



# Working with Youth with a hard life trajectory

New Delhi, June 2019

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## INTRODUCTION

This theme was suggested by one of our members. Our interlocutor was saying to us “we are fine with working with Youth who come from poor backgrounds, but we have trouble, **we simply don't know how to deal with Youth who had a hard life trajectory** (have been in drugs, in jail, are violent, etc.). We don't know how to work with them”.

From this starting point, we considered we could **benefit from our members' best practices** in order to get ideas to face this challenge. And here are the results of all your great work! You will notice that some elements are valid while working with Youth in general, but are even more important while working with Youth with a hard life trajectory!

To write this document, we followed these different steps :

1. We discussed with our members in order to know how they were working with Youth with a hard life trajectory
2. We exchanged with other organisations / structures and Youth in order to get more inputs about the subject
3. We gathered all the inputs in this memo

In this memo, you will **find the keys** in order **to work with Youth with a hard life trajectory**. We also detailed some elements with examples we thought of, and practices we witnessed, during our discussions.



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# 1. GLOBALLY SPEAKING

## Build trust

This is one of the key words of this memo and of the work with any excluded Youth generally speaking. But it is even more important with excluded Youth who had a hard life trajectory, since they once felt betrayed (by the system, a team, their environment, etc).

Here are some tips to help in building trust with them :

- **Be a help for them** : some Youth with a hard life trajectory lost trust in their surroundings and it is hard to get back. One of our members, [Horizon d'Enfance](#), explained to us that some of their street Youth had trouble with the local authorities. One way to gain their trust was to help them handle these problems (help with administrative papers, help to get them out of jail, etc.). Afterwards, the Youth see you not only as someone who could potentially break their trust, but also as a potential help.

- **Get trust from key actors recognized by the community** : the Youth who see an organization arriving in their environment will not trust it deeply from the first sight. To help them consider that you are trustworthy, you can begin by getting root into the community and getting the trust of key actors in the community, asking them to put you in touch, etc.. It will show that you are trustworthy to older peers from the same area !

- **Involve the families** : the families are always important when working with Youth. In the process of getting a Youth's trust, it is also the case. Why is it important ?
  - Because the families can support you and the Youth to join your activities
  - Because the Youth see their family trust your organisation and feel they can do the same
- **Live with the Youth** : in order to help them consider that you are involved working with them and you take it seriously, one way for you can be to settle down where the Youth themselves live, in the same environment, the same neighbourhood. One of our members - [Corpoemprende](#) - did it on one of their on-going projects. They explained to us that it showed the Youth that they were strongly motivated to know the area and get involved in it. It's a very good opportunity to enable them to spend some informal time with the Youth as well (doing random things like discussing, playing games, listening to music, etc.), getting their trust through these interactions.
- **Don't forget that truth goes both ways !** It means you also need to give them your trust ! Trust goes both ways : you should show the youth that you trust them too, by giving them a chance. They are youth not used to being trusted so it can empower them and make them feel valued.



## Be flexible!

It seems obvious but it is not always easy since you need a fixed scheme, you have targeted outcomes for your programs, etc. Yet, the excluded Youth with a hard life trajectory need **a customized approach** even more, since they are dealing with their past (or not so past sometimes) trajectory, which can still be a burden for them. Therefore, it is important to get time to understand their needs and to **answer them on an individual basis**. It will enable them :

- To **heal faster** (if they get a customized approach and the right help from experts, psychologists, counsellors, etc.)
- **Not to compare themselves** to other Youth, who might seem to be successful or achieving things faster in the program

## Accept the Youth as they are!

In addition to the usual stigma of “excluded Youth”, the Youth with a hard life trajectory get the labels of “former prisoners”, “drug addict”, “violent”, etc. It is **not easy for Youth to deal with this image that society projects on them**. Therefore, accepting the Youth as they are, with **no judgement** on past actions, but looking together towards the future, will help working with them !

## Learn patience!

Patience is another key word. Excluded Youth with a hard life trajectory have a burden they try to deal with. It is not easy to manage - for anyone - but especially for Youth who lived hard moments on their own. Organizations need to understand and accept that those Youth need time to overcome their challenges, get rid of bad habits, build trust, etc.

For example, Anaïs from [Qosko Maki](#) was saying : “I have known a teenager for 3 years and I can only see the change now”. So **do what you can and keep up with the pace they each need !**

## 2. WITHIN YOUR ACTIVITIES!

### Base your project on the Youth and their communities' needs

It is important for the Youth you are working with to make a project their own, to keep them interested and engaged. [Corpoemprende](#), in a project they were running on a third structure's behalf, based the project on the needs they had collected from the Youth and the community itself. By working this way, you **AVOID**:

- **Imposing projects** on the Youth and on their community, who will not consider their actual needs as a priority
- The need to **work so hard yourself, alone**, to make people engage in your projects, **because they do not feel that concerned**
- **Realizing** at one point all your **energy was not spent in the right direction** !

### Strict frame / respect

By speaking with Youth themselves on the subject, a comment which came back several times is the **need to have a strict frame**, where the rules are known from all.

The reason ? Youth with a hard life trajectory need rules to respect, **otherwise global respect** in the structure with the trainers and among themselves **is not guaranteed**.

### Give the Youth space to grow and let them express themselves

It seems natural to do but it is not. Indeed, we want to help the Youth we work with, and sometimes we consider that we know better what is good for them.

Yet, **providing space to the Youth** so they can grow, and enabling them to express what they think and how they feel, is **key in their maturation and assuming their identity as well as role in the society**.

What can be done in addition to the usual efforts ? Well, [Qosqo Maki](#) pushed it further ! They **make the Youth part of the decision-process**. Indeed, since their shelter is for the Youth, why not listen to them and make them manage it ?

It does not mean educators don't take part in the discussion to help it, make sure everyone has been listened to, to make the participants consider additional elements they might not know in the discussion, etc. But it means **the Youth will make their own rules** (they are more likely to respect rules they decided themselves !) and **be more engaged** into the activities



## Create a team spirit

For any Youth and any human being generally speaking, **a family is key** in the development of a person. The team in a program (and creating a team spirit within) is also very important in the development of a Youth : for the support it can bring, for the respect of the rules, to develop the Youth's motivations to join the program. It is a cement !

## Give them exposure

Giving them exposure is about **testing them and giving them the chance to change horizon**. Most of the Youth with a hard life trajectory have grown up in an environment which did not enable them to see further, differently, hopefully, etc. Giving them exposure and organizing activities is a way to make them go **out of their comfort zone**, **learn about new things** and **open their minds**, **think about bright opportunities** they could grab by working hard.

## Give them responsibilities !

Speaking with a Youth from our member [Life Project 4 Youth](#), he states that the key is to give responsibility to the Youth. It is a way to **give them space to show their abilities** and to **make them think** about solutions, problem solving ("responsibility always makes you think, and Youth realize they are intelligent").

## Explain them your actions, the reason behind it

It is key to explain your actions, the reason why you do them, etc. And explain the same about the actions you wish the Youth to do ! Why ? Well, because **we are generally motivated to act, knowing the reason why we should do so**. In addition, speaking with Youth with difficult stories, they sometimes say that they acted in the past in a certain way because it seemed like the only way for them to do so, and because **nobody had never explained to them how they should do**, right and wrong ways. Maybe if they had known, they would have acted differently.

## Mediation thanks to arts / culture / sports

Some NGOs use **unordinary tools** to help the Youth to heal :

- Example 1: [Salaam Baalak Trust](#) helps the Youth to heal through art (music, dance, etc.). Every year, they even prepare a musical where the Youth use all the skills they developed during the year.
- Example 2: [Etijah](#) uses the organization of sport events in order to promote peaceful behaviour in Egyptian communities.





## Integrate the financial dimension

Youth with a hard life trajectory sometimes had to work in order to make money for themselves and their families (which can actually push them towards the hard part of their life if the activities to get financed are touching drugs, etc.). While working with them, it is important to consider young adults need some money to survive and are expected to provide support for the family which raised them. Considering that, it can be a good idea to integrate the financial dimension into your program. For instance, [Life Project 4 Youth](#) gives Life Project Money to the Youth. During their 9-month program, the Youth will get some money :

- In order for them to be able to fulfill their basic needs
- In order to help them to take action towards their professional integration (for professional attires, for transportation to go to interviews, for completing some necessary administrative processes, etc.)

And they actually use it as a pedagogical tool too!  
The money is split into :

- The allowance the Youth get weekly to fulfill basic needs, after completing a budget sheet
- The savings the Youth will get at the end of the program for their professional inclusion

An interesting way to teach them how to manage / save their money, while financially enabling them to come and benefit from your programs !

## Measure with them the advancements of the project (small, concrete and measurable)

In order to measure the advancement and push the Youth to improve, one of the keys is to exchange with them and decide about objectives they need to achieve. It enables them to know the direction they are going towards, and they can understand where they are in the process. For this, the objectives need to be :

- Small : consider every step of the way and go easy on them. We are not saying you should not be demanding, you need to ! But do not push it too hard too fast, otherwise the Youth might not achieve the objectives and get upset with themselves (especially regarding management of self-violence)
- Concrete : it needs to be concrete, otherwise the Youth will not see how to work on it
- Measurable : decide with the Youth about the objectives and actions, and how to measure them. Because the Youth need to know where they are in the improvement process, even more than you !
- Time frames : decide about a time limit where you and the Youth will review the objectives : were they reached ? If yes, celebrate ! If no, why not ? And get the next objectives fixed as well !







## Develop partnerships

In Y4CN, we see it as a proof of humility. We can't do everything and it is good to know our own limits to benefit at the same time of the **expertise** and **knowledge** of others.

When you work with Youth with hard life trajectories, you are even more concerned by the subject, since you are not an expert in both professional and social inclusion of Youth, in addition of drug addiction, in rehabilitation, and in trauma psychology, etc. Therefore, when you meet Youth with this kind of challenges, think about reaching out to specific structures, who will be able to help you with it.

## Supervision with a psychologist for advice and personal handling

Provide them adapted psychological support : Youth with hard life trajectories sometimes lived trauma that can affect them on the long term. The healing process can be very long, and needs to be managed by professional psychologists, psychotherapists, specialized doctors, or any other expert that could help the Youth to go out of his / her trauma.

One of our members is using this approach. At [Messy Bessy](#), the Youth coming from slums work both :

- On their studies that they pay partially and are given grants for the rest by the [House Foundation](#)

- On a job of the social enterprise [Messy Bessy](#) where they can earn money as professional experience.

During their whole journey, they are still followed by psychological experts so they can heal, grow as much professionally as personally !

## Plurality of persons

Youth with hard life trajectories are normal persons, so they have affinities with different people. Among the trainers that support and coach, sometimes teach the Youth, it is key to have different people that can fit different Youth personalities. In addition, a former Youth from the NGO [Life Project 4 Youth](#) explained that, if at one point a Youth got mad at one staff member, he/she could always go and talk to other staff members, and still feel supported / non isolated in the structure. It also gives time to the trainers to solve the conflict in a constructive way instead of seeing Youth flee because they feel trapped.

# 3. ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR TRAINING YOUR TRAINERS!



## Train the trainers and make them aware of the situation / profiles / pedagogy

The more the trainers are trained and prepared for the situations they will face, the easier it is for them to find their correct posture. It can be beneficial for them to get prepared and understand the context they will be working in. It can be the object of a specific training that will prepare the trainers to the reality of the job and make them more at ease on the field.

- Example 1 : It can be a preparation training => This is actually the aim of one of the trainings / workshops that Y4CN has been working on with volunteers going to work abroad : "Prepare volunteers to go on the field".
- Example 2 : Work upstream to make it clear for the trainers that they will be working with young adults, who are really sensitive. Therefore, it is important to understand the responsibilities that go with their job and invest and dedicate the most of it, without impacting their own self into the relationship they will create with the Youth they will be working with.

## Acting of difficult situations with debrief

In the NGO [Life Project 4 Youth](#), the trainings of trainers include "experiment" of difficult situations to handle. In this session, the trainers are given a specific situation to handle :

- Some are acting based on a brief and playing the Youth so that it leads to a difficult / tricky situation
- Some are taking the roles of the trainers and need to handle the situation the best they can
- Some are observers and try to determine if the behaviours of the trainers fit their responsibilities and posture

In the end, everyone debriefs on the situation, which allows to discuss about the key things to think about and consider when facing difficult situations.

*Example: a Youth is doing a violence attack => how will the coaches / trainers handle it ?*



## Regular team meetings

The NGO [AVVEJ](#) considers that it is key to exchange and make the whole staff aware of the atmosphere and situation of every Youth. Indeed, regular team meetings are key to exchange about the Youth situation, challenges and improvements they have made, contexts that could explain their behaviors. In most NGOs, weekly meetings are the opportunity to exchange about the challenges of the past week, the actions planned for this week, and elements that the trainers would like to share.

## Support the trainers psychologically

Working with Youth in situation of exclusion with a hard life trajectory, can be hard to live through : it is as rewarding as it can be painful to see Youth you care about going through tough times, or not been able to help them as much as you could.

Therefore, it is important to enable the trainers to access a psychological support if needed, to check with them if they manage to put some distance with what they live in their work, or if it affects their personal life, and use their professional skills to grow personally.

## Explain the deal when working with Youth !

The trainers should be told and explained that some elements are part of the deal when working with young adults, who are people above all :

- Never take it personally ! No matter what the Youth say, try to understand what they really mean and why
- Know yourself : trainers need to know themselves and understand how they act and feel in order to respond to the Youth according to their own values, which will be respected by the Youth. Expressing feelings and explaining the reasons of such, are keys into the building of a real and trustworthy relationship with the Youth.
- Accept "love and hate" relationships : Youth are human beings. They can be grumpy, they can be happy, their mood can switch quite quickly but it does not mean that the trainers need to suffer from it. Try to accept there will be highs, there will be downs, and it is normal.



# Working with Youth with a hard life trajectory ?

## CONCLUSION

In order to introduce this conclusion, we would like to quote a movie about Youth inclusion, that our team Y4CN loved - "[Bad seeds](#)" made by Kheiron :

***"A Youth who is trouble, is a Youth who is in trouble"***

It says it all. NGOs and staff need to go further to the roots of the hard life trajectory the Youth took, to be able to make a change in the Youth' lives.

Reading this document, you have seen that a lot of elements are common to the work with Youth in situations of exclusion, but some elements are even more important with Youth who come from a difficult past and struggle to go out of it. Yet, it does not mean that any effort is vain and that their professional as well as social inclusion is impossible. It means NGOs and staff need to be extra careful of some elements that have been tricky for these Youth in the past.

So let's go and try whatever we can since Youth are our future, and every Youth with a hard life trajectory can contribute to a brighter world !

Have a nice day,

Y4CN team





# THANK YOU TO OUR MEMBERS...



# ...AND PARTNERS!



Youth 4 Change Network ([Y4CN](#)) is an international network of support and exchange between organizations working in favour of the inclusion of Youths who are victims of exclusion.

