



GENERAL QUALITY ASSURANCE TOOLKIT



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LEARNING AND REFLECTION BOOK

2020

This handbook was produced as an Intellectual Output (IO2) of the Strategic Partnership project **“Pay it Forward Be A Social Entrepreneur International” (PiFbase International)**.

The project was implemented by Awesome People (Sweden) in collaboration with Un strop de fericire (Romania) and Muuramen Innola Ry (Finland) with the support of the Swedish National Agency MUCF.

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union under the Erasmus+ program. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not represent the opinions or positions of the funders of this project. “The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.”

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROJECT

PiFbase International is a 3-year strategic partnership between three youth organizations in Finland, Romania, and Sweden. This long-term collaboration took place between March 2017- February 2021.

Our main goal is to improve the quality of youth work through an innovative method called PiFbase – Pay it Forward Be a Social Entrepreneur.

We use coaching as the central tool and we strongly believe in social inclusion and celebration of diversity.

In the strategic partnership PiFbase International we focus on four themes:

- ▶ **The learning environment in Youth Work**
- ▶ **Professionalization of Youth workers**
- ▶ **Social Inclusion and managing diversity in Youth work**
- ▶ **Quality in Youth Work**

In this strategic partnership we focused on six objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Professionalize youth workers by setting quality standards and ethical and professional codes related to the coaching role, and develop high-quality skills and competencies, particularly in their work with inclusion and diversity.
- **Objective 2:** Create a space for youth workers to share experiences and know-how regarding reaching out to marginalized young people.
- **Objective 3:** Create a set of intellectual outputs to support youth workers in their personal and professional development.
- **Objective 4:** Improve capacity building, management, and collaboration skills within the three organizations.
- **Objective 5:** Increase the organizations' ability to work with young people with fewer opportunities through the promotion of social entrepreneurship.
- **Objective 6:** Improve strategies and methods on how to conduct qualitative youth work including collaboration with local communities and initiate cross-sectoral cooperation.

FUNDING BODIES



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SUMMARY

Quality assurance is focused on working processes, looking at how youth work is done. The present piece of work is first making a case for evaluating quality in youth work and why it is worth investing resources into creating a system to ensure the standards of our work in the field. Basic concepts related to the quality evaluation are then introduced. Working with our specific example, where we adapted the SPAM (Self- and Peer-Assessment Model) tool for youth workers and organizations implementing the PiFbase method, we describe the process we went through to fit an existing tool to the specifics of our activity. Finally, we suggest a step-by-step path of formulating your own quality criteria to evaluating the quality of your working processes.

1 MAKING A CASE FOR EVALUATING QUALITY IN YOUTH WORK

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ To familiarise readers with what is quality in youth work and related concepts.
- ▶ To acknowledge the barriers that might stop us from measuring the quality of youth work.
- ▶ To make a case for investing the time to develop a system for measuring quality in youth work, regardless of the level we are working at.
- ▶ If objective (3) achieved, to provide a set of useful resources for developing a system for quality evaluation.

BRIEFLY ABOUT YOUTH WORK

Before starting the discussion about quality in youth work, we think it is important to clarify what we mean by youth work and what are its core features. As defined by an EU Expert Group in the field, youth work is represented by "actions directed toward young people regarding activities where they take part voluntarily, designed for supporting their personal and social development through non-formal and informal learning" (p.12, European Commission, 2015). Its core features are illustrated in Figure 1.

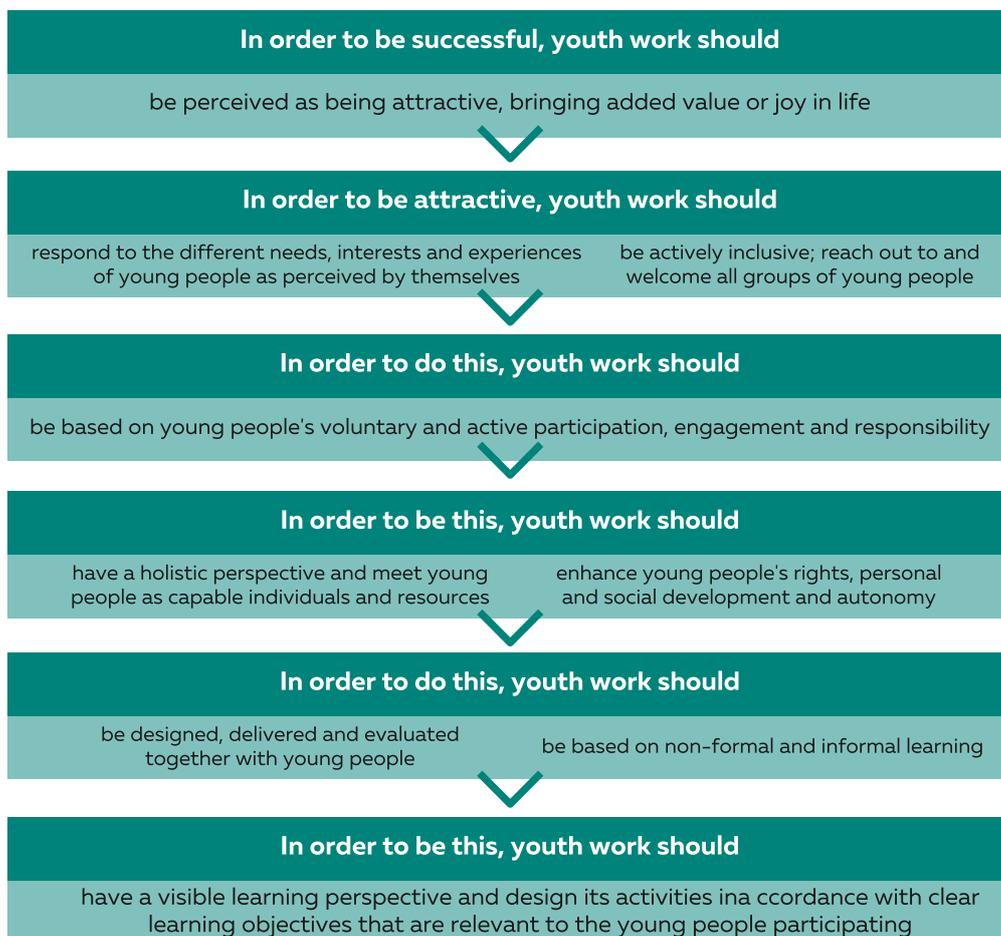


Figure 1. The core features of youth work, as presented in the 2015 Report from the Expert Group on Youth Work Quality Systems in the EU Member States



QUALITY IN YOUTH WORK

Now let's deal with the concept of quality that refers to the degree to which something fulfills its function. Therefore, taken together, quality in youth work refers to the extent to which youth work fulfills its function of supporting the personal and social development of young people through voluntary participation in activities based on non-formal and informal learning. Discussion about the quality of youth work should have a starting point of the overall aims and the core features of youth work. This is important because, due to various reasons, we can get side-tracked into focusing on more general results such as "more young people in education", "lower crime rates among young people", "more people doing voluntary work" which can be outcomes of quality youth work but should not be the focus! The simple reason for it is that they are outcomes of the interplay between many more factors and sectors than youth work alone. The focus of good quality youth work is to provide spaces for personal and social development for young people and when talking about the quality of youth work we should be looking at the degree to which we succeed to provide such spaces bearing in mind the core features mentioned previously.



LOVELY INDICATORS AND THE MAGIC QUALITY CIRCLE

Quality assurance, evaluation, assessment, criteria, system, indicators, standards, did you fall asleep already? What if we use research, purpose, values, meaning, change, impact, curiosity, development, learning? Better? Maybe for some, maybe some are even more comfortable sleeping after this second batch of words. We know the topic of quality evaluation can seem dry or boring if you are not patient enough to understand its true value. But take a coffee and let's try to break this wall. The main point is that it doesn't mean you cannot do good youth work without indicators, but you could neither prove it nor know whether the quality has improved or not. We can list many reasons for taking the time to develop a system to evaluate the quality of your work, but here are a few:

- 
- 1. To gain an understanding of what you are doing from different perspectives.**
 - 2. To learn about what you are doing well and what you need to improve.**
 - 3. To be able to improve your work in a systematic way and check whether the changes you implemented are working.**
 - 4. To show to external bodies the outcomes of your work**

When going a bit more in-depth with what quality evaluation is, we discover that for every objective we set, there are a few elements that we need to 'attach' indicators to in order to understand how well we are doing things and where we need to improve:



PRECONDITIONS

I.e., what needs to be there for the objective to be tackled such as budget, facilities, youth worker competencies.

WORK PROCESSES

I.e., how we set aims, how we map youth needs and interests, how we document our work.

OUTCOMES WHICH ARE QUANTITATIVE

I.e., number of participants, of events, of hours) and qualitative (i.e., attitudes changed, skills developed, knowledge gained.

If we make a quick stop at the “outcomes”, it is important to mention that youth work is (too) often described in quantitative terms: how many young people were reached, how many events organized for them, how many hours worked. Because of the variety of youth work activities and the approach and context of youth centers and youth NGOs, these quantitative indicators are sort of useless if you want to look a bit further than numbers or when you are interested in the actual change made. But this happens often and we know we all do it, sometimes for the very reason that it’s rather easy and it looks nice and neat. In contrast, trying to capture something less quantifiable, but we would argue much more important, can be challenging. That’s why having qualitative indicators in place to look for BEFORE starting any kind of activity is so crucial, not only for the external stakeholders but also for internal checks. Qualitative measures would look for perceived experiences and feelings of young people, changes in their attitudes, developed soft and hard skills, and gained knowledge.

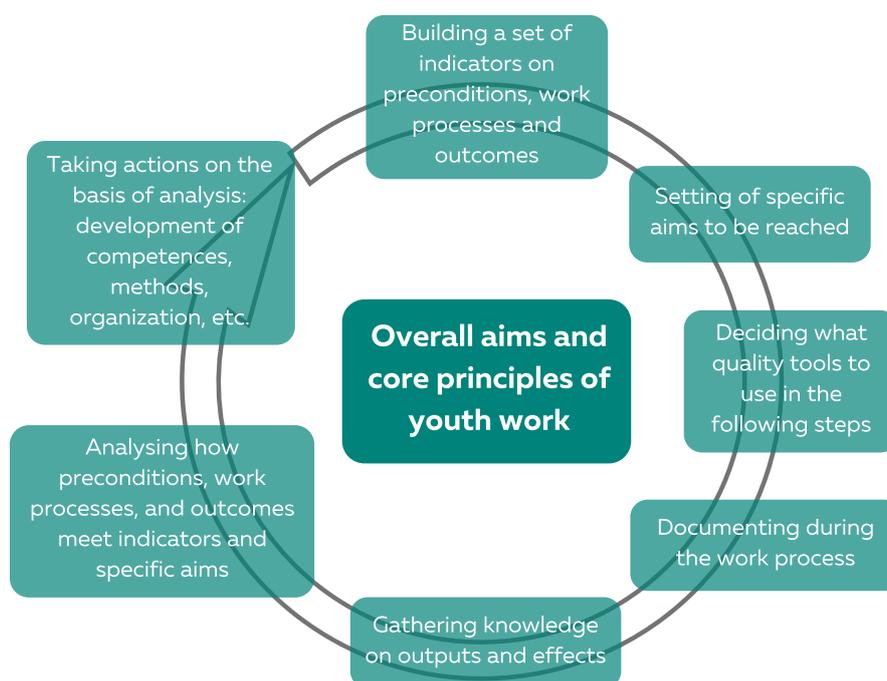


Figure 2. The quality circle, as presented in the 2015 Report from the Expert Group on Youth Work Quality Systems in the EU Member States

The figure showing the quality circle suggests some basic steps to develop a system for quality evaluation, to which I have added some pre-steps with questions for reflection:

1. **Define your youth work:** What kind of activities do you do that can go under this umbrella?
2. **Connect them with the core features of youth work mentioned above:** Which ones would you like to focus on? What indicators will you be looking for?
3. **Design your evaluation plan alongside your activities, not at the end:** What tools will you use to gather your data? Who will do it?
4. **Analyze the information you gather:** Who will do it? Who will discuss these results with?
5. **Plan the change:** What will you do now that you got these results? What would you like to change?
6. **Action plan:** Who will implement these changes and how? How will you track the changes you planned?
7. **Gather new data:** You are back in the loop.



Awareness about different quality tools and how the quality circle works is very much needed for organizations to ensure they themselves understand the nature of their work and how to improve it, but also to be able to show it to external parties. However, there is no one-fits-all solution for the quality system and the job of each organization is to carefully choose their own compilation of quality tools depending on their desired outcomes and based on their resources and realities.

START WHERE YOU ARE

We are aware that the reality we are working in varies a lot in different countries, in different organizations, and so on. The differences are manifold, but we will focus on attitudes towards evaluation in general and the actual resources invested in youth work which we think can pose some challenges in being able to implement a quality system.

ATTITUDES

Arguably, because of our previous experiences, evaluation rarely has a positive vibe associated with it. For us, it was either that we would get a bit scared of being assessed and marked on something or that we used to find evaluation rather boring, especially when it comes with a table of indicators and bullet points of abstract stuff. But, as mentioned by Chelimsky (1997), evaluation takes place with three main purposes:

- **For accountability:** to measure results of a process and how efficient it was, for instance.
- **For development:** to provide help to strengthen and improve a process.
- **For knowledge:** to gain a more in-depth understanding of a process.

By looking at these, we can easily see that not being that open towards evaluation is related to having an unbalanced focus on its accountability purpose. Indeed, Ellis (2008, cited in Cooper, 2014) reported that people working in the voluntary sector hold the belief that evaluation is rather for the funders and regulators and not necessarily for their own benefit. Cooper (2014) emphasized that the challenge is to encourage practitioners to engage with the evaluation process as “researchers of their own practice” and not as “data collectors”. The point here is that there is a clear need to shift the view on evaluation from something done mainly for external bodies towards its learning and development purposes for those who are actually doing the work.

Warning! We should be aware that on this path we might find things we do not necessarily like. We all like to think that we do wonderfully, but be prepared to find out we might not do so well in some areas is super important. The motivation for evaluating quality should be related to a desire to improve which implies that we will need to change our old ways and remain open for continuous learning. No matter what your experience with evaluation is, it is never too late to start building a learning culture within your organization. With this in mind, when leading an evaluation process, experts advise us to be:

- Curious;
- Open-minded;
- Humble;
- Constructively critical:
- More interested in saying what we do not know than demonstrating what we know;
- More interested in asking questions than giving answers;
- Aware that no one knows better, but that we know different things;
- Focused on solutions, not on who provides them.;



RESOURCES

It is understandable that when the resources allocated for youth work are limited and it is often that the work is done by unpaid volunteers, the task of managing an ongoing evaluation process in parallel with the actual work is rather daunting. It is also important to acknowledge that resources allocated to youth work in different countries vary a lot and while in some countries this is mainly done on a voluntary basis, in other countries there is more support from local/national governments as well as from other sectors. This has implications for the level at which we are able to do the work and different barriers we might face that will require extra energy to overcome. However, before rejecting the idea of thinking about the quality of our work when overwhelmed with many other daily tasks, we should reflect for a bit on the bigger picture and our WHY. We are most probably doing this work to provide opportunities for the personal and social development of young people. So knowing whether our work is achieving its objectives or not and how we can improve is something that should be of great interest.



After acknowledging all these, we would argue that creating a quality system is necessary if you are interested in the value of the time you are investing in this work. And if you are reading this, we assume you are. So here you go, start where you are! We can go on with a lot of clichés: If you were waiting for a sign, this is it. No better time than now to start thinking about how you will evaluate the quality of the youth work you are doing. If you have never done it, start thinking about it, do a bit of reading (from the resources linked at the end of the article), reflect on what is the nature of the youth work you do and what would you like to focus on from the core features mentioned earlier. Start small and try gathering some data and implement small changes based on what you discover. If you are measuring the quality of your youth work already, start thinking about systematic ways to support change based on what you find. Do you have an overview that includes all different aspects of youth work? Are your tools the most appropriate to use for your purposes? Start to optimize. If you already have a quality system in place, first of all well done, you've come a long way! But that is not a reason to stop improving, you can go into...meta-evaluation which means you can start thinking about the quality of your quality system. Are you doing it in the most efficient way? Are you learning from the evaluation process itself as well? Do you involve all stakeholders (youth, youth workers, project managers, policymakers, funding bodies)? If yes, wow! But then, you need to teach us, the rest, how to get there! So start where you are and never stop, because that is the beauty of this never-ending journey.



2 HOW WE ADAPTED SPAM

PIFBASE INTERNATIONAL AND SPAM

In November 2019, during the International ToolFair #knowhow, one of the PiFbase International project managers met Merja Hovi and took part in the “tool-to-explore” workshop about using the tool for the formative evaluation of youth work performed within a youth center or youth organization. The unique feature of the SPAM (Self- and Peer-assessment model) tool is that is developed with youth workers to be used by youth workers, in this way ensuring that the criteria are relevant for them and periodically updated to reflect the changes in their reality.



Since we were in search of a good formative evaluation tool, it seemed like the perfect model to adapt for the purpose of quality assuring the implementation of the PiFbase method. The set of criteria used in the original SPAM tool for ‘small group’ activities has been adapted for the PiFbase coaching processes. In addition, based on the same skeleton, we created a set of criteria for our organizations to evaluate internally the organisational support and learning while using the PiFbase method.

After adapting the tool for the PiFbase coaching processes we had a meeting with Merja in Helsinki (picture showing us), where project managers from all three partner organizations (i.e., Awesome People, Innola, and Asoc. Un Strop de Fericire) took part to further discuss the adaptation of the tool and its use. The results of these two adaptations of SPAM can be found in the PiFbase part of this intellectual output. In the following pages, I would like to take on the journey we made to adapt SPAM for being used with the PiFbase coaches and, then, for youth organizations using the PiFbase method. I would say in the first adaptation process the tool suffered few changes collaboratively with the coaches and the second adaptation was a recreation of the set of criteria based on a facilitated discussion around what we find a qualitative implementation of the PiFbase processes from the perspective of the youth organizations and considering that we are planning to use already the set of criteria with coaches. The two sets we are currently using alongside the implementation of the PiFbase method are complementary. We considered it useful to describe both processes; depending on your needs, you might choose to go for one or another. However, it is worth highlighting that even the process of adapting and developing these tools reflects the formative nature of the assessment: developed by the users for the users, so care is required if you want to use some conclusions made based on these assessments to external parties!



PROCESS 1. ADAPTING SPAM TO BE USED WITH THE PIFBASE COACHES

What we did. First, we removed criteria that were not relevant from the SPAM tool: small group activities version. Then, for each remaining criteria, we reframed the descriptions of each level to follow closely the PiFbase process. For some criteria, this meant little change and for some others more changes. Following this, we piloted the use of the tool with our coaches and discussed further changes with them, explaining that this is tool supposed to be helpful for them so they should find everything relevant and clear. A few changes were made following the discussion with our coaches, but they were happy with the version they saw in general.

PROCESS 2. CREATING OUR OWN SET OF CRITERIA FOR ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

What we did. First, there was a semi-guided discussion with the project managers from the 3 organizations in the strategic partnership and we came up with the list of criteria included in the tool for organizations. Keeping in mind the definition of and values associated with youth work, the starting point was what we think a successful PiFbase process means from different points of view, considering:

- the process itself;
- the different preparatory and following-up steps;
- the organization in relation to other stakeholders;
- the organizational support for the learning process of PiFbase coaches;
- the learning and development of the organization itself.

Alongside the process of deciding which criteria should go in the tool, with the team of project managers we also tried to decide what is a '2' (i.e., what we consider to be a good enough level to qualify as high-quality work). Following the group discussion, each criterion has been taken separately and each level (1-4) has been described, trying to keep the '4's as something challenging but possible to reach.

Related to how the tools are used, after the self-assessment forms are completed individually, we find the reflective discussion to be the crucial part. We designed a set of objectives for this discussion to try to reach and a list of guiding questions that we suggest to be asked with a coaching mindset to keep the spirit of the method.

As a last remark, we tried to make sure that in the pack of materials that we developed for the PiFbase process we did include support to reach the highest levels on all sets of criteria, where applicable. Also, through the nature of the PiFbase method itself, we are naturally encouraging organizations and youth workers who work with the method to think about most of the criteria by default. Finally, once embarked on this path, we also advise you to reflect on how you can best support the youth workers, as well as the project managers/method coordinators, to reach whatever you decide is a "4", by providing materials and opportunities for them to work towards excellence. When reaching 4 on all criteria is fairly easy, it is time for an update! The path is never arriving, but we surely become better by being on it consciously.



3 SHORT PATH FOR CREATING YOUR OWN SET OF CRITERIA

WHAT YOU NEED

- ✓ *Template for brainstorming.*
- ✓ *Checklist of quality criteria for inspiration.*
- ✓ *Time to brainstorm in the team.*
- ✓ *Time to formulate the criteria and descriptions of each level
(better to be done by 1 person and then reviewed by the team).*

1. Getting started – as project manager or youth worker with an overview of the youth work done in an organization, use the provided template containing the definition of youth work and its core features and values. Then:

- a) Choose a specific type of youth work you are doing that you would like to assess and improve the quality of.
- b) Have the mission and values of your own organization in mind. They should align more or less with the ones associated with youth work, but under this big umbrella maybe you have a special focus. Include it in the starting template.

2. Keeping in mind all the above, ask yourself the question: "What do I see as high-quality youth work in the context of the chosen type of activity?"

3. Formulating criteria. Based on the brainstormed ideas, identify and phrase your criteria set. Remember that a criterion is a general area you consider important for the youth work you are doing. During the brainstorming, you might have already come up with what you think should be a minimum level for some criteria (use that in the description of levels). Check some already existing criteria for inspiration if you need to (provided in our checklist):

- a) If you end up with too many criteria (whatever you decided is too many!), try to order them in terms of importance for your organization and keep the top one on the list.
- b) Once you have a more or less final set, try to spot emerging themes and group the criteria. It can make it easier to process or, at least, to organize logically.
- c) For each criterion, decide what is a good enough level (which will go as "2"). Then work out the description of the other levels: "1" should be non-existent measures or an attempt towards reaching the criterion, "4" should reflect what you see as excellence in that area, but something realistic to reach, and "3" is an effort beyond the satisfactory level. Try to be as concrete as possible when describing these levels, to make it clear for yourself what you need to do and also to be able to evaluate yourself later, knowing the work that has been done or not.

4. Pilot your set of criteria ideally with other youth workers in your organization or people involved in the processes you are trying to assess and improve. Check whether it is clear for them what you meant and whether they find it relevant. Your set of criteria and descriptions of the levels might go through a couple of iterations before it can be called final. Over time, be prepared to revise the set when your context or reality changes.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	1 WEAK/ INADEQUATE	2 SATISFACTORY	3 GOOD	4 EXCELLENT
1. Goal-orientation	<i>Some goals have been set for activities, but the wishes of youngsters have not been listened to.</i>	<i>Common goals have been set for specific sessions for a general process and, when needed, individual goals have been set.</i>	<i>Goals have been set that the coachee knows and has been able to influence and is committed to. Goals are defined and changed if needed.</i>	<i>Goals have been set together with the coachee and, when needed, with cooperation partners and parents/carers.</i>

Criterion.
Formulated as a general principle to reach the overarching aim of your youth work

Different levels of the criterion the organization can reach depending on specific actions taken in their youth work (for some criteria self-assessment might be enough to know your level, for others you might need additional measurements).



4 CHECKLIST OF QUALITY CRITERIA

- Goal orientation**
Are the goals of your activity set with your target group?
- Content and planning**
Have you thoroughly planned your activity and also left space for flexibility?
- Educational value**
What are the learning objectives of your activity? How are you going to challenge youth while supporting their learning?
- Documentation**
How are you going to document the activity? Are you involving youth in it?
- Youth feedback**
Is there feedback from previous similar activities that you can integrate now?
- Impact**
Do you need to measure the impact of the activity? How are you going to do it?
- Evaluation**
How will you evaluate if you reached your goals? Is it appropriate for your target group?
- Youth workers' profile**
Does the facilitator of the activity have space to learn? How?
- Interactions**
How will you ensure an open and safe space for interaction between facilitator and group and between youngsters?
- Equality**
Are you aware of your youngsters' backgrounds and needs? How are you planning to enable feelings of equality?
- Cooperation with parents/carers**
Are you actively collaborating with parents/carers of your target group?
- Local partners**
Can you collaborate with local stakeholders in your community for your activity?
- Environmental mindset**
Have you considered how the activity might impact the environment? Are you creating the space for youngsters to care about the environment?
- Digital tools**
Have you considered integrating digital tools in your activity?
- Operating models and rules**
Are you following the organisation's working framework?
- Safety**
Are you aware of the potential physical and psychological risks during the activity? Do you have a plan to cope with them?
- Division of responsibility**
Are you following the organisation's working framework?
- Operating environment and equipment**
Is the space and the equipment available supporting the purpose of the activity?



5 REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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Youth Work Quality Assessment: The self and peer assessment model. (2015). Nöjd, T. & Siurala, L., Kanuuna Network & The City of Lappeenranta Youth Services Kanuuna Publications. Retrieved from: http://intercityyouth.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/youth_work_quality_assessment_verkkoversio.pdf

You can find these following this link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19cLj4GZRLKMnwmfuogQ5WtHyAAuOIZ48?usp=sharing>

Intercity Youth compiled a comprehensive set of indicators to evaluate outcomes with target groups: <http://intercityyouth.eu/iq-youth-work/booklet/>



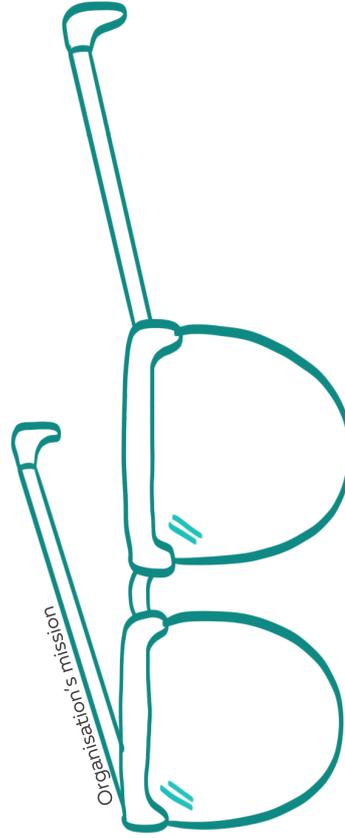
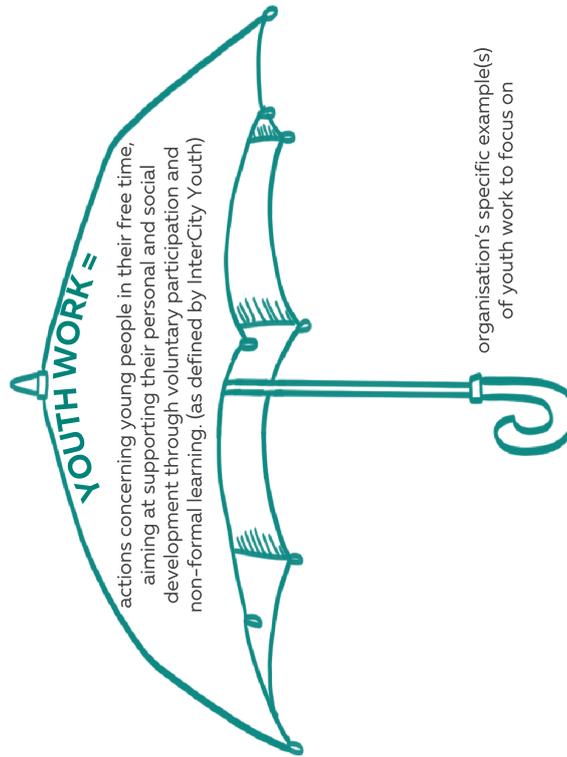
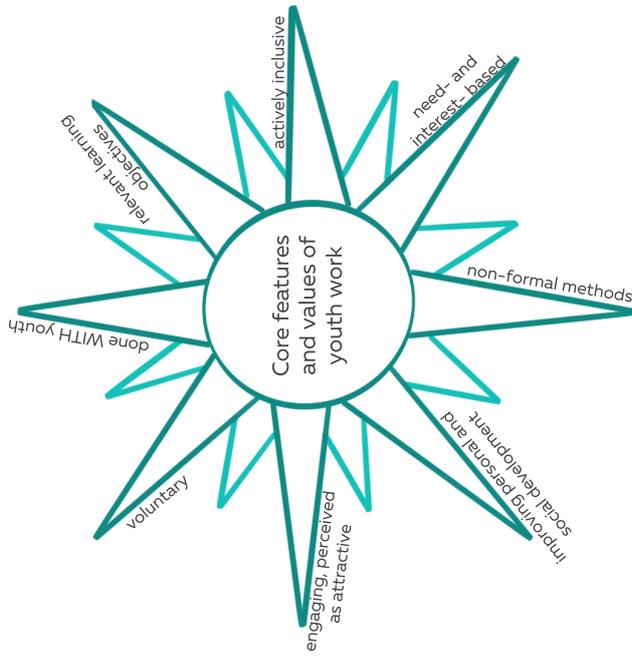
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Appendix 1

Template for brainstorming quality criteria



WHAT DO WE SEE AS HIGH QUALITY YOUTH WORK IN OUR CONTEXT?



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