theme Coordinator  
Jouko Porkka

## PARTNER ORGANISATIONS AND RESEARCH GROUP OF THE STUDY





In Armenia the interdiac partner organisation is the Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation. The study was conducted in the St. Mariane Social Centre, Ashtarak. The centre was established in 2014 and implements social assistance, community development and environmental programs. The centre works with vulnerable families in Ashtarak and surrounding areas. The beneficiaries are mainly socially insecure, orphaned or single-parent children, divorced women, as well as unemployed adults. Currently the centre works with women from about 60 families and about 120 children and young people. The Centre provides services to needy young people in several areas: spiritual support, social assistance and training. The services include educational and professional training courses; cultural, educational and informational programmes and professional orientation consultations for adults, children and youth. Social workers and the clergy visit families to discuss concerning issues, which include family relationships and different problems. Domestic violence, socialisation of children and parenting are topics that are discussed often in the meetings. The Centre also organises spiritual meetings with Bible reading and sermons. (Maritrosyan 2020a & 2020b.)

The employees have implemented “*social diaconia*” which has given to young people opportunities to grow as independent, critical, well-informed and social citizens. The employees had noticed that there were many cases when young people in needy families got married at an early age without a profession and education. Employees decided that all women have great opportunities and abilities that should be developed. The goal is to integrate women into community life, strengthen them and make them competitive in the job market. (Staff focus group data.)

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Foundation of Diaconia and Social Action is the partner organisation in Estonia. EELC Foundation of Diaconia and Social Action was founded in 2018, but diaconia work with youth started in Estonia already in the 1990s with children and young people experiencing homelessness and street-connected life. In the beginning of 2000, the Social Centre was founded in Tallinn. The data for this research project was collected at this centre. The Social Centre is working with people with lower income and with the non-Estonian speaking population. The centre is mainly helping people with the integration to the Estonian society and producing material and moral support. The work of Bethel’s Centre of Pastoral Care is primarily orientated towards risk group children and youth, supporting them with studies and involving them into socially accepted and safe activities such as youth clubs, hobbies and sports. The main goals are decreasing poverty and exclusion and preventing crime. There is a foster home and a day centre run by the Church of Bethel that offer long term and short-term housing for young persons but also for families in needed. There are about 20 regulars enrolled in the foster home and day centre and all together the Social Centre works with about 100 families in disadvantageous situations. (Bethel’s Centre of Pastoral Care 2020; Kesküla 2020.) The centre offers working possibilities, adventure pedagogic, different art and singing groups. The goal of the activities was to offer young people experiences of succeeding and thereby strengthen their self-confidence. Centre also gave support for poor families. It could be food, financial and psychological help. In summertime also camps for children and youth have been organised. (Staff focus group data.)

The study in Georgia was conducted in the Caritas Georgia 24-hour centre for street-connected children. Caritas Georgia was founded in 1994 to help disadvantaged families. Caritas Georgia Children and Youth Programme in Tbilisi focuses on children between six and 18 years. It provides services for children from families living below the poverty line, children living on the street and children and youth without parental care. The centre offers services for the basic needs: food, clothing and medical assistance. In addition, it offers psychological services which aim at improving the children’s physical and psychological situation including, for example, managing harmful substances, a medical programme, socialisation, and recreational therapy. The day care and 24-hour shelter also offer services on the street for children who could not come to the centre. One of the main services is to provide secondary and vocational education. Moreover, the centre arranges non-formal education which focuses both on education for children with special needs as well as on occupational training. The centre supports the children and young people with skills for everyday life and for an independent living including conflict prevention and resolutions skills. (Caritas 2020; Gotsiridze 2020; staff interviews)

In Kyrgyzstan the data was collected by interviewing young people from the ‘Children of Tien-Shan’ organisation. The organisation was founded in 2000 in Balykchy, Issyk-Kul region to serve as a diaconia ministry. Shelter for street children was opened providing safe housing for children and young people, restoring social and family ties, restoring legal documents, assisting with medical services, supporting education and providing psychological assistance.

Also, there was a work with vulnerable families to prevent child abandonment, various seminars were held for parents, various assistance was provided, for example, medical support, assistance in restoring registration documents, assistance in labour placement, so that children could keep their families and not become street children. In 2015, when the economic support was cut down the Shelter was converted into a day-care centre, new activities were developed by the employers of the organisation. They began to conduct seminars and training in schools on a healthy lifestyle and life skills. The courses and clubs were for example on computer skills, media, sewing, leisure time activities. The financial support received from various donor agencies.

The organisation has been piloting and creating a foster care model in the Kyrgyz Republic working together with the national and local officials to promote the situation of the children and young people to guarantee the educational and medical services they need and to build the foster care system. ‘Children of Tien-Shan’ worked together with UNICEF to develop regulations on the foster model for the country.

Due to the active promotion of Islam in the country, some programmes of the organisation were closed down since ‘Children of Tien-Shan is a Christian organisation, however, there are still left some seminars and trainings for young people on healthy lifestyle. But the work is not easy, because the schools have become closed to religious organisations. (Staff focus group.) Nowadays the main form of services provided by ‘Children of Tien-Shan’ is support for families to prevent abandonment of children and preventing children ending up experiencing a street connected life. (Trofimova 2020.)

Relevant NGO is a non-profit organisation based in Prešov, Slovakia. The organisation was founded in 2006 to institutionalise activities in the field of youth work and visits to children’s homes that had previously been done through voluntary work by the Lutheran congregation in Prešov. The services consist of a team of social workers, a psychologist and volunteers that help the girls every step of the way towards integrating into the society, independence and responsibility. Relevant NGO provides services called half-way houses for girls leaving foster homes or orphans. The services include housing, training in life skills as well as working skills, economic support and so on. Spiritual and personal support is important, too. The girls can also get help in planning practical actions, for example giving a lecture or organising a camp. Above all it is important, that they can maintain good relationships with friends, get mental support if needed and have good life values. (Staff focus group discussion.) They also organise summer camps, trips, non-formal education activities, sporting and free-time events and hosting of volunteers from abroad. The latest project by Relevant NGO involves launching a social enterprise to help the girls living in the half-way house to integrate into a healthy social and work life. The NGO had started also a cafeteria connected with cultural open space, where young people can develop their working skills and habits as well as grow personally and spiritually. (Ilenin 2020.)

The organization in Ukraine is called Living Hope. “Living Hope” is a faith-based NGO working with and for excluded children, youngsters and families mainly in Odessa and Odessa Region since 1999. The NGO aims to open possibilities for young people and children facing difficult life circumstances and support them long term in their personal development. To give this vision a practical frame they have established several day care centres, where children and youth at risk find a safe place to grow. Examples of activities in the day care centres include assistance with homework, preparing and eating meals together, leisure time activities, and support in private hygiene and sanitation as well as teaching of Christian values. The day care centres also give assistance in emergency life circumstances, such as illness or death of a parent. Another important focus is on prevention of negative habits and health problems such as HIV, alcohol- and drug abuse and other. The centres accept also children with some psychological and physical problems and offers support in education for needy: for example, some of the young people who grew in the Living Hope centres could finish university studies because of the financial support from the organisation. “Living Hope” promotes and supports education and integration in paid and voluntary work as another important source of inclusion. The NGO is receiving and sending young people from different countries as volunteers and promotes voluntary activities in general. (Borisuk 2020; staff focus group discussion.)

THE LIFE OF YOUNG  
PEOPLE IN CENTRAL  
AND EASTERN EUROPE  
AND CENTRAL ASIA





# 1.

## Societal context

The Central and Eastern European and Central Asian countries in which the youth diaconia organisations work in have a lot in common with each other in terms of their sociological and political history. However, the countries also have their distinctive cultures, languages, religious settings, and social and political context. As an example of the differences in the religious settings, Christianity is the minority religion within a Muslim majority in Kyrgyzstan, atheism is the majority worldview in Estonia and most people in Ukraine, Slovakia, Armenia and Georgia belong to different Christian denominations.

The last 30 years have included major shifts and transition times as well as one crisis following another in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The dissolution of Soviet Union and the time of transition affected the countries and the inhabitants. During the Soviet time, the social service system was centrally led and institutionalised. It meant, for example, that a lot of children were institutionalised instead of the social system encouraging families to take care of their children (Addy, Bănăruș, Borisuk, & Ghazaryan 2012, 15). In the 1990s, the quality of social services and utilities deteriorated rapidly. The societies started to decentralise the social services to local administrations but there were not always sufficient resources for the process, which led to the weakening of the social infrastructure (UNDP 2011, 20). Social protection functions were transferred in many countries to family, community and similar informal providers, with adverse outcomes. There is still a continuing trend of institutional care for some groups such as children who are abandoned, orphaned or neglected, 'at risk' children or young people in conflict with the law, and children and adults with disabilities. (Addy et al. 2012, 15; UNDP 2011, 26.)

Because of the fall of the Soviet Union, there were also changes in the employment opportunities when companies and industries disappeared causing unemployment and further impacting on social exclusion. New opportunities arose in the labour market, but people did not necessarily have sufficient skills. Without effective retraining opportunities, people with outdated skills found themselves vulnerable. In some cases, this process has led to the marginalisation of whole groups. (UNDP 2011, 18-19.) Poverty increases people's vulnerability to social exclusion in other areas of life. Income poverty limits the opportunity to participate in public life, particularly in periods of structural transformation when the old 'non-monetary' channels of inclusion have disappeared. (UNDP 2011, 17.) The situation is not the same in all the countries, but this overview gives a glimpse of how great the structural changes were and what the governments and the people have had to deal with and that to some extent changes are still ongoing.

During the last 10 plus years the economic crisis of 2008 and now currently the COVID-19 pandemic have had effects on the economies, societies and communities of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. All in all, the economic crisis caused majority of European countries to cut down social services with wide-ranging austerity-measures. For children and young people for example, this has meant a high rate of youth unemployment which was 17% in 2008. With only limited employment opportunities, young people are often forced to take low-skilled employment, to leave the labour market, or to migrate to another country. (UNDP 2011, 20.) There are current estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic hits hard on young people in the form of unemployment. The pandemic also influences the lives of young people in a vulnerable situation because some of the social and community services were forced to close or limit their services during the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic. (Stakelum & Matthiesen 2020.)

On top of the regional and global crisis described above, some of the countries in the former Soviet bloc have also experienced different armed and violent conflicts as well as political eruptions that create instability. Examples of these are nationwide conflicts that have ousted presidents, elections that have been assessed not to follow the democratic procedure, the occupation of areas by foreign governments, ethnic violence, territorial tensions because of interstate conflicts and conflicts over government and separatist movements. Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia is a vast region and some of the countries within the region are geographically large. Therefore, the abovementioned conflicts and political eruptions may affect different communities and organisations differently.

The lack of employment opportunities and military conflicts have led to migration both abroad and

within countries (UNDP 2011, 33, 75). According to the surveys in Central Asia, most labour migrants are men. In other countries, however, migration has become more feminised (UNDP 2011, 78). Migration also affects young people's lives. As families migrate, for example because of seasonal work, children and young people migrate as well. Seasonal migration is linked to agriculture work as well as to tourists flows. Seasonal migration is also part of the realities of street-connected youth. (UNICEF 2018, 23.)

# 2.

## Marginalisation of young people

The theme for the "Voices of the young people in the 'M'" research project is how youth diaconia can support the young people living in the risk of marginalisation or the prevalent experience of being marginalised. Marginalisation occurs when an individual or certain groups are pushed aside from the economic system, the social system and the decision-making systems of the society. (UNDP 2011, Rodriguez Nygaard 2017, 168.) The social systems that people live in are multi-layered consisting of a macrosystem, a mesosystem and a microsystem. The macrosystem represents the political and economic system, the mesosystem represents institutions such as schools, and the microsystem is seen in close relationships. People can be at the margins in one of these systems, but not necessarily in all of them. However, being at the margins in macrosystems often has an impact on all the other layers. (Rodriguez Nygaard 2017, 166-168.) People can be marginalised in multiple ways and marginalisation can be a cumulative process, worsening over time (Backwith 2015, 49).

In defining and researching marginalised youth, the term "not in education, employment or training" (NEET) has become popular. The term describes more widely the context of marginalised youth. In Eastern Europe in 2011 38,3% of the youth were part of the labour force and the unemployment rate was 17,9% (International Labour Organisation 2020, 13-19). NEET is used specially to describe the marginalisation of youth in Europe. The definition NEET connects the problem of marginalisation most often in relation to the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state. The needs of marginalised youth can also be discussed in relation to more fundamental issues such as social cohesion and social stability, racial and gender inequality, weak state performance and a dysfunctional education system (Swart 2018, 3).

In the case of this study, marginalisation relates to disadvantageous situations such as poor connection to the society and to not being employed or part of education. Marginalisation is also connected to the experiences of street-connected life, experiences of inadequate foster care, deprivation from social services and inadequate services in supporting independent life after growing up in foster care or in institutions for orphans.

THE THREE MOST  
SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS  
OF YOUTH DIACONIA  
- YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
PERSPECTIVE



In the individual and focus group interviews the young people were asked to talk about their own lives and describe and reflect about the youth diaconia that they had been part of. The focus of the study was on how the young people have perceived and experienced youth diaconia, what they may have learned or gained through the services and what kind of impact the services have had on their lives. The instructions and questions for the interviews are explained in detail in appendices 2 and 3. Through the phases of a content analysis three top categories were found linking together the experiences of the young people in the different countries. The top categories are 1) acceptance, 2) social inclusion and 3) being empowered. The top categories consist of subcategories that can be seen in figure 1.

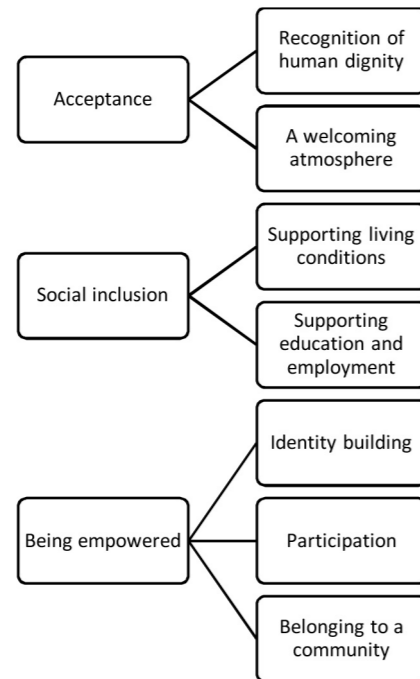


FIGURE 1. Top and subcategories of young people's experiences

## 1. ACCEPTANCE

Throughout the interviews, a shared experience was that of how the young people had been accepted by the staff members in the organisations and recognised as valuable young people. The experience of acceptance consists of the recognition of the human dignity of the young people and a welcoming atmosphere in the diaconia organisations and centres.

Based on the content analysis, topics such as the attitude towards youth participating in diaconia, how youth participating in diaconia are treated and perceived and how young people feel that they are of interest to other people can all be tied to *the recognition of human dignity*.

Remarkable for the young people was the attitude of the staff members towards them in the organisations. The young people described how in other parts of the society, not related to youth diaconia they had had negative experiences of how people treat and perceive them as young people who participate in youth diaconia. On the contrary, the experiences of how the staff members and volunteers in the diaconal organisations had treated and perceived them had been mostly positive. The staff members and volunteers have had an impact on the atmosphere in the organisations, they had become role models for the young people and were people that the young people could trust in. Some young people described the attitude of the staff as warm and open (K F3/F4). These attitudes were

experienced when the young people had joined the services for the first time, but the attitude was also experienced in situations where the young person had been away and come back. One young person describes it as follows:

*Sometimes I did not visit the centre for months, but when I came back every time the workers and volunteers showed me that they are very happy to see me. There was no condemnation. Nobody was telling me that I am bad, nobody laughed at me every time when I came back. After one more time walking away and doing bad things I returned with a deep understanding that this is the only place where people really wait for me and that I want to change something in my life. (U M2)*

The young people mentioned how they were surprised about the attitude and the way people perceived them. They even thought that the staff were not like everyone else. (K F3/F4.) How these young people have felt that people treat them and how people perceive them can be seen in different ways. The young people in Kyrgyzstan also mentioned that they had not had many people in their lives that they found to be trustworthy (K F3/F4).

*When I came to the shelter, I was very surprised by the people who worked there, they were very kind, open, I wanted to trust them, because until that moment in my life, unfortunately, there were no such people, everything was quite the opposite, and I forgot how to trust people. (K F3/F4)*

The young people expressed how they have encountered people who are interested in them, willing to get to know them and willing to support and take care of them and reminding the young people of their dignity. A few of the young people brought up the idea that being part of the life in the centres had changed their view of themselves and their understanding of self-worth.

*Exactly in church I felt someone needs in me and waits for me. (K F6)*

*I was really impressed that I did not have to earn respect, but I am respected anyway. I felt valued and met people who tried to understand me openhearted. (U M1)*

*You remind me that I am a person with dignity and deserve respect as I am. (K F5)*

The importance of the recognition of human dignity can also be understood in relation to how the young people described other encounters in society. The young people expressed how they have had complex and negative experiences of how people have related to them and perceived and treated them because they participate in youth diaconia. Some of the young people in Ukraine expressed how they had been bullied or excluded in school by other students or how the teachers had treated them differently or unequally because they were orphans and part of the centres.

*I was very excluded, because I attended the day care centre. That was very difficult for me. (U M2)*

*I had always problems with the other kids, because the teacher called me an orphan and then the other kids behaved differently. (U F6)*

Also, in Slovakia, the young people have had similar experiences, as in the other countries. One girl said that in her experience people have a negative impression of young people related to youth diaconia (S F6). Some of the other young people could relate to this and shared their experiences. One person had told people at a workplace that he was from the diaconal organisation and then he felt that the people at the workplace perceived him as a homeless man, they put him in a bad light, with mental health problems and not equal with other people. (U M1) The rest of the young people in the focus group could relate to this and added that people's attitude and perception change when people hear about the personal history and connections to youth diaconia. Some had also experienced that strangers have tried to define and explain the young people's background. Some of the young people had stopped to tell people about their background and relations to the organisation to avoid these situations and experiences. (S M4/ S M1/ S F6/ S M3)

*It is negative if I tell other people in a community who we are and where we are from (e.g., from half-way house). It does not even matter what education you have. There is straight away a negative impression for the people. (S F6)*

*People do not take me as equal anymore, if I tell them that I live in the half-way house. (S M1)*



Based on the content analysis *the experience of a welcoming atmosphere* affected the experience of acceptance. The content analysis brought up topics highlighting the atmosphere of the centres as vital in influencing how people are treated and given care and attention. The analysis also shows that the atmosphere can also have a negative impact on the experience on quality of the youth diaconal services provided.

Through a welcoming atmosphere in the centres the young people have found places to grow as young people, to find people to trust in and a place where they can be themselves. The atmosphere of a place is formed by the way people treat each other.

*I love this place. Here are so many good people and atmosphere. (S F4)*

*I really like the atmosphere in the day care centres. It differs from the atmosphere at home or in school. It feels like you are part of a huge friendly family. (K F1)*

*Cozy. Like a real home. You can be yourself. You don't have to pretend that you are someone else. (K F2)*

*It's like a family. I feel good to be part of a community. (K M2)*

The experience of a warm and friendly atmosphere was created by different situations where the staff members had given the young people attention and time. The young people mentioned that the staff and the volunteers had acted as an inspiration for them, they had given advice and consultations to the young people, they had solved issues together with the young people and given help and support. (U M2/U F3/U F5/ K F6/ S F2/S F7)

*They paid attention to me, gave me love that won my heart. (K F6)*

*I do not feel alone now, I have someone to talk to, to solve the issues with – it is very positive. (S F8)*

*I have a desire to be like the teachers in our centre who have endless patience. (A F2)*

*A social worker ... in "Hniezdo" has a little time for me, but when she has time – we communicate. (S F6)*

The young people expressed their gratefulness and affection towards the staff members by telling how long they had known the staff (S F7) and of what they were thankful for (UF6). One of the young people described how she has kept contact with the staff also after the time spent in the organisation:

*I continue to keep in touch with the shelter staff, as they became the ones who helped me gain hope and faith in the future. (K F4)*

In the focus group interview in Georgia the young people brought up how they felt that the organisation, and the way the staff members were working, had previously been better, compared to how they were at the time of this study. In the interviews the young people discussed how things had changed, many children and young people had left the centre and that the attitude of the teachers had changed. They reflected on how, in their opinion, the teachers had previously been more attentive towards the children and that the teachers had used methods which, in their opinion, were better. They felt that one reason why many children and young people had left the centre was because of the staff members' attitude and way of working. They also discussed how mistrust towards the staff members had also grown. They thought that teachers and staff in general should be warm, patient and have time for children. (G P1/G P2)

*...despite that fact the children number were huge, teachers were more attentive than they are now. (G P1)*

Time spent together with the young people and the time that the staff are possible to give to the young people is highly valued and anticipated. One young person speculated that the decline in the service and the change in the attitudes of teachers was caused by the lack of time the staff had for the children and youth and by the increase of paperwork the staff had to do. (G P1)

*I am sure, that this problem is caused from the teacher. They do so many administrative paperwork that they don't have time for children. (G P1)*

## 2. SOCIAL INCLUSION

The second established top category describing the experiences of the young people participating in youth diaconia is social inclusion. The interviews highlight the support that the young people have received that has increased their social inclusion. The young people described how they had received support in the centres and how that had impacted their living conditions and on their education and employment.

The main topics that were determined through the content analysis imply that youth diaconal activities support young people's living conditions. The centres have affected the lives for example through help in disadvantageous life situations, the centres have become the young people's second home, the centres have helped them get hold of life again as well as giving them support in different legal or official matters.

Many of the organisations work with street-connected children and young people. Many of the young people describe how the organisation has become their new home.

*...the organisation became the family for me, I am very grateful for that, at that difficult time, when I was completely left alone on the street. (K F3)*

There are similar experiences also in other countries on how being connected to the centre or organisation has changed the young person's life course – the young people have in their own words started to live a normal life, changed their lifestyle, stopped being attracted of the things connected to street life, become part of a community, and their life has changed for better. (G P6/ U F3/ M5)

Street-connected life can have different consequences on a young person's life and places young people in vulnerable situations. The young people participating in the interviews described street-connected life in the following ways:

*When I managed to escape from that house, I became a street kid and start begging for food since I was starving, was very cold and scared. (K F4)*

*... it was very bad at the street. I didn't like to be a part of the street life... It was long time ago... and I was there a lot... (G P5)*

*Before I was in the street, I had some protest in my family, I wanted to be outside all the time, I have been to all the centres in Tbilisi ... after that I was in jail for 6 month ... The main reason why I was not at home was conflict with everyone.... So, then I decided to left house. I wanted to be free and I could do whatever I wanted.... I was 7-8 years old... I don't like boundaries.... Then I gained many friends. This period was so mess... (G P6)*

The young people in Kyrgyzstan also explained how a person must be registered to be entitled various legal, official and basic services in the society. The registration must be done together with an adult, but because street-connected children and young people might not have any adults or legal guardians to support them, the minors are left on their own without the registration. The young people expressed how important it is to have the registered documents and how the registration process is difficult for young people and especially for young people that do not have reliable adults around them. (K M2) The organisation has helped the young people to get their registration done and by doing this that the young people have been able to benefit of the services in the society.

Not all of the young people interviewed have lived a street-connected life, but many of them described issues, problems and difficult circumstances that their families had gone through. Families struggled with substance abuse, domestic violence afflicted both the young people and other family members, inadequate living conditions and homelessness, mistreatment in foster care, malnutrition, unemployment and underemployment of the parents or grandparents as well as adults in the family juggling with too many jobs because of the poor economic situation. Some of the young people grew up in single parent families or in a family where the grandparents took care of them. Some of the young people had lived in various family settings such as foster care and orphanages, with relatives and or at

friends. In relation to difficulties and struggles that the families had had, the young people talked about the different ways how the organisations have helped the families.

*Living Hope started to cover all the medical expenses for my mother. (U F3)*

*I was beaten in case if I did not iron the cloth. I have never had any support in that family. From both sides, at school and at home I was humiliated. The “woman” (“Profi family”) did not even do my laundry and did not allow me to do it myself. School peers helped me with my laundry (take it at home). She did not play the role of a mother; it was some kind of terror for me. I had a full list of tasks in the house: to do ironing, cleaning, go to the garden and do some work over there until the evening etc. (S F8)*

*I started to attend the day care centre I met many good people, ready to help me and my family. (U F2)*

Some of the young people had lived in a shelter for young people but then later they had moved back to their families. The centres had provided the families with supervision and support in parenting issues in the new start of having their young person living back at home.

*I lived in the shelter for a year then I was placed back to my own family since it became a safer place to live then it used to be, but the staff of the organisation provided supervision of my family during the next few years. (K F1/ F2/ M2)*

In some cases, the situation in the family had become worse for the young person and the young person had shifted from daytime services to fulltime services and moved to the centre.

*First I was day care child and then when I had crucial problems in my family I was staying at night also. (G P1)*

The organisations and the diaconia work had also supported education and employment of the young people. The interview data shows that participating in the youth diaconia have given the young people support in school and education related matters, they have received help in funding their education, they have received help with unemployment issues and have succeeded to connect to work life.

Many of the young people had needed support in building a stable and independent life. School and education in general have been areas that the young people had received support for from the centres they have been involved in. Some of them had needed support to enrol to school, some had needed and received support in doing their homework, some had needed motivation and encouragement to keep studying.

*I’ve got a lot of help during the secondary school. Social workers from Relevant motivated me to move forward ... motivated me to start the studies in the university. (SF7)*

Some of the young people had needed funding for different courses and other education and the centres had helped in covering these costs. In other cases, the centre had helped with the legal documents so that the young person could study for free. In Slovakia the young people mentioned how the different vocational training that the organisation had arranged had been important, supportive and necessary for them.

*The organisation restored to me registration documents that were lost. I had privileges at school so that I could start studying again for free. (K F3)*

*Relevant helped me to get other funds from one project. I used to go to language courses – Relevant covered that one for me as well. (S F7)*

*The people around me were supportive in making the progress in my life. Also, the trainings were supportive too. (S M1)*

Closely related to educational support is employment issues. Many of the young people have gained job experiences despite their young age. The young people had though also seen a lot of unemployment and underemployment within their families. The personal and family history that the interviewees shared gave a picture of families and young people in poor economic situations.

*When I didn’t have enough for my personal expenses I always found some job to earn that money, for example collecting walnuts and selling them. (U M1)*

*I worked during that time (during schooltime), so I managed to cover the bus tickets, lunches at school and so on. (S F7)*

*Mother brings me and my younger brother up alone, I would say we are poor. (U M2)*

*I often was left alone even during kindergarten time, because my mother was always working trying to earn enough money for us to survive. (U M4)*

*In the biological family the economic situation was bad; the father worked, but he did not earn the necessary amount of money to take care of all of us. (S F7)*

The different centres offer support in connecting adolescents with working life. In Slovakia the aim of the youth diaconia services is to teach and train the young people to manage on their own in working life and to become integrated to the society. The young people in Slovakia describe how the opportunity to work has given them the possibility to become economically independent and stable, being able to pay debts, being part of a work community and getting the feeling of being needed and appreciated.

*I was doing for SED, (Centre of Lutheran diaconia who runs halfway house) with a purpose to learn how to work, and other things, which I needed. (S M5)*

*I have finished school and now I work in a company called “U Denku” (social enterprise run by SED). This work helped me to get rid of a debt. (S M3)*

*I got a working position in health sector after finishing a nursing school. Now I work as a nurse-practitioner. (S F6)*

In Ukraine one young person had learned cooking at the organisation as he had prepared meals for other children in the activities the organisation had organised. Obtaining the cooking skills have led to the young person to hope that cooking could be his future profession.

*I really like to prepare meals and in the day care centre I have developed this skill. I have voluntarily helped to prepare food for the kids almost every day over the last two years. And now I want to become a professional cook. The NGO helped me to define my future profession I would say. (U M3)*

### 3. BEING EMPOWERED

The third top category related to the experiences of youth in diaconia is being empowered. The interviews place emphasis on how youth diaconia had influenced the young people growing as a young person, what kind of skills they had learned, what kind of communities they had belonged to, what kind of impacts communities had on their lives and what kind of participatory roles they have had. The experience of being empowered consists of identity building, participation and the experience of belonging to a community.

Being part of the youth diaconia services have had an impact on the young people’s identity building. The services have given the young people different skills, competences and experiences that they might have been deprived of, if they had not been part of the services. The young people describe frequently how being part of the different youth diaconal services have influenced their identity building, growing as a person and growing in their faith.

*Before I have attraction beyond the streets but after being here I changed my life, I became more “talkative” connected with people, change some sought about the life and change my lifestyle. (G P3)*

Other young people described that they had learned to be more tolerant and more forgiving towards their friends and family members (A F3). Some of the young people in Slovakia said that the kindness and love they had experienced in the centre, despite their own actions and behaviour, had changed them to be kinder and better (S F3/ F4).



Pastoral care, sessions with psychologists and therapists and discussions with the staff members have been meaningful and important for the young people. Through the discussions, young people have received help to deal with the circumstances in their lives, they have grown as persons and in their spiritual life (U M4), they have received mentoring in a new phase of their life (E M1), support in the process of changing their life, motivation and encouragements in spiritual guidance (S M1), and encouragement in building trust towards other people and trying to open up themselves to other people (S F6).

*Everything stopped in one day. To make this change, the day care centre helped me. I analysed the life of youngsters older than me attending the centre - not smoking, drinking, loving and caring for us the younger ones and I wanted to be like them. (U M1)*

Being included in youth diaconia and as a part of a community has also changed the values and worldviews of the young people. Encountering volunteers and staff members of the centres have made the young people re-evaluate their values and how they perceive the world.

*I also was very much impressed by the help of two men from Germany. They are both handicapped, but still help a lot and care for others. I have met them during a youth exchange with Living Hope. They don't look at their weaknesses but use what they have to make the lives of others a little better.*

*For me it is important to be part of Living Hope community. It has changed my world view. Before I was more an egoist now it brings me joy to help others. (U M5)*

*I have learned from the teachers of the centre that everyone is important in our society. (A F2)*

All the organisations are faith based and many of the young people explained how youth diaconia had supported and strengthened their faith which is part of the young people's identity. The young people explained their spiritual growth in various ways. By being surrounded by other believers, Christian belief and values had become more personal for a few young persons (U F3/ M4; G P6). Taking part in home groups, worship services and Bible study groups, their faith had grown, and it had become deeper and the role of faith had become bigger in their lives (U M1/U F3/ K F3/ F4/ F1/ M1/ E F1). One young person from Armenia noted that if the centre would not be faith based, he and the other young people would probably not be Christians and know God (A M3).

The young people explained how faith and the spiritual life in the centres had influenced their lives. This is represented in the interviews with the following expressions, among others: hearing about God made them more strong and rooted and laid a foundation for life (U F2/ K F2), hearing and learning about Christian faith in the centres had supported the young people (U M3/U F5/ K F5), church and faith had changed young people themselves and their lives (K F6), faith and going to church calms them down (A M1/ F4/ M2), faith gives trust in the future and in future plans (U M4/ K F4), through the centre and God, dreams had come true (U F3), through faith they had found answers to their questions (U F6), choices and decisions are based on faith (E M7) and having other Christians around them had had an influence on them (U M1).

Faith had been part of difficult times in life. One young person said that his faith had been the only anchor in the difficult situations in life and that life is much easier with faith and with the organisation being faith based (U M2). Many others had experienced that by relying on their faith they had overcome difficult times in life. One person in Kyrgyzstan expressed the fact that through her faith and prayers she can survive the 'unfriendly' world, and another said that she can get through difficult times with faith (K F1/ F5). The men interviewed in the Estonian focus group expressed how faith and church had saved them from the difficulties of their history with addictions (E M1/ M2/ M3/ M4/ M5).

For many young people religion and faith had a big impact and was an important part of their identity and life. But for some, religion and faith were not important, or they did not believe in God (G P2). There were some young people who felt that religion and faith had no influence on their current life (E M6/ F2). One person had had a rich history of churchgoing, but at times he felt that he was not deeply dedicated to religion (K M3). Also, one person was pondering on how her faith had become more ambiguous and that she was now more careful with trusting in what people say about religion, faith and God (K F2). One person said that he is not a believer, but he has no problem with the organisation being faith based (S M4).

Growing as a young person includes learning various skills, gaining competencies self-esteem. Youth diaconia can be a space for informal learning. Many of the organisations offer activities for the young people where they can learn new skills and try out new activities. Skills that the young people have learned include playing guitar, dancing, language skills, cooking skills.

*We learn something new at the centre every day. (A M1)*

Youth diaconia can also be a form of producing experiences that young people might be deprived of because of the hard circumstances they deal with. Youth diaconia can even out the inequalities in the society. The young people in Armenia talked about different trips, excursions and pilgrimages with the organisations. They told how the destinations were unknown to them, how they learned new things about the history and the culture of their home country, and that they would probably not have seen those places without the organisations. They also mentioned that they had had a good time together and received good and positive energy from spending time together in groups (A F4/ F1/ F3/ M1). A young person in Ukraine also talked about her opportunities to travel to different countries and take part in a youth exchange through the organisations and that it gave her many opportunities (U F3).

*Participation* is a component of the process of being empowered. Based on the content analysis the young people emphasise the active roles that they had have in diaconia. Some of the young people mentioned how they have had an active role in volunteering or working for the organisation that they are involved in.

In Georgia for example one young person told frequently how he has been a peer educator in a mobile group that monitors the streets and the risk zones of the streets with the intention to find street-connected children and help them to survive (G P6). The peer educators have a background in being street-connected children themselves. The young person described how he had some trouble with his family, how he ended up on the streets and in jail. After he was released from jail, he became part of the youth centre. As a peer educator he helps other children and youth to get back to normal life and away from a street-connected life. He feels that he can help because he has similar experiences as other street-connected children, he can explain what he has gone through, what he has learned and how he has passed through the difficulties. He feels that other children can trust him because they can relate to him.

*I am peer educator and I like it. I don't call it profession but still it is good job, because I help children and youth, help them to back to normal life and leave the street. If I change my life they can change too (he was a street kid in the past), and I try to explain all the mistakes and challenges what is important what I have already passed. And they trust because they know me. (G P6)*

Participating and volunteering in the activities and programmes organised by the organisations are mentioned by young people from other countries too. Two of the young people in Ukraine mentioned that they participate in helping in the activities and one of them mentioned that he finds value in belonging to a community and participating in the activities. In Estonia one of the informants said that he has been part of organising an event for six years already. In Slovakia, a big part of the aim of the programmes and activities conducted by the organisation builds on the idea of participation in social enterprises where the service users can train for different jobs and be integrated to the society.

*I can volunteer in the day care centre, helping other kids. (U M2)*

*We (the young people) can develop a programme for the kids in our centres connected to sustainability and eco-friendliness. (U M1)*

*Belonging to a community* also impacts the experience of becoming empowered. The content analysis picked up experiences of the young people that suggest both positive and negative experiences in relation to belonging to a community but in general, the strong feeling of belonging to a community is highlighted.

Belonging to a community and how it impacts the young people's lives were discussed in the interviews. In the content analysis community refers to the organisations that are part of the research project. For some of the young people it was a positive experience to be part of a community, for some it has had some negative implications and some of the young people felt indifferent or reluctant about belonging to a community. A young person in Ukraine explained that it is important for her to belong to the organisation and she has tried to attend church regularly and to serve on summer camps.

Belonging and being active has shaped her faith (U F5). In Slovakia one of the young people described how she feels that the young people in the organisation form a community because they live together, communicate with each other and sometimes they spend time together and go to different places together (S F7). A girl in Estonia described how she likes to be part of the centre when there is a lot of singing and storytelling (E F1).

Belonging and being part of a community can also be complicated and have negative implications. Young people felt that it is important to belong to the community and being part of the activities but at the same time it may be difficult to be part of the community since they have problems in trusting people.

*For me belonging is not so important, because I was often disappointed by people. But I like to serve God and people, for instance in summer camps, in the day care centre etc. Participation is important, because we are part of a community. (U F6)*

Two of the young people in Kyrgyzstan reflected on their belonging to the centre and being Christians. For them it was important to be part of the community because it was part of their identity, but at the same time they felt that it separated them from other young people in their city.

*My identity is rooted in my family, in the organisations and my church. I am actively involved in church life, involving in various youth ministries and I enjoy it... This separates me from the general youth in our city, but at the same time, I am a member of the Christian community and part of my church. (K F3/K F4)*

The young people in Kyrgyzstan also reflected over the dimensions of being a Christian and being part of the centre and church and therefore being somewhat excluded from other young people's lives and cultures. The young people felt difficulties to build relationships with non-believers because they have a different value base, they had struggled to find a "common language" and they felt that they were interested in different things in life and had different opinions on for example the use of substances and sexual relationships.

*I often can't find a "common language" with nonbelievers. This separates me from the general youth in our city. (K F3/K F4)*

The young people in Ukraine had had experiences of discrimination and exclusion because of being Christian. One person explained how her friends had made jokes about her Christian faith, which she did not like, but she felt that the jokes would not stop her to believe and do good things (U F1). Many other young people in Ukraine could relate to the experience and had experienced something similar. Another young person told in more detail about his experiences. He said that he felt excluded from other students because of his relations to the centre and because of his faith. The other students in school had tried to pressure him to do things that he did not want to do. (U M2) Similarly the young people in Slovakia discussed how Christian faith can be a taboo and how talking about faith can change how people perceive you.

*I also had many others making fun of me, because of my values. (U F1)*

*It was the hardest year in school for me in relation to my classmates. I was very excluded, because I attended the day care centre. (U M2)*

*The taboo is connected to a faith. If you speak about the faith - your opinion may not be accepted by others. You tell your opinion on the Christianity - and you will be a different person for others. (S M1)*

Some of the young people felt that they did not belong to a community. One young person reflected on how she thinks that she did not belong to the community in the centre. She explained how she is reserved towards the other girls in the centre because she felt that the other girls could not help her and that the young people in the centre all take care of their own things. The young person felt that she can rely on and talk with the staff members in the organisation. (S F8)

# THE PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS OF YOUTH DIACONIA

As a part of the project, a focus group discussion was also implemented with the professionals of the same organisations which the young people have been involved in. The professionals discussed questions related to the institution and its work, questions related to the employees' personal values and connection with faith-based organisations, and questions related to the support the organisation is offering to the young people in need. A more detailed explanation of the topics can be seen in appendix 3. Because this study focuses on the voices of the young people, only parts of the data collected in the interviews with the employees will be published in this research report. However, the employees' ideas on the principles of diaconia work will be reported. This research report will also discuss how the employee's opinions fit with the experiences of the young people.

Through the phases of the content analysis one top category and three subcategories were found describing how the professionals perceive the diaconal work in the organisations and how they describe the support the centres offer. The top category is 1) diaconal work approach and the subcategories are 1) spiritual life and support, 2) a safe place in a family like centre, and 3) sowing a good seed: social pedagogy and social learning. The categories can be seen in figure 2.

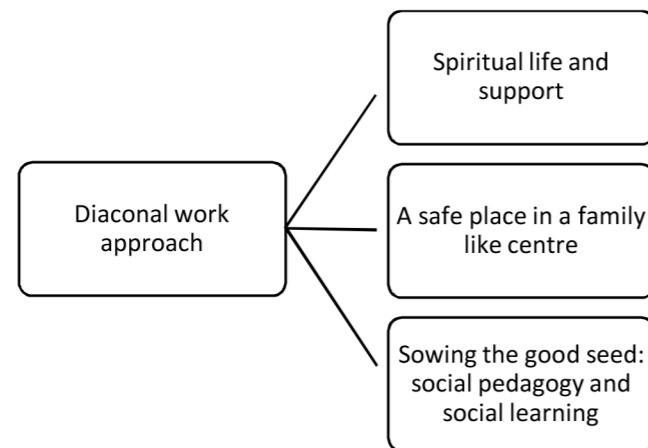


FIGURE 2. Top and subcategories of the analysis on the professionals' interviews

## 1. DIACONAL WORK APPROACH

The top category that was established based on the focus group interviews with the professionals is diaconal work approach. All the organisations involved in the research project are diaconal and the basis of their work is in the Christian faith. According to the informants, diaconia stands for an unconditional acceptance of all kinds of persons (S2/S4), openness to all people in need, regardless of race, gender and religion (K1/S1/G6/G3), trust in a person's own choices and decisions (E3) and openness to God's plans and possibilities (K1).

This diaconal work approach has been developed based on their work experience and on the Christian values which form the foundation of the work. However, the environment in which the organisations are working in has also influenced the values of the work.

*When the work was started, there was not necessarily a clear plan but a willingness to help poor children on the streets. (E1)*

*When the clubroom has a 'low threshold', people had questions. Why are you doing this? Why do you do it for free? We did it because we felt something like this was needed. (S1)*

Christianity and diaconia are important reasons for many of the professionals to work in these organisations: it gives motivation to do the work and forms the basis of the work which can be seen in the everyday activities of the centres.

*The group we work with is demanding, and if we did not have as much living faith as an organisation, I think that after several failures and difficult situations we would just give up. (S3)*

However, there were employees who were not active Christians or church goers.

*The church does not play a role in my life. As for faith, I grew up in such an environment, so I have these values. (S2)*

The way of understanding Christianity in the diaconal organisations was open and ecumenical because there were representatives from different denominations among the staff (E3). The workers had also a positive attitude towards representatives of other religions who are also trying to help people.

*All religions as well as the Christian religion call on us to help people who need our help. (G1)*

Despite the open ecumenical attitude there were sometimes anxieties related to the way of believing. For example, when a young person from a family with a very strong Catholic orientation starts to participate the activities of the diaconal centre, the family members may have strong reactions, even if the young person would only participate in leisure activities. (S3). Moreover, many of the young people participating in the activities have rather weak connections to any religion, which needed to be taken into consideration in the work (G6).

*Our organisation is faith-based, but there is freedom of religion and conscience here, and we never accuse those who attend other religious organisations/groups. We respect his/her choice, but only if this attitude is mutual. (A/4)*

The diaconal organisations and centres are typically connected to local churches in many ways. For example, in Slovakia there are representatives of the local church on the board of the diaconal organisation, in Estonia the centre has its facilities in a church building and in Kyrgyzstan the church offers an office in use for the diaconal organisation and the church even takes care of some of the organisation's operational expenses (S4/ E3/ K3).

In Armenia the diaconal centre works in close connection with the church and the pastor of the church has a very essential role in the life of the diaconal organisation, for example by meeting vulnerable families, children and young people regularly. He also leads group discussions and questions-answers sessions. Therefore, the cooperation between the pastor and the social workers is very close. (A1/A2)

*There is a close cooperation between priest and social workers. Not all young people and families in our community are ready to share their problems with the priest, for example, marital relations, problems and relations with mothers-in-law, parents and children. (A1)*

The close connection between the centres and the local churches are beneficial for all. Collaboration and cooperation between the centres and the churches reduces their weakness and increases the strengths of all. The churches do not only offer facilities and human resources, but they also give spiritual support. Reciprocally the diaconal organisations have an important role in narrowing the gap between the churches and the communities because employees in diaconia work know the circumstances that the young people and their families live in (A6).

*Without the organisation the church would have a very narrow view of its role in the community development process. The church helps the organisation, but the organisation does much more for the church. (K1)*

*Churches in Kyrgyzstan often live in their own isolated world (due to the Islamic context) and look very narrowly at the world around them, but due to the connection with charitable organisations, the vision of churches is expanded. (K2)*



## 2. SPIRITUAL LIFE AND SUPPORT

The first subcategory is the *spiritual life and support* that the organisations and centres offer. The spiritual life and support are unique for these organisations and it separates them from other actors in the field of youth work. In Georgia the service users are representatives of different religions and therefore they must be very sensitive in the way they are representing Christianity in their activities.

*Because our beneficiaries are from different religions, we must be very careful and respectful about this issue. (G2)*

However, Christian faith is a visible part of the everyday life of all the other centres involved in the study. They pray together for the young people and their families and life circumstances. (U2/K4/S3/S1/A1/E2) The team in Kyrgyzstan have a practice to include people in need in their prayer list and pray for them regularly until the situation has improved – this happens especially in cases that they cannot help someone who is looking for help (K4).

*Prayer is also part of our job and it is a visible difference compared to organisations that are engaged in the same activities, but prayer does not play any role there and I believe that it is very important in our organisation. We also count on help from above. (S1)*

*For example, there are times when poor people turn to us, but we don't know how to help them or cannot because of limited resources, in this case, we include this person in the prayer list and pray for him regularly until the situation improves. (K4)*

*We have a practice of holding regular prayer meetings where the organisation's employees get together and pray for each other and for people in need (K6)*

*When a child first enters our centres we of course don't force anybody to pray or read the Bible. It's a free proposal it's totally voluntary. But often the children find interest and want to learn more by watching the others. Then we are open to explain and answer questions. Many of them find it helpful to have the practice to pray for their families or situations they face in school or at home together with others. (U4)*

*When we go home, sometimes we need to read a prayer over a sick person, if that is needed. (A2)*

Religious practice is not an end in itself in these centres. The aim of the religious practice and rituals is to support both the staff members and people participating in the activities and services. Christianity also forms a solid basis for the choices of the life in order to help the service users to find a better future. The spiritual atmosphere in the centres has an influence also on the employees and their way of working in the centres. It for example offers wisdom for the professionals to decide in conflicts and difficulties. (S1/S2/S3/K1/K4/K5)

*If I am not a believer, I wouldn't do this job. (S1)*

*...we find out that the difficult conditions of most of those families come from the non-Christian way of life. Today, we have not only work on social problems, but also do service and propaganda to help people for the proper and responsible human life. The service is combined with the ritual. (A2)*

*I think it changes not only the girls but also us. (S3)*

*I was before a very different person. Then I needed a change in my life, I became believer and started to work here. (E3)*

Christian faith also offers the professionals trust that there is always hope and even the deeply wounded young people with serious traumas can be healed. Though the healing seems to be impossible even for the best experts, it is possible with God according to the professionals (S3). Singing hymns and liturgy is also a part of the diaconal work because it supports the participants' spiritual growth (A6).

*[...] if God brought this person (who does not fit our criteria), then He knows that we can help him. God knows better what we can and to whom we can help, even if it goes against our programs, and even if it requires us more time and energy. (K4/K5/K1)*

*I think often about Gods involvement. Even if we were experts, we cannot heal the inner injuries that a person experiences. Internal wounds are healed by God. (S3)*

## 3. A SAFE PLACE IN A FAMILY LIKE CENTRE

The second subcategory, *a safe place in a family like centre*, characterises the youth diaconal organisations and centres in the research project. However, both parts, a safe place and a family kind of a centre, can have different meanings.

Firstly, the concept “safe place” carries the meaning of urgent support which children and young people need because of some crisis, individual or societal, in their lives. One example of a crisis which happened during the data collection period of the research project is the COVID-19 pandemic which led to a catastrophic situation for the children who had participated in the 24 shelter services in Georgia.

*...it was hard for 24-hour children to stay indoors, and they had cases of self-harm and suicide, and we work in a very 'force majeure' situation. And this difficult emotion was very contagious, and it took a lot of psychological work to get the results. Currently the centres are controlled very strictly in the quarantine zone and direct flow to the centres does not occur. (G6)*

There are a lot of young people who need medical support, housing and food in the context that the centres work in. The centres help with these emergent needs. However, the deeper need is to find positive human connections, acceptance and spiritual support for the young people. It is crucial that there are trustworthy people available all the time. This work approach follows the classical idea of diaconal work by going to places where other help is not available.

*The day care and 24-hour shelter offer children mobile group services as they cannot come to the centre and we help them on the street with different needs. Many organisations do not work with this community (street-connected youth) and they are not a popular community and their prevention is less common. (G6)*

Moreover, the concept of a “safe place” is connected to a diaconal community which is an environment where wounded children and young people can live for a longer time in peace surrounded by adults who support them. It is a safe place where young people do not need to be afraid.

*The diaconal communities form a safe place for young people who had lived in a vulnerable situation before. These communities might be like a family where people take care of each other. (E3)*

*We create a safe environment for young people and generally support their development and growth. We try to create such an environment in the Hniezdo as well as the environment of accepting so that one is not afraid to be there, because only then can someone heal and grow. (S1)*

*A priority for us is that each person visiting the centres feels safe. Creating a safe space is important for all of us. (U2)*

Secondly, the diaconal centres for children and young people are “a home like place” or like a second home. Behind this metaphor is the idea that children and young people participating in the services often do not have a home where they could live in peace. The centres have offered them a place which can compensate for this shortage. The concept of a home like place also includes the importance of the atmosphere of the centre which emphasises that everybody is seen as a unique and important person, with unique needs. There are loving adults available who are doing their best to support everybody in the centre. Even though there have been anxieties and quarrels in centres among

both the professionals and service users, it has been possible to solve the problems without violence. This has been a new experience for many of the service users.

*The employees described their centres as a family where people take care of each other. There are good and bad periods like there are in every family, but young people and the employees go through them together (E2).*

People in these centres have been able to spend holiday times together like in a real family. In these centres there have also been older brothers and sisters who have helped the younger with their homework and organise free time activities for them. In a centre like this, the communal life has been emphasised. Children and young people have been able learn a new way of living in the community with love and respect as the basis. In most of the cases this had been a totally new way of life for the service users. (U5/U6)

*For example, some parents suffer from alcohol and drug addictions and the kids see and feel the effects of this every day. In the centre they see that there is also a different life - you can live together honouring and accepting each other, they see how healthy families work during the camps, they see how it is possible to solve conflict in a peaceful way, without using violence. By seeing these different ways of life, they have options to choose for their own future. (U6)*

Even though these centres are communities, they try to tailor their services individually according to the need of the young people. This is crucial because of the serious traumas and special needs of the service users. The help can be material, practical, emotional or spiritual. It's important to review each case individually.

*Our help is very diverse - our help is material, practical, emotional and spiritual. All situations are different, and we approach each "case" individually. Even some might need medical support. Also, in these cases we organise what is needed. (U1)*

*As our place is very small, this gives the specialists the opportunity to work individually with the children, to understand the child's needs and opportunities. (A4)*

*Our organisation has been implementing a child development programme in Georgia for more than 20 years, where socially vulnerable, sheltered children receive services tailored to their needs, starting with basic material assistance, ending with health and education, and adapting to their social environment, (G2)*

However, in Armenia the services are focused on the whole family because if supporting only one or two persons in a family, it could have a negative influence on the dynamics of the family. Because of this orientation, the concept "a family like centre" also carries a slightly different meaning compared to the communities where children and young people have been without their family members. A 'family like centre' presents a centre with positive learning environment where families spend time together cooking and playing while the children participate in educational activities with joy. Everybody has been able to feel safe in these centres. (A3/A4)

The contact with the family members is important even though the services are only for children. In Slovakia the parents have been able to visit the centre where their children spent their free time. During the visits the parents have learnt to know the employees and have started to trust the services. In some cases, the professionals have become friends with some of the parents.

*In the Depo we also had contact with the parents, they came to see where their child spends their free time. At that time, we had the space to explain them why we were doing it, and even became friends with some of the parents and some friendships last till this day. (SF2)*

Even though the children did not participate in the services together with their parents, the services have been able to influence the family members, too. For example, in Estonia the employees had recognised that the support given to a child may later help the whole family.

*The parents are broken inside of themselves. We start to work with children, read Bible, pray. After some time also the parents start to be fine because the children have influence on them. The parents become believers. (E1)*

The analysis of the data shows that the professionals need to give time and be present so that the young people are listened to and their questions, needs and wishes are heard.

*I also grew up in one of the centres and in my special case the most valuable thing I experienced - was the constant psychological and emotional support. It helped me so much to have trustworthy people by my side, who would talk to me, pray for me and hold me up. I was a very shy and closed person due to the family environment I grew up in. Over the years in the day care centre, I became whole and healed inside. (U3)*

## 4. SOWING A GOOD SEED: SOCIAL PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL LEARNING

The third subcategory of the diaconal youth work approach is *sowing a good seed: social pedagogy and social learning* and it is related to teaching and learning through social pedagogy and learning by doing. All the centres offer courses, mentoring, tutoring and coaching for and with the young people. The aim of these activities is to support the development of the young people. The centres offer courses for example in life skills, economics, human relationships, values, history, cooking, handicraft, hygiene, interaction skills and media. There is also teaching available on singing, playing music and making visual arts. Some organisations also offer adventure education, cultural and sport events, camps and holiday trips and pilgrimages. There is career planning, vocational education, teaching of foreign languages and support related to schoolwork available in many of the organisations. (G2/G5/S2/A2/E1/E2/U2)

*In other organisations all this is done more for fun and entertainment. In our organisation the entertainment is more developmental, for example we have pilgrimages, which give young people the opportunity to be aware of our history, historical monuments and homeland. (A6)*

*We have different programs supporting teenagers to choose their professional career after school - either vocational training, volunteering or university. (U2)*

*I think our classes are also great ways to help people by giving them the opportunity to manage their own careers and choices, have professional orientation. We already have a few young people who, being from socially vulnerable families, had a desire to study and today they are in universities. (A5)*

Many other organisations working with youth also offer similar programmes and education as the youth diaconal centres participating in this research project. However, the young people's opinions on youth diaconia are important in developing the services and activities in these centres. This is one of the important elements which separates the diaconal centres from other organisations.

*The services which we provide in the centre are a result of great discussions. We take into account the opinions of young people and beneficiaries which we get by surveys among them. (A4)*

The aim of the programmes offered by the diaconal centres is to offer skills for the young people which they will need later in their life. Simultaneously the activities empower the young people because they can learn new skills and gain an experience that they are good at something. Also, equally important is the atmosphere in the centres which encourages and motivates the service users to attend school and complete their education. The centres may also offer financial support for the young people which may also motivate the young people to be successful with their school and studies. (E1/E2)

One of the aims in Armenia is to build the capacity of women. The capacity building supports women to manage in the labour markets which can in turn strengthen the whole family and stop marginalisation with all its consequences. (A1)



*The kids and young people love to bring their ideas in this field - even the boys. Very often they come with a new recipe and just want some verbal assistance but do all the work themselves. That helps their self-confidence to grow. Often they later share that they have done the same meal at home for family members. (U6)*

Although the centres organise a lot of events and education for the service users, the most effective way of learning is the social learning which is happening spontaneously without planning. Younger and less experienced service users learn many things from the older service users. The professionals are also very important role models for the service users. Moreover, many of the centres have invited their former service users to volunteer in the services. The example given by these volunteers is very important and encourages the service users.

*I also grew up in one of the centres and in my special case the most valuable thing I experienced - was the constant psychological and emotional support. Today my own story helps me in my personal work with the kids. (...) I work in the village and for these kids it's stimulating, because there are not many ways to escape the predefined path many of their friends follow. (U3)*

Therefore, it is crucial that the young people are free to decide for themselves what they are willing to do and how they would like to develop themselves. In the diaconal work approach the young peoples' own will is the starting point. The young people can influence the rules of the centres and organise camps for example, if they are interested in it.

However, it is also important to encourage the young people to take responsibility of their own lives. For this reason, there are clear rules in the centres that youth people must follow. By following the given instructions, they will receive a safe and caring community in return. These boundaries and rules may of course cause aggression, which is only part of growing up.

*But certain rules help to move toward our goals. One priority is that young people should go for education and if someone chooses not to work or educate we will not support this choice (U1)*

*Showing clients boundaries and that certain behaviour is also expected on their side. (S3)*

*There is negative feedback as well. Our work is often perceived as such that when you do something as if it is an obligation and usually considered 'a story', and often there is aggression when you show some responsibilities, for example asking a basic question about hygiene, etc. Basically, the feeling of gratitude is less. You find it difficult to express positive emotions, so they are accustomed to this and alienated from them. (E2)*

There are many examples of the good results of the work of the centres. The best way of evaluating the results is to see how the lives of the service users have changed. (S3) However, the work is not easy. It is important to understand that it takes time before you can see the results. (A2/S3)

*A young man who had grown up with us - at some moment turned away and started to drink a lot like his parents. But after a while he returned, and he is now finishing education as a caregiver in Germany. But he needed some time of reflection and negative experience to take decisions. He even came to thank us for the time and resources Living Hope had put into his development and for the relationships. We really can see that the seeds sown into a young person's life will sooner or later bring forth fruit. (U3)*

# OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND TABOOS IN YOUTH DIACONIA

The professionals as well as the young people discussed about opportunities, challenges and taboos in youth diaconia. Through the phases of the content analysis based on the professionals' focus group interviews three top categories were formed. The top categories are 1) trust building as an excluded organisation, 2) barriers to the work, and 3) taboos in diaconal work. These are presented in this chapter. The young people spoke about challenges and development needs in youth diaconia in their focus group interviews. One of the top categories that emerged in the content analysis was the gap between the generations. This category is included in this chapter as it touches similar topics as the professionals' discussions. The rest of the young people's development ideas are presented in chapter seven. The categories can be seen in figure 3.

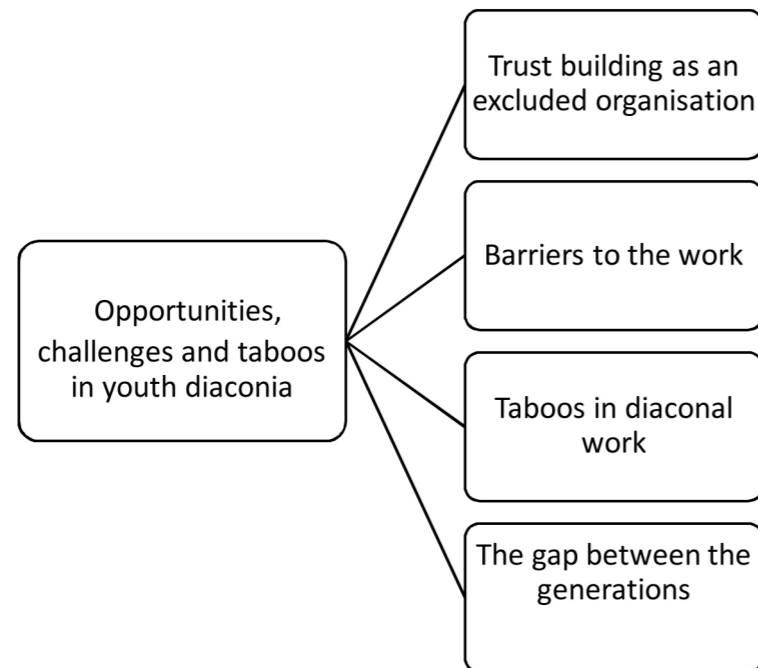


FIGURE 3. Top categories of the analysis on the opportunities, challenges and taboos in youth diaconia

## 1. TRUST BUILDING AS AN EXCLUDED ORGANISATION

The organisations are living in societies with their respective social structures and legislation. It is interesting to know and important to reflect on what kind of influences the different contexts have had on the work and everyday life of the organisations. Because all of the organisations participating in the research project have had a common history with official atheism in their societies, the faith-based organisations have therefore had to face prejudices and, in many cases, win the trust of people and communities step-by-step.

The experiences of trying to win the trust of people were discussed in the professional's focus group discussions both in Estonia and Ukraine. When they had founded the diaconia organisation or started a new project, suspicions and distrust became visible in the society around them. Trust in the organisation grew only slowly and in order to win the trust of the communities, the work had to be more transparent and resistant than if the work would have been done by some secular organisation. Step-by-step the mutual trust has grown deeper and the organisations have become a part of their physical environments. (E1/ U5/ U6)

*There [was] a director of a school who was strongly against us and said that we must finish. Now we drink coffee together and he says that the work is very good that we have done. It takes time. (E3)*

*When you start a new project in a new place there is always a lot of suspicion. Only after time "under observation" carefully monitoring the work and its outcomes people start to trust. It needs a lot of work to show that our motivation is a positive one and we only want the best for the children and young people. (U6)*

*But because we obviously communicate that we are a NGO based on Christian values – ecumenically not orthodox – we were often called a sect and rumours about our work were spread. (U2)*

The employees in Ukraine mentioned two examples of good cooperation between the organisation and the local authorities. The first example was a practice of the governmental departments who nowadays send children to the organisation's programme. The second example was a project during the time of quarantine imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic when the village administration turned to the organisation and asked for food help for forty families and fifty lonely pensioners. The organisation accepted the plea for help and could supply the food packages on a weekly basis to the needy. During the organisation's first years of operation, this could not have happened. (U1/U3)

There were a couple of opinions about the economic support of the society. If a diaconal organisation receives financial support from the municipalities or some other secular organisations, it creates a situation where the organisation is dependent on the benefactor. If the organisation does not receive any financial support, it has a freedom to plan and implement the work independently. The leaders in the Ukrainian organisation said that the biggest support of the government is if the authorities do not hinder the work (U2).

It is important to find a balance between the financial support and the number of service users. There have been situations where the financing of the social services was arranged by the local authorities enabling more money for the organisation. This arrangement was pushing the organisation into higher numbers of service users. However, the increase of financial support and increase of the number of service users happened at the expense of the quality of the services. More money and bigger numbers meant less services that the young people would have needed and less services that the professionals were willing to offer (S4).

It is not only money or the trust but also the legislation and tradition that put boundaries for the work. The diaconal organisations have also a role in the society to make life easier for the needy. However, the current legislation sets the boundaries for the work. An employee in Georgia said that society and the law are not flexible for children. For example, a homeless child under the age of five cannot receive services (G6). There was also a wish for the lawgivers:

*If child begging is banned in Georgia, we will get results. (G6)*

An employee in Kyrgyzstan also commented on the weaknesses of the legislation. Because a child and a young person is not perceived as a separate human being in the legislation, many laws simply could not protect young people and take their side. There were teenagers who were subjected to domestic violence, but the organisation did not have sufficient authority in the situation and remained helpless (K1). The conflicts between legislation, traditions and ethical goals have also led to tragic situations, as follows:

*There was a young girl in our programme whom her husband often beat (according to Kyrgyz traditions, a girl can get married very early). After our consultation, she filed a complaint with the police about the facts of domestic violence by her husband, the police conducted an investigation and closed him in prison for 30 days. After he was released from prison, he came home and wounded his wife with a knife. She had to stay in the hospital for almost a month, we assist her in treatment in the hospital. After that, she no longer complains about her husband and continues to endure domestic violence from him. We as employees of the organisation went to the police to write an appeal in order to protect her, but we were told by the police that we did not have authority and if this young woman needs protection, she must come to police by herself and appeal. But she will not do this anymore, as she is afraid that her husband will completely kill her. And we can do nothing and its very pity. (K4)*

There was also another example from Kyrgyzstan where societal structures based on traditions created barriers for the support of young people. The employees talked about the difficult and humiliating situation of adolescents in schools. The whole state system seemed to be losing resources and that affected also the schools a lot. The young people did not get the education they should deserve (K2). There were teachers that had behaved inappropriately towards pupils, but the teenagers were defenceless because according to traditional principles it is necessary to respect elders and to submit to the fact that a teacher is always right. That is why the parents also chose the side of teachers and the adolescents were left alone (K4).

The change of the society has derogated the trust towards the Christian diaconal organisations and because of that there are less opportunities for Christian organisations to work for example in schools. Simultaneously the global economic crisis caused the reduction in funding for youth programmes and many professionals left the city which led the young people to remain on their own (K1/K5). Also, young people's values have changed, and the Christian values do not fit with the way of thinking of modern youth (K4).

*Many young people are afraid to come to us because of their Muslim belief. (K2)*

*Image is very important for young people and therefore they would better be in need and deprivation than becoming an outcast among their friends. (K6)*

## 2. BARRIERS TO THE WORK

The barriers to the work performed by the organisations were discussed in the focus group interviews. The work of the organisations had a strong formal support when it was based on the laws of the country. This was perceived as a kind of common motivation by the employees because the ultimate goal of the work was the welfare, awareness and education of vulnerable families (A3).

The work was also perceived relevant, if no other organisations working on the same field existed, for example helping street-connected youth. In these cases, it was necessary not only to provide services but also to raise public awareness of the distress of the young people (G6).

One of the key points concerning the relevance of the work were the young people themselves. The question was whether the young people themselves had realised that they need support, guidance or access to services. The employees had noticed that teenagers and children sometimes avoid receiving the services offered to them. There can be several reasons to reject or avoid the services, for example even the families who were living in extreme conditions did not want to take selfish advantage of services. (A1/ A3/ A6/ S4)

The employees talked about several barriers to meaningful support. There were external factors, individual factors, and factors dealing with resources. One of the external factors was the stereotypical negative attitude towards the beneficiary in the society. A young person could even get a stigma when being one of the service users (G2/ G4). This kind of attitude was also seen amongst youth groups. The young people were favouring various subcultures and leaning towards the group where they were understood the most (S1). The situation was often similar among the schoolmates:

*It can be that a child is in our centre and really likes to be here, but he is afraid of saying it in his school. (E2)*

Sometimes also the parents were against the services offered to their child. They thought that it was more useful when the child was working and earning money for the family rather than gaining help from the organisations (G2). Religious reasons form one of the barriers for meaningful support. This could be seen for example in Kyrgyzstan, where the Christian organisation was working in an Islamic context (K2). The same kind of situation appeared in societies where a Protestant organisation and a Catholic community were living close to each other (S2).

Besides the external factors there were also many individual factors that were related to the young people themselves. In fact, a great deal of the supporting work of the employees seemed to be focusing on encountering the choices and habits of the young people. Alcohol or drug addiction was one of the challenges. If a young person did not see the addiction as a problem, it was not easy to start the cooperation (S1). There was also a case, when drinking changed the direction of a good process, fortunately only for a while:

*A young man who had grown up with us - at some moment turned away and started to drink a lot like his parents. But after a while he returned, and he is now finishing education [...]. However, he needed some time of reflection and negative experience to take decisions. (U3)*

However, sometimes the lifestyle choices of young people raised too strong conflict between the young person and the organisation, and their ways had to separate from each other (U1). Although the organisation was flexible and understanding, certain rules and principles were necessary for achieving the goals (U1/ U4). Some of the employees also lacked motivation if some young people thought that they do not need help or could get help by themselves (S1/ S4). In some cases, there was a question, if the young person had come too late to get help. He or she seemed to have sunk too deep into 'the hole of hopelessness' (E1).

Besides the external and individual factors there were also factors dealing with resources. It was not unusual that the number of places for service in the organisations has been limited. The organisations had often faced a situation where the young people's need to get help and the organisation's will for giving support was big, but there was not room enough for this to happen in practice.

*I think we are an accessible organisation. It's not difficult to enter the programmes of Living Hope. Of course, we have a limited space - limited places for children and young people and therefore we have to choose. (U4)*

*...We take as much we manage with. The places are limited. (E2)*

*[M: Is there support available to all young people who are in need [of] it?] Because capacity reasons I would say no. This happened to us often we could not accept the client because it was not possible. (S2)*

Also, the lack of certain professional employees in the organisation acted as a barrier to the meaningful support for young people (K1).

## 3. TABOO TOPICS IN DIACONAL WORK

There were a lot of topics which seemed to be difficult to talk about according to the experiences of the service users. Three main themes were sexuality, ethnicity and traditions including religion. These topics were not separate from each other, rather they were linked to each other.

One of the taboos was the sexual orientation. Homosexuality was still a topic that was not very openly discussed (S4/ K1). The employees shared experiences from their work where parents avoided to talk about sexuality and sexual orientation with their children. Parents should be the most important educators also in this area, but this was not yet generally accepted (A3/ A4/ A6). Issues of sexual orientation were also connected to the religious background of the family:

*In Muslim families fathers can physically deal with a teenager if he decides to say that his sexual orientation is different from what it should be. Young people in Christian families are more fortunate since we have more mercy and we do not believe in physical punishment. (K2)*

Sexual orientation was taboo not only in families, but also among young people themselves. They preferred to remain silent about it and there seemed to be no difference between the church related youth or so-called secular youth (K1).



The issues concerning ethnicity were common when working in communities because it is in connection with the big themes of various cultures and religions. The employees found out that there were also tensions in the work and discussions:

*However, it should be noted that stigma exists and is often reflected in the work process, for example in the case of migration, it is crucial. (G3)*

Ethnic differences could also cause a stigma for a child at school (G6). One of the ethnic groups that was mentioned by Slovak and Estonian employees was the Roma people. The Roma people still encounter negative attitudes and pressure from the majority of the society (S1/ S4). But there were however also good experiences of the work with Roma children. During a longer period of time the professionals had seen positive progress, too (E3).

Different traditions, often related to religions, carry many kinds of taboos. One of the problems was that young people were not aware of the issues that the older generation had 'banned' them to talk about. This kind of silence and uncertainty was causing stress for the younger generation (A5). That is why the professionals had realised that it is important to talk with young people about everything and try to show them, that there are no forbidden topics (A4).

Affiliation with religion could be a sensitive topic especially if it differed from the belief of the majority.

*For example, if a young Kyrgyz guy, who should be a Muslim, became a Christian, he will not speak openly about this, as he will experience persecution from his peers. (K6)*

In addition, one of the employees mentioned topics that were not easy to talk about but were rather common in certain traditions, such as early marriage, unplanned pregnancy, children's work and prostitution (G6). The single-parent families were also mentioned:

*Very often young people from single-parent families become an outcast, as it is a shame to have divorced parents (the Islamic context affects this) and so this topic is hidden as well. (K4)*

## 4. THE GAP BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

The young people also discussed barriers and challenges to the work of the organisations. The young people discussed issues and topics that could be developed within youth diaconia and the gap between the generations rose as one such a topic. The young people had identified a gap between generations: between young people and adults, and the traditional churches.

The gap between generations were describes as youth culture, globalisation and a pluralistic society on one side and adults, the older generation in general, traditions and the traditional churches on the other side. The young people in Kyrgyzstan especially discussed how they felt that it is valuable that the organisation is faith-based and that Christian values are part of the youth diaconia and the services provided. They also however discussed how they experience a tension between young people and the older generation.

*It would probably be easier to live, for us young people if the church and parents knew how to listen and hear us, would be willing to let us make our own choices, and not decide for us what we need in this world. (K F1)*

*The problem with the gap that has arisen between the old and new generations, and a lack of understanding between them. (K F2)*

*They are not understood in their local communities. (K M2)*

The young people felt that because of the gap between generations as well as the traditional church and youth culture, adolescents might be misunderstood and might not receive the support and services they would need. The young people felt that if many of the issues in young people's lives are observed

from the perspective of churches, the organisations do not give enough time and support for the young people to choose a better direction for their lives. (K F1/ K F4/ K F2)

*These are Christian organisations, many of them have strong beliefs about sin and are not particularly open to "sinful" youth, are not always ready to accept them with their views and beliefs, are not always ready to give enough time for young people to choose the right way and not destruction for their lives. (K F1/ K F4)*

*It is generally very difficult to speak with adults on any topic that they do not understand, and which is unacceptable to them. (K M1/ K M2)*

*I think it is very difficult for teenagers to tell their parents when they start smoking and drinking alcohol, this is also a kind of closed topic. (K M1 /K M2)*

The young people in other countries mentioned also several issues in young people's lives that are taboos in their societies. Taboos were identified as topics and issues that cannot be discussed about with adults and family members and sometimes not even with friends.

*Family, smoking, drinking, sexual connections, if someone would be pregnant here you can't say your opinion... it's hard to say something... (G P2)*

*We are forbidden to speak, and we are not talking about children who have health problems, are born with defective bodies, mental disabilities. We are used to locking them in homes and leaving them without any contact. (A M1)*

*We are not talking about violence when we are beaten, pressured, because we consider it as a family problem that should not be raised. (A F2)*

The young people hoped that the churches would firstly become more interested in and more open to young people, and secondly approach the issues in young people's lives from the perspective of the young people. The young people hoped that the church would become more open to the youth. They suggested that churches should use different methods and approaches in serving the youth. They thought that the churches should take in consideration the pace of development in the society and the churches could for example use technology.

*It seems to me that the churches in our country should think about using different approaches in serving the youth, not just traditional ones, taking into account how fast the world is developing, technology and what new challenges society poses to modern youth. (K F3)*

*I think that in churches there are rules and traditions that cannot accept young people as they are in our days, with their voices and sins. (K F4)*

According to the interviewees, churches should consider what the issues in young people's lives are and address those issues. This would make the churches more open towards young people. The young people mentioned issues such as the moral and physical pressure of fitting in, meeting the standard of being 'normal' and reflecting on one's sexual orientation. They hoped that there would be space in the churches and in the organisations to talk about questions and issues that confuse adolescents. (K F3/ K F4/ K M2)

*In our Asian context, it is not customary to talk about sexual orientation, drugs and alcohol consumption, since this is all considered a sin and often instead of helping a teenager make an informed choice in favour of getting freedom, the Christian (or even Muslim) community condemns this behaviour and insists on the immediate release and termination of this practice... so the teenager is left alone with his problem and he doesn't even have anyone to talk about it. (K F4)*

*Young people who are morally and physically pressured by society because they differ from the image accepted by others, „normal“ people. (K M2)*

The young people hoped that there would be space in the churches and in the youth diaconia organisations to talk about questions and issues that perplex adolescents. Practical ideas that the young people came up with was using different methods and ways to reach and serve youth, for example social media, having a space to discuss and reflect on issues relating to the confusing problems of adolescence nowadays.

*It seems to me that the churches in our country should think about using different approaches in serving the youth... Use technology and consider what new challenges society poses to modern youth. (K F3)*

*I think you can help them by making them interested in what they like to do and support in their endeavours (K M1)*

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUTH DIACONIA



The young people shared their thoughts on specific improvement and development areas of youth diaconia in the individual and in the focus group interviews. In the focus group interviews the young people were asked to describe the life of themselves, of young people in general and problems young people face in life. The young people were also asked to reflect on and contribute ideas on how the organisations could develop their services to meet the needs of the young people and to find solutions for the problems, difficulties or disadvantageous situations young people might be in. The problems and difficulties young people are facing include economic and educational issues, problems concerning health and well-being, housing issues, problems with legislation and human rights, services that young people should be entitled to, independency and growing up, and tensions and pressure from different parts of the society.

The content analysis suggests two top categories that capture the improvement and development ideas of the young people: 1) supporting orphans and street-connected young people, and 2) supporting young people in social inclusion.

## 1. SUPPORTING ORPHANS AND STREET-CONNECTED YOUNG PEOPLE

The first established top category describes how youth diaconia could be developed is supporting orphans and street-connected young people. The need to support orphans and street-connected youth rose from the difficult circumstances that both orphans and street-connected young people face in life. Many of the young people that have taken part in this research project are or were street-connected young people themselves. As a result of trouble in families or in foster care, some of the young people had actively chosen to or because of the circumstances ended up living on the streets. Street-connected youth was one group of young people that the interviewees identified as a group who would in their opinion need support and help. The hardships related to living on the streets according to the young people's own experiences include issues like not being registered and therefore not being entitled all the services there would be for children and young people (K F3/ K F4) and humiliating and unstable living conditions with begging, substance use, violence and uncertainty (G P4/ G P5).

The young people came up with suggestions to meet the needs of orphans and street-connected youth. On top of being concerned of the living conditions and well-being of orphans and street-connected youth, the young people were concerned of the rights of disadvantaged children and young people. The young people in Kyrgyzstan discussed about the problems with the requirements for registration and valid documents which young people have difficult to obtain without the help of adults (K F3/ K F4). The young people in Ukraine discussed about the treatment of orphans and unequal and discriminatory practices, for example in schools (U M1/ U F5/ U F6). Similarly, the young people in Slovakia had had personal experiences of discrimination and mistreatment because of their background in foster care (S M4/ S M1/ S F6/ S M3).

As a solution to the discrimination and unequal treatment the young people suggested advocacy work for the rights of street-connected young people and orphans as well as advocacy work for rights of children all in all (U M1).

*Supporting rights of orphans. The orphans do not get what they should materially and financially by the law. So, in the protection of children's rights there is a lot of work ahead. And it would be important to do more in this field in our organisation. (U M1)*

The young people also suggested supporting orphans with material donations and food. They also suggested that there could be different activities with sports, arts and mentoring with the aim of building friendships between the children in the orphanages, the young people in the youth diaconal organisations and other children and young people in the city. (U F2/ U M2/ U M1)

*I think regular visits to orphanages with material help and some common activities would be great. (U M2)*

*We could go and visit an orphanage regularly. Maybe some kind of friendship/mentorship will develop. (U F2)*

The young people discussed how there are different services for street-connected young people, but there are not enough organisations that offer youth diaconia. They suggested that social workers could work on the streets and look for street-connected youth and approach them on the streets. The participants in the Estonian focus group suggested that street-connected young people need support like loving and caring families, respect and recognition, social programmes with music, training and creative activities and support in making choices in their lives. As a whole, the young people thought that there should be more services for orphans and street-connected young people. One type of service would be the "half-way" house in Slovakia. (S F2/ K F1/ K F4/ E M1/ E M3/ E M4)

*Abandoned young people, probably even teenagers, maybe they have parents or guardians, but they have remained out of the system and are trying to figure out their own lives. Sometimes they receive help and support from organisations such as the „Children of the Tien Shan“, but there are very few such organisations in our country. (K F1/ K F4)*

*The young people who graduated from the orphanage. They have the fewer opportunities. (S F2)*

*Secretary/Observer: do I understand correctly, do the children and young people need such half-way houses?*

*Yes, the half-way houses. (S F6)*

*Some people from the orphanages ended up on the street, as they did not have anywhere to live. Those youngsters were for some time with the relatives; nevertheless, the relatives used the chance to receive the state money for the young people, who leave the orphanage (1000 EUR). I had another thought. When I saw that the relatives are mostly motivated with the money, I did not go to them. Because I have had 2 options, whether to go to the relatives, or to a "half-way house". (S M1)*

## 2. SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOCIAL INCLUSION

The second top category is supporting young people in social inclusion. Supporting social inclusion consists of supporting independent life, arranging free time activities and helping with education and employment.

Growing up and learning to be independent concerns all young people as a part of adolescence. The focus group in Estonia talked about street-connected young people, but also about young people in general. They thought that youth diaconia for young people could try to work on the assets and interests that a young person has. They thought that by starting with the assets and interests, it would encourage the young person to continue with other issues in life. They discussed also about how any kind of activities and support would prevent them from participating dangerous situations.

*Finding out what a human being really likes to do and starting to study it, for example playing guitar, then step by step he starts to open his mind for other things too. People need your time and recognition. (E M3)*

*Free trainings, that are open for young people are important. This helps to prevent dangerous situations. (E M4)*

The young people discussed how free time activities would support young people in being part of the society and prevent them from joining street-connected life and substance abuse. Free-time activities are needed especially in rural areas that might not have enough services and activities for young people. There could be youth clubs and free-time centres and the organisations could organise seminars and workshops with different topics and together with schools as well as discussion groups and places for sharing experiences.

*I really would like us to develop projects rising awareness in the field of youth and ecology. (U M1)*

*Seminars and workshops for kids from our schools to bring all together. This will help to be more inclusive. (U F3)*

*Clubs should participate in the preventive activities. (G M1)*

*In my opinion, it should be such an organisation like "CVC" (centrum volného času) – "Free Time Centre". (S F2)*

The young people also mentioned that young people need support with education and employment issues. The young people in the research project talked about their hopes and dreams for their own futures including decent jobs, that they could provide for them and their families. Many hoped to be able to support their future family better than their own childhood family had been able to support them. The young people wished that the youth diaconia would include learning skills on how to apply for jobs and how to act in job interviews and that there would be possibilities to do practical training and learn skills for working life. (S F6/ S M1).

*The education should be more practical. The second thing is to prepare a student at schooling system for the future life. (S M1)*

*I would add the preparation for the work interviews at school. (S F6)*

## DISCUSSION

Youth diaconia and Christian social practice is based on the idea that everybody has an equal right to find a meaningful life. This research project shows that life is not fair or just, and some of the children have more challenges in their lives because of the circumstances where they were born in. Life seems to follow the logic of Matthew's effect of accumulated advantage (Matthew 25:29). The fact is that the gap between those who have a better starting point in life and those who do not expands with age. However, this study has shown that there is always hope regardless of the starting point in an individual's life. The work that the organisations in this research project do among the young people with challenging life situation is very important, meaningful, and successful.

The data set concerning the professionals, and the one on young people both show that there is a need for a safe, family-like place where young people can either stay or visit regularly. Supportive peer relations and useful activities offered by the centres also play an important role in the development of the young people. However, the positive and supportive relationships between the young people and professionals are the most important elements in the recovering process of the young people.

These findings match those predicted by the theory of positive youth development (PYD) by Lerner and his colleagues (Lerner 2004). The theory presents three key elements for youth work and youth programmes, ones that are important factors in the young people's development. These three elements are ensuring that (1) a positive and caring adult-youth relationship are formed, (2) the activity encourages the adolescent to take active leadership roles and leave their 'comfort zone' in order to acquire new competences, and (3) the activity offers a safe and respected place to use these new competences in practice. (Lerner 2004; Lerner et al. 2012, 373.)

Both the professionals and the young people in this research project emphasised how important it is that adults of the centres are available for the young people and are interested in their lives. One very important part of the professionals' contributions is the spiritual support they provide in the centres: they pray for the young people and their family members, teach them to read and understand the Bible, or sing the liturgy and hymns, which support their spiritual development. Equally important are the other professionals and adults of the centre, for example peer educators and volunteers. They live the way they teach, and the adolescents see these adults and peers as role models. According to this research project, all these organisations could be considered places for positive youth development regardless of the size of the organisations or the different services and activities provided by them.

One of the important findings of this research project is how throughout the study the power structures remain invisible. Neither the young people nor the professionals discuss power relations in the services. Nevertheless, power relations are visible in-between the lines and through the analysis. According to Foucault (1976) all human relations are always relations of power. Power is constructed in interaction between people and it is not a quality of a person nor is it owned by anyone. Power relations are also a part of diaconia and social action work. The power structures impact both the definitions imposed on the people and they also impact people's abilities to take action, make decisions, and speak with their own voice. Diaconal work uses power by defining the needs of the young people as well as by defining the courses of action needed to take in helping the young people. It is important to recognise the situations, where the practices of diaconia work, societal structures, and the context decrease the young people's abilities to take action and make decisions. It is equally important to recognise the possibilities for increasing agency, participation, and empowerment of young people (Hokkanen 2014; Repo-Saeed 2020, 35).

According to a large body of research, power relations are imminent in the relationship between service users and professionals (Katisko 2018; Repo-Saeed 2020, 29). In this study, this becomes visible when the young people move from their broken contexts and harsh life circumstances to the spiritual context of the organisations. The practises of the organisations exercise power over the young people as they determine both the needs of young people and the help that a young person should get. Power is also practised in defining the acceptable behaviour of the youth. The young people are socialised to the organisations and centres which forces them to adapt.

The young people's experience of the gap between generations also reflects the power relations in the context of youth diaconia and the young people's lives. Power relations may make both acceptable behaviour and topics which can be discussed narrower and more limited. The desire of the young people to have time and space for discussions and questions indicates the need for adult-youth relations, which might be compromised because of the power structures and taboos, if they are not

reflected upon and assessed. The professionals have fortunately recognised this and state that it is important to talk with young people about everything and try to show them that there are no forbidden topics. The question is whether the diaconal organisations and churches attempt to create a sense of community as well as social cohesion through social control, intended or unintended, by giving definitions of marginalisation and defining acceptable behaviour. The same question was raised in a similar research project in South Africa (Le Roux, Hankela & McDonald 2018, 6).

The organisations participating in this research project all strive to empower young people and strengthen their participation. These are actions that aim at decreasing the power imbalances both, in diaconal work and in the broader society. This manifests itself in the findings of the research project where it is seen that the young people have had opportunities to take active leadership roles in developing the services of the organisations. Their feedback has been heard and the organisations are determined to develop their services. The question still of how youth diaconia can increase participation and empowerment still stands, however.

The need to empower young people and hear their voices challenges diaconal organisations and churches. The challenge is to create places where young people can be themselves and be met and treated respectfully regardless of their backgrounds or life circumstances. The study shows that the organisations participating in the study have succeeded in this – the young people shared the experience of being accepted in the centres. However, the challenge exists for the broader context of diaconal and social action and the churches. The churches need diaconal work to see and understand communities and the life circumstances of young people and families. Through diaconal work churches open themselves up connecting them to the broader society.

The discussion thus far is summed up in as a model in figure 4 below, explaining the important role of the sense of community in youth diaconia and Christian social practice. This model is an application of the original model of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). The figure shows that meaning, practice, community, and identity are deeply interconnected and mutually defining. In Wenger's theory, three dimensions are associated with practice and community: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. In this study, communities and mutual engagement could mean doing things together as a group consisting of service users, peer educators, volunteers, and professionals. Joint enterprise could mean the common understanding of how life in the centres and its activities should be organised. Shared repertoire could mean the common experiences and stories related to the life in the centre. The meanings could involve religious opinions, Christian stories, values, and norms. Religious acting could mean personal devotional activity such as praying and reading the Bible and belonging could mean coalitional behaviour like participating in worship services and other activities. All this affects the formation of identity.



Figure 4. Developing and learning as belonging in the diaconia community: a model based on Wenger 1998, 5 and Porkka 2019, 58.

Figure 4 shows that learning and developing occur through doing, when the objects of learning are models of acting. Learning and developing modify belonging, commitment, and relating to a community and also alter an individual's identity by giving the individual more readiness to understand things, to act, and to feel a sense of belonging to a community.

Young people in this study learn a lot and develop in many ways while being involved in the activities of the organisations participating this project. This new information and competence are useful, opening up new opportunities for the young people. New identity formation happens by itself while being involved in the activities. However, the services and the organisations they are involved in seem to simultaneously stigmatise the participants in the eyes of their external teachers, their peers and the whole society – and in some cases also in the eyes of their family members. This stigma is a result of using the services in general, but it is especially accentuated by the organisation being Christian. Services which aim to improve the life of the marginalised young people seem to cause them to be marginalised again but in a new way!

The organisations involved in this study have tried to solve this anxiety by trying to build trust with schools, social work, and other authorities with whom their service users interact. For example, in Armenia they work with the whole family in order to avoid conflicts inside the family and in Slovakia they have invited the parents to get acquainted with the centre and the professionals as well as to potentially make friends with some of them. These are good examples of how to build trust. However, the young want more to be done in this regard. They have practical ideas for how more bridges could be built between the centres and the young people of the neighbourhood. Their suggestions should definitely be heard.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



We have heard the voices of the young people from “M”. So far it has become evident that there are many reasons why we use the capital letter “M” in this research project to characterise these people. According to some definitions, many of them have been marginalised already during their early childhood. However probably don’t call or consider themselves marginalised. Later, when they have been involved in the services of the organisations of this study, they have received a lot of support, education, activities, love, and care, which have helped them overcome their challenging life situation. Moreover, they have learned to know Christian faith and the support God can give them. Simultaneously when overcoming their challenges in life, services have placed them in another margin in the eyes of their friends and peers. There is always the question, whose margin we are talking about and who has the power to define someone’s status.

It became evident during this research project that it is very important to listen to the young people who have been involved in the services of the organisations represented in this study. The experiences they have shared during this project give us a lot to think about. It is strongly recommended that the organisations involved in this project should continue to hear the young people’s opinion while developing their services. This study shows that this is already taking place now, but this sort of self-development activity appears to lack a cohesive structure, which would enable the improvements to be applied more holistically to the activity as a whole.

The opinion of the professionals has also been heard during this research project. They show that they really are motivated to develop the services according to the needs and well-being of the service users. They are willing to search for ways to provide young people with a safe space in youth organisations, ensure inclusive equal treatment, and build practices towards empowerment of young people through their active engagement. One of the supportive tasks on this journey would be to combine the research findings and the previous interdiac handbook “Make Change Yourselves” and produce an updated manual.

Another developmental step for Interdiac would then be to build a learning programme to work with young people in challenging life situations. It would be important to include the opportunity to visit other organisations working in the field of youth diaconia in interdiac. This research project shows how much each person and organisation can learn from other organisations and their practices.

It is also strongly recommended to continue producing research on youth diaconia. One of the areas where more research is needed is the history of diaconal work and youth diaconia in the post-communist countries because this kind of written history is almost totally missing. Knowing the history would be very important while developing the services, both to understand why the present models are the way they are and to rediscover usable ideas that have since been discontinued but could be worthwhile in the present circumstances, as well as to see what has been tried unsuccessfully.

It would also be important to continue studying the practises of youth diaconia among the member organisations of interdiac. This research project is a first step, and more research is needed. One of the topics for future research is the role of volunteers and peer educators in the services. Volunteers and peer educators seem to be very important for the young people. These people are equally important for organising the activities. A study of the lives and roles of the volunteers and the peer educators in organising the services would make their role visible and help develop their part in the services.

This study has highlighted how important a role religion could play in the support of the young people with challenging life situations. Based on the findings of this project, secular organisations working in the same field with the organisations as those in this study should also take these findings into account and pay more attention to the worldview and religion of the service users.

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# Appendix

**APPENDIX 1.**  
CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS PUBLICATION

**APPENDIX 2.**  
INSTRUCTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

**APPENDIX 3.**  
INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

**APPENDIX 4.**  
INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH THE PROFESSIONALS



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Born 1975. Is a German social pedagogue who, together with her husband, founded the Christian faith-based NGO “Living Hope” in Ukraine (1999). They have established three day care centres for marginalised children, young people and families in disadvantaged urban and rural areas. Nicole Borisuk is a certified coach supporting young people in their transition from childhood to adulthood. She has served as a member of the executive and advisory board of interdiac since 2010.



#### **Teona Gotsiridze, Georgia**

Teona holds MA and BA degrees in Social Sciences. She is a PhD candidate in Social work at Ilia State University in Tbilisi. She has around 10-years academic and teaching experience both at the University and in the field of professional practice. Along with it, she has gained a solid experience of research activities. She was involved in many research projects, for instance, such as: “Child research rights situation analysis of children at risk of losing parental care & children who have lost parental care”, “Children welfare reform and children care system analysis”, etc. Teona’s current ongoing PhD paper – “Street connected and working children” was presented at the 6th European Conference for Social Work Research.





## Marek Ilenin, Slovakia

Marek has worked in the field of youth work for more than 15 years. After a few years working in youth organisations and volunteering he decided to found the organisation Relevant to support their volunteer activities. He is married and has two children. He studied Theology in Bratislava and intercultural Theology in Gottingen (Germany). Marek is an experienced specialist counsellor and teacher for young adults after leaving foster care. He still leads and further develops the organisation and its employees and volunteers.



## Kadri Kesküla, Estonia

Born in 1975, Kadri has been working in the field of diaconia in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church since 2006. Last year she also got her Professional Christian Educator Degree in Sweden (2007). She is responsible for the work with families and people with special needs at the Foundation of Diaconal Work and Social Action of Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. She is also working as a learning support teacher for students with special educational needs at Tallinn Nõmme Primary School. Her Master's Thesis is entitled: Proportions of Work and Spirituality in the Building Mix for Everyday Foundation (Tallinn University, 2019).



## Knarik Martirosyan, Armenia

Knarik was born in 1994. During 2012-2016 studied Social Work and Technologies in Yerevan State University. From 2016- 2018 she attained her Master's degree in Social Policy and Administration, in the same University. During her study, practised in Social work with women and children, sociological research and analysis. She worked with the UN and did various research projects on vulnerable families (2014) In 2015 she was trained in family violence counselling, and since then Knarik conducts training for stakeholders and future professionals in this field. From 2015 she joined the diaconal work.



## Irina Trofimova, Kyrgyz Republic

Irina graduated in social pedagogy. She and her family reside in the Kyrgyz Republic. In 1997 together with her husband she was sent out on a mission to develop the diaconal ministry which would be based on the local church in the small town in the north of the Kyrgyz Republic. There from 2001 to 2009 she was a head of the Public Association „Children of the Tien-Shan“ which was working with street children and youth. From 2009 to 2019 she was managing the church mobilisation programme “Raising Families from poverty” in the Kyrgyz Republic. The programme promoted church and community mobilisation processes through workshops, coaching and training programmes. For the past few years, she has been a consultant in „Children of the Tien-Shan“ helping to develop new programmes for youth and vulnerable families.



## Analysis of the data

### Riikka Hillebrand, Finland

Master's student in Diak, Finland. She is a youth worker in a local Lutheran congregation and has worked in Christian youth work since 2009. She has a BA in Theology and BA in Humanities with youth work and civic activity. She will graduate as Master of Social Services from Diak in 2021. Her Master's Thesis was part of this research.



### Dr. Pekka Launonen, Finland

Dr. Pekka Launonen was working in Diaconia University of Applied Sciences in Finland since 1996 as a Lecturer and a Principal Lecturer (retired since 2017). His doctoral dissertation (2004) was about the interpretations of occupational competences within the youth work leader education in Finland. As a teacher and researcher, he also has had special interest in the history and practices of youth work, as well as in the connections between youth work and diaconia.



## Editors

### Tony Addy

Head of Education, interdiac

### Oksana Prosvirina

Senior Lecturer and Research Coordinator, interdiac



## **APPENDIX 2.**

### **INSTRUCTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE**

#### **YOUNG PEOPLE IN “M”: FIRST PART OF THE DATA COLLECTION – THE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

##### **FIRST PART**

The individual interview starts by drawing own lifeline from your birth until now. We should ask the informants to think about the history of their childhood and youth placing a special emphasis on:

- changes in subsistence
- childhood family if having one
- socio-economic status and way of living (social classes, status of men and women)
- ideas, worldviews and religion (values, norms, customs, ethics and morality)
  - evaluate the connections between this history and present situation of your family.
  - Can you distinguish causes and effects?

The interview starts only after drawing the lifeline. Lifeline is the tool we use in the first part of the data collection.

##### **SECOND PART: CHILDHOOD**

How was your childhood in the environment you lived? How did it affect you? What did you think or feel about future then? How did you cope with the situation? What did you find challenging, if anything?

##### **THIRD PART: EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC SITUATION**

How has been your schooling time? Tell me about your primary school and your time there. What about secondary school? How did you finance the studies? What is the economic situation in your family and neighbourhood from your point of view?

##### **FOURTH PART: SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Tell me about your family relationships? Who do you think has been the closest person to you? Why? How were the other students in the regular school/special school?

##### **FIFTH PART: THE ROLE OF FAITH AND RELIGION**

Think about your biography and concentrate on the role of religion in it:

- How the spiritual topics have or have not been present over the course of your life.
- Recall which incidents and people have been the most important to your spiritual development
- (obs. the influence might have been either positive or negative).
- Try also to describe how your thinking and image of God has changed in the course of the time.
- What is the importance and meaning of faith for you now and how has it influenced to your current life?

##### **SIXT PART: DRAWING THE FUTURE LIFELINE**

Drawing the second lifeline where the starting point is your life now and in the other end “My own future life”.

##### **SEVENT PART: DISCUSSION ON THE FUTURE LIFELINE**

How do you see your future? Where would you like to be after 10 years? What are your dreams? What kind of expectations you have? Do you think you can achieve them? If yes, how? If no, why? What would you like to be differently, if anything? How do you see the good life?

How are you now? What does well-being mean to you? How do you understand participation and belonging? Do you feel that you participate in or belong to something? Describe a good life according to your own standards: Can you call your life as a good life now? What else you would like to say?

## APPENDIX 3.

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSIONS, TASKS FOR MODERATORS, OBSERVERS AND PARTICIPANTS

##### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION CHART

The group discussions will be divided into four sections; your identity, the institution you are currently involved in, the support you have and perhaps would need and coping with the challenges.

##### IDENTITY

1. Who you are? Identity building: from local to societal level. How do you define yourself in the societal level? Is your identity in touch with your family or perhaps with whom you spent time – or the organisation you are involved in.
2. How are you doing? Do you enjoy your life? Do you see hope? Depression? Mental health challenges and traumas?
3. Construction of social relationship – family, friends, neighbours, relatives; What kinds of relationships do respondents have?

##### INSTITUTION YOU ARE INVOLVED IN

What factors affect access to the institution you are involved in? How? What are your experiences in this organisation? The role of the Church/faith in your life and in the organisation you're involved. What is your opinion on religion and faith? Does it support you or disturb you while you're in touch with the organisation?

##### SUPPORT

1. Support – implementation; How were the services distributed? Getting support? Possible barriers in getting support according to their experiences?
2. Community level: Cultural elements
3. Is support available for all who needs them around you?
4. Are there taboos, habits, beliefs of surrounding community which are difficult to talk about? For example, discussion on sexual orientation, mental problems, drugs, alcohol or ethnic background, immigration, religion?
5. Societal level – infrastructure, legislation, registered services; How do the society structures affect your everyday life? What kind of young people/groups of young people there are who are out of support? Who we should try to find and help? How to find them?

##### COPING WITH CHALLENGES

How did the respondents cope with the challenges they confronted in societal, communal or social dimension? What could still be done?

##### *Tasks of the moderator*

- Create a relaxed, supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere
- Remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers
- Take care that all participants have possibility to talk and express their viewpoints
- Take care of the time!

##### *Tasks of the observer/ secretary*

- Make notes of the main topics discussed
- Your role is to be mainly a silent observer, but you can ask clarifying questions and act as a co-moderator
- Concentrate on group dynamic:
  - Do all participants have possibility to talk and express their viewpoints?
  - Is the discussion focusing on the topics given?
  - Are participants discussing with each other?

##### *Tasks of the participant*

- Discuss and focus on the given topics
- You can tell your own viewpoint and experiences
- Share ideas and experiences with other group participants
- Remember that there are no right or wrong answers!

## APPENDIX 4.

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH THE PROFESSIONALS

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS' FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS, TASKS FOR MODERATORS, OBSERVERS AND PARTICIPANTS

##### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION CHART

The group discussions will be divided into four sections: (1) The institution you are currently involved in, (2) your personal values and connections with faith-based organisations, (3) the support you offer and should develop and (4) conclusion.

##### INSTITUTION YOU ARE INVOLVED IN

If defining it with a few sentences: Why does this organisation exist? Describe the role of the Church, congregation and faith in the life of the organisation you're involved in.

What does diaconia/charity/Christian social practice (please use the concept suitable in your own context) mean in your organisation? Is it a living practise in your organisation? Does it have an influence on the everyday work of the organisation you are involved in if comparing its way of working with other organisations in the same field?

How do you evaluate your work in your organisation? How have you developed the evaluation model you use? Have you discussed about the services available with the young service users?

##### YOUR PERSONAL VALUES AND CONNECTIONS WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS

The role of the Church, congregation and faith in your life. How are the faith-based values and Christianity related to your personal motive to work in this organisation? What is your opinion on religion and faith? Does it support you or disturb you while you are in touch with the organisation?

What does diaconia/charity/Christian social practice mean to you personally? Does it have an influence on the way you work?

##### SUPPORT

What is the support your organisation is offering to young people in need? Do you think that this is the kind of support the service users need? What barriers there are for young people to get meaningful support in your organisation according to your own experiences? What do you think, is support available for all young people who would need them around you? What barriers you think avoid young people to get support they would need.

Are there habits or beliefs of surrounding community which are difficult to talk about and has an influence on the target group you are dealing with? For example, sexual orientation, mental problems, drugs, alcohol use or ethnic background, immigration status or religion affiliation or background?

Does the society structures and legislation have either positive or negative influences on your everyday life and way of working in your organisation? Please, explain more detailed.

What kind of invisible young people or groups of young people there are in the society who are out of support? Who we should try to find and help? How to find them and how to help them?

## CONCLUSION

The topics we have discussed and find challenging: Make a list of them – is there something that you would like to add or which you don't regard as important now as it was during our discussion? Is there more new innovations or developmental ideas you would like to tell us.

##### Tasks of the moderator

- Create a relaxed, supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere
- Remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers
- Take care that all participants have possibility to talk and express their viewpoints
- Take care of the time!

##### Tasks of the observer/ secretary

- Make notes of the main topics discussed
- Your role is to be mainly a silent observer but you can ask clarifying questions and act as a co-moderator
- Concentrate on group dynamic:
  - Do all participants have possibility to talk and express their viewpoints?
  - Is the discussion focusing on the topics given?
  - Are participants discussing with each other?

##### Tasks of the participant

- Discuss and focus on the given topics
- You can tell your own viewpoint and experiences
- Share ideas and experiences with other group participants
- Remember that there are no right or wrong answers!





Youth diaconia is defined in this publication as Christian social practice with children, adolescents, and families that need extra support. This work has different names in different Christian churches. Youth diaconia is the term used to refer to the phenomenon in this study.

The motivation for this study originates from the fact that an ever-increasing number of adolescents find it difficult to find meaning in their lives due to personal, social, cultural, or economic factors. Herein lies the call for youth diaconia: it develops new working models to aid these adolescents achieve social inclusion and build positive social connections with their peers as well as with adults.

Therefore, the purpose of the research is complex and addresses two related issues:

1. To hear the 'voices' of the young people in the margins
2. In the light of received 'voices', the professionals will reflect on and evaluate their working methods with 'marginalised' youth, embracing the perspective of the present-day challenges in the field

There is very little well-known research about work of youth diaconia from the Eastern European perspective and especially so from churches and Faith Based Organisations in the region. For that reason, the research focuses attention on the Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This research was carried out as a collaborative process between practitioner researchers in six countries: Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine. Practitioner-researchers from every country joined the research team.

We invite you to read about the experiences both of "Youth on the Margins" and those from churches and Faith Based Organisations who work with them. We would like to hear of your reactions to this research and in interdiac we will be following up this theme through our Research Platform, learning programmes and by networking.

## **Voices of the young people in the "M"**

***A Study of Youth Diaconia in six interdiac member organisations in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia***

