



YouthLink Manual

On Community Centres

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1.

INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPT OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

This manual has been developed within the framework of the NextGen project, which aims to promote inclusion, innovation, and active citizenship, particularly among young people with fewer opportunities. It responds to the growing need for structured, long-term support to community centres as infrastructures for social inclusion, civic engagement, and local development.

Community centres are understood here not merely as service providers, but as stable and accessible spaces that strengthen community connections, enable participation, and respond to local needs. While the NextGen project places a particular focus on young people, the approach presented in this manual treats community centres as shared civic resources open to all, shaped through intergenerational and cross-sectoral collaboration.

The project is coordinated by LoPe and implemented in partnership with DKolektiv, AFP Patronato San Vincenzo, and Kulturno izobraževalno društvo PiNA, with the support of the European Commission.

This manual is intended for organisations, practitioners, local authorities, and community leaders interested in establishing or strengthening community centres, particularly in underserved or remote areas.

The manual is not designed to be followed dogmatically; rather, it offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to different community contexts. Rather than offering fixed models or ready-made solutions, the manual focuses on both what community centres do and why and how they operate.

Although the following chapters address physical infrastructure, digital tools, mobile outreach, and participatory models, the aim is not to prescribe a standardised approach. Instead, the manual supports reflection on processes that are inherently contextual, relational, and evolving. In this sense, “community” is not a fixed entity, but an ongoing social practice shaped through interaction, negotiation, and shared responsibility.



1.1.CONCEPTUALISING THE COMMUNITY CENTER

There is no universally established definition of a community centre. Their roles, structures, and activities vary depending on the socio-political context in which they operate. However, across different contexts, several core characteristics consistently emerge: community centres enable dialogue, cultivate relationships, promote citizen empowerment, and facilitate shared governance of community resources.

Community centres are as diverse as the communities that shape them. Their value does not lie in formal recognition or institutional status, but in their ability to respond to local needs, especially in situations where existing systems may be insufficient or unresponsive.

They often emerge through the adaptive reuse of public or underutilised spaces and occupy a hybrid position between civil society, local government, and public policy.

From the perspective of critical urban theory and political sociology, community centres can be understood as spaces of social production. They are environments where access to resources, forms of participation, and the meaning of “community” itself are continuously negotiated. These are not neutral spaces. Rather, they are shaped by the values, experiences, and perspectives of the people who use them.

While neutrality may appear inclusive, in practice every decision—regarding governance, access, funding, or programming—reflects particular values and priorities. The strength of a community centre lies not in avoiding these dynamics, but in making them visible and open to dialogue. Clearly articulated values contribute to inclusivity by acknowledging diverse lived experiences rather than suppressing them.

THE VALUE FRAMEWORK OF NEXTGEN COMMUNITY CENTRES

The model developed through the NextGen project is grounded in norms often used when shaping community centre programs and practices:

Solidarity: The centre functions as a space of mutual support, where relationships and cooperation are actively developed.

Participation: Programmes and decisions are co-created, drawing on lived experiences and local knowledge rather than relying solely on institutional expertise.

Openness and Inclusivity: Community centres are open to all, while intentionally ensuring accessibility for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

Locality: Initiatives are shaped by local realities, informed by dialogue with residents and rooted in local wisdom.

Flexibility and Process Orientation: The centre operates as an adaptive system, open to ongoing learning and change in response to emerging needs and community dynamics.

1.2. YOUNG PEOPLE AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Young people with fewer opportunities face multiple forms of exclusion, which often extend beyond the economic or educational domain. Structural barriers limit their access not only to resources but also to spaces where their needs can be expressed and addressed collectively.

Institutional frameworks frequently frame youth as a “risk group,” leading to policies that treat them as passive recipients of preventive or corrective interventions. Such approaches ignore their potential for self-determination.

Within the community centre model developed here, young people are not positioned as beneficiaries but as co-creators of processes and relationships. They participate in shaping content, taking responsibility, and developing critical and social competences through real-world engagement. This approach draws on critical pedagogies, particularly Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of dialogue-based learning, where knowledge emerges from interaction rather than instruction.

Work with young people in community centres is integrated within a broader social ecosystem that includes diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds, and social positions. In this sense, “community” is not treated as a homogeneous unit but as a diverse assembly in which norms, values, and practices are negotiated.

1.3. CONTINUITY AND RELEVANCE

Unlike short-term project-based interventions, community centres provide a foundation for sustained civic engagement and collective learning.

While many centres rely on project funding, their activities should form part of a broader, long-term strategy aligned with community priorities. A community centre is not an additional service, but a civic infrastructure that connects people, knowledge, and resources that might otherwise remain fragmented.

Its role includes mediating diverse interests, strengthening relationships within the community, and creating opportunities for participation and collaboration.

Young people play a central role in this process. Their involvement is not symbolic, but essential in shaping how the centre develops and responds to change. By contributing new perspectives, they expand the possibilities of what the centre can become.

Community centres grounded in these principles are not passive service providers. They create conditions for long-term social change by fostering participation, building trust, and strengthening collective capacity.

In a context marked by social fragmentation, growing distrust, and political disengagement, community centres can serve as spaces of reconnection through concrete practices of cooperation, accountability, and shared responsibility.



2.

METHODOLOGY OF COMMUNITY CENTRE



2.1. INTRODUCTION – METHODOLOGY EMERGES FROM PRACTICE

When reflecting on the methodology underpinning community centre work, understood here as the set of approaches, principles, and practices that guide how a centre operates and engages with its community, we cannot predetermine a simple set of tools.

Methodology develops from the centre's role within the community's social infrastructure and from the people who participate in and co-create its activities. In such a space, practices, relationships, and values are continuously shaped through dialogue with the local context.

Methodology is therefore not only about how things are done, but also about who is involved, who benefits, and under what conditions the work takes place.

Such approaches require ongoing reflection on the techniques we use and the assumptions they carry:

- **Who makes decisions?**
- **Whose needs are recognised, and whose remain invisible?**
- **How is inclusion operationalised in everyday practice?**

In the following sections, we illustrate how these principles are applied through governance, community needs assessments, and participatory programme design.

2.2. GOVERNANCE: STRUCTURES, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Although governance models differ depending on legal, financial and cultural contexts, as well as on the founding mission of each centre, several common principles can be identified.

1. Participatory Decision-Making

Governance mechanisms enable shared decision-making that goes far beyond consultation. Community members are active co-actors, not passive recipients of services. Power relations are opened to discussion, and multiple perspectives are incorporated into collective decisions.

2. Distributed Responsibility

A centre may have a coordinator or director, but leadership and responsibility are not concentrated in a single role. Instead, they are distributed across the team according to competencies and capacities. This strengthens organisational resilience, reduces dependence on one individual, and recognises the contributions of all members.

3. Structural Accessibility

Roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes should be clearly communicated within the team and to the wider community. Transparency is essential for building trust; opaque or closed structures undermine participation and weaken the sense of shared ownership. The centre should operate openly, rather than as a restricted structure accessible only to a few. Everyone should be able to understand its functioning, participate meaningfully, and influence outcomes. This includes providing accessible information, ensuring physical accessibility, and maintaining open channels of communication.

4. Locality

A community centre works within the community, not as an external service provider. Governance is rooted in relationships rather than procedures alone, and leadership involves listening, recognising, and strengthening local capacities. The aim is to reduce the gap between decision-making structures and the voices of community members.

Community centres navigate the tension between formal requirements (legal, administrative, financial) and informal relations (trust, spontaneity, mutual care). Good governance does not remove this tension but provides ways to work productively within it.

2.3. MAPPING COMMUNITY NEEDS: FROM ASSESSMENT TO CO-CREATION

Needs assessments are often reduced to data collection and superficial analysis. Surveys are useful—and at times necessary—but they can reproduce the risk of treating the community as an object of analysis rather than a subject of change.

Combining quantitative methods with diverse qualitative approaches enables participatory mapping that draws on local knowledge as a resource. At the same time, the process itself becomes an opportunity to build community capacity and develop a deeper understanding of local realities.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCH AN APPROACH:

1. Start from existing knowledge

Local organisations often hold deep—though sometimes informal—insight into the community's context. Involving them in interpreting results strengthens both the methodology and alignment with existing community initiatives.

2. Use diverse tools with community members

Beyond interviews and focus groups, needs mapping can include workshops, neighbourhood walks, informal gatherings, storytelling sessions, and participatory mapping. These approaches create accessible environments where community members can share experiences more openly and meaningfully.

3. Analyse absences

When gathering information, it's possible that there are some demographics that go unnoticed. Think: Who is not present? Have I forgotten anyone? "No man left behind" thinking is fundamental for the community center to function as intended.

4. Connect individual needs to structural context

Needs are not only individual or family-based; they often reveal broader systemic barriers—housing, education, healthcare, mobility, employment. Aggregating individual needs helps identify shared obstacles.

The goal is not to produce a final, definitive list of needs—they change constantly. Instead, mapping should generate a shared understanding of the community's lived reality: its challenges, resources, aspirations and contradictions.

2.4. PARTICIPATORY PLANNING AND CO-CREATION OF PROGRAMMES

Programmes are not delivered as finished products; they evolve through dialogue with participants. This requires a shift from service provision to shared authorship, from “reaching users” to building relationships, and from fixed activities to ongoing collective learning.

KEY TOOLS TO INCLUDE:

Open calls and co-design workshops - Participants propose ideas, test small prototypes and evaluate them collectively.

Flexible programme cycles - Programmes are regularly revisited and adapted based on feedback and emerging needs..

Meaningful youth participation - Young people should not be limited to “youth programmes” but included across all thematic areas and all levels of decision-making.

Drawing on Freire, Boal, and other radical pedagogues, methodology must remain dialogical. It should:

- Affirm the experiential knowledge of the community,
- Create spaces for critical awareness,
- Treat community centres not only as service points but as spaces of social transformation.

Finally, co-creation requires time and trust. These qualities are built through sustained, long-term processes. Without them, participation risks remaining symbolic rather than real.

3.

PHYSICAL SPACE OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

NextGen Community Centres are characterised by strong local roots: initiatives are shaped by local realities, informed by dialogue with residents, and grounded in specific local knowledge. It is evident that the Community Center—both as a place and as a symbol—plays a crucial role in this experience. The center enables participation, visibility, and a sense of belonging, providing a stable and recognisable environment where relationships can develop over time. It is not just a physical room or infrastructure; there is a strong feeling of belonging attached to the Community Center, as its symbolic value comes directly from the community itself and reflects the values of those who use it. In this sense, it functions as a symbol of the community and its shared values.

Accessibility and flexibility are essential: spaces should be easy to reach, inclusive for people with different needs, and adaptable to a variety of activities, group sizes, and uses.

Financial and geographical constraints often shape how spaces are designed and used, requiring creative, context-sensitive solutions such as shared facilities, multipurpose rooms, or mobile and temporary setups.



3.1. CO-DESIGN OF THE SPACE

The importance of co-design lies in ensuring that the space truly reflects the needs, ideas, and experiences of those who will use it. By actively involving community members in the process, the NextGen Community Centre can become more inclusive, relevant, and meaningful for its users.

To support this, residents and future users should be engaged from the earliest design stages. This can be done through structured activities such as brainstorming sessions, co-design workshops, and simple methods for visualizing and testing emerging ideas.

To illustrate this approach, we will briefly outline how a co-design activity can be carried out in practice.

The activity can begin with a short introduction to the project, the co-design approach, and the role of participants, emphasizing their active involvement in shaping decisions about the future of the space.

If available, the architectural design of the Community Centre can be presented as a starting point. It is important to clearly highlight which aspects of the space are open to input and adaptation. Participants can focus on key functional areas such as a kitchen, study room, multimedia room, or multipurpose space.

Selected case studies of similar spaces can be presented as inspiration, illustrating different uses, equipment, and design solutions. Participants discuss and vote on preferred examples to identify elements that best respond to their needs. Facilitators can provide additional examples based on the local context.

In the first part of the session, the following case studies can be used as inspiration, organised by functional areas:

MULTIMEDIA ROOM

Benchmark School Innovation Lab / Pennsylvania. A school with an educational approach that promotes research on learning. Classrooms are designed as fully equipped laboratories; knowledge is built through hands-on experience.

Defhouse / Milan. A house in Milan designed for young social media influencers. "The ideal setting for content production."

Google Campus/ Dublin. Google's campus where work and play merge, spaces foster creativity, and technology is an integral part of the interiors.

Hamilton Grange Teen Centre / New York. A centre dedicated to teens, a library that becomes a more open and stimulating environment, centred on technology to attract and engage neighbourhood youth.

KITCHEN

Shabu Lab. A restaurant-cum-lab that allows diners to cook their own meals using induction hobs placed at the tables. The space is designed as a true laboratory, where guests leave their belongings at the entrance and prepare for the culinary experiments that will take place at the tables, where they can cut, combine, and cook various dishes.

Tawlet Restaurant. A convivial space celebrating local food, promoting locally sourced produce from farmers around Beirut. The space puts producers at the forefront, allowing them or their families to become chefs for a day and prepare their own recipes.

Officine Vispa. Community Kitchen. Every week, Officine Vispa opens the doors of its neighbourhood kitchen, where volunteers and community members develop various creative initiatives to foster social cohesion. One of the projects is Cucine Senza Confine (Kitchens Without Borders), which involves the collaboration of various citizen volunteers, immigrants, and second-generation immigrants, to create culinary events that showcase the flavours and knowledge of different communities and foster intergroup socialization.

Kitchen Lab / Alto Adige (Bolzano). A laboratory available for the exchange of knowledge and experience to develop new food products or production techniques. Product testing, processing technologies, and workshops are available.

CibOfficina / Turin. A permanent social cooking laboratory that promotes environmental sustainability, inclusion, community development, and access to food for all.

STUDY ROOM

Factoria Joven. A multipurpose space where indoors and outdoors blend together, the study room is basic but offers students the opportunity to work in groups, spend time on the computer, and engage in prototyping activities.

B.Open. An inclusive space in Bergamo for working, meeting, participating in cultural and educational events, and studying. You can choose your own way of "inhabiting" the space: huddled on an ottoman, focused on a more formal seating arrangement, or relaxing on a sofa, or outside in the park, alone or with others.

MULTIPURPOSE ROOM

Espaço Núcleo Pulso / São Paulo, Brazil. Therapeutic and body awareness centre. Various spaces for individual therapy, group activities, and body expression dynamics.

The Studios / Seattle. An arts education centre dedicated to acting, dance, and music. A place to incubate and launch local talent and meet the demand for flexible performance spaces.

Participants vote on the cases that best reflect community needs, taking into account both of the following criteria:

- **Aesthetic qualities** – warm, welcoming, and home-like spaces; outdoor areas for studying and eating; inviting environments where people naturally want to spend time.
- **Features and equipment** – self-managed spaces; accessibility; technologically equipped areas; and opportunities for shared use.

In the second part of the session, participants create their own catalogue of ideas and visual references, such as images collected online, based on the four functional typologies defined for the common spaces. Their research is guided by the discussion of the stimulus cases presented earlier. Suggestions are collected interactively on a digital platform, for example using Padlet, which allows participants to combine images and text on a virtual bulletin board.

Participants are divided into small groups, and each group receives pre-designed “sheets” corresponding to the different space functions. They complete these sheets with a title, an image, and a brief description of their ideas. At the end of the session, a representative from each group presents their results to the wider group, explaining and justifying their choices.

The implementation of the activity can be outlined as follows:

- 1.** Participants design a room (one of the four mentioned above)
- 2.** Designs are submitted to a bulletin board (Padlet), where all proposals will be collected and made available for participants to review before the group discussion and selection process.
- 3.** Participants will be divided into groups according to the room for which they submitted a design proposal. For example, participants who submitted a kitchen design will join the Kitchen Group, while those who proposed ideas for the multipurpose room will join the Multipurpose Room Group.
- 4.** Each group will make a pitch for their room design to everyone. There will be one spokesperson per room-group.
- 5.** Each spokesperson will present their ideas.
- 6.** The codesign of the space must be agreed upon by future users at the end of the session so that the codesign of the space is to everyone's liking.



3.2. THE CRITERIA FOR A NEXTGEN COMMUNITY CENTRE SPACE

Precisely for its purposes and mission, a NextGen Community Centre should be guided by clear criteria for accessibility and a balance between private and shared spaces.

Centres must provide adequate accessibility and safety features: elevators, wide corridors, and step-free transitions ensure that all users, including those with mobility difficulties, can move comfortably throughout the building. Non-slip floors, emergency buttons, and sensor-assisted lighting further enhance safety.

Modular interior design, flexible furniture systems, and “living” technologies can support adaptability and user comfort.

MODULAR DESIGN

The flexibility and adaptability of modular systems allow spaces to evolve according to users’ changing needs, offering practical and sustainable solutions. **In smaller spaces, modular systems maximize efficiency while enabling more personalized environments.**

Modular design involves systems in which independent components can be assembled, rearranged, or combined. Key characteristics include:

Flexibility and scalability: Modules can be added or removed as needed.

User-centred design: Systems can be adapted and reorganised to match user preferences.

Ease of assembly and transport: Components can be quickly assembled, moved, or reconfigured.

In social gathering areas, movable partitions offer an excellent example of spatial flexibility, allowing a balance between private and shared use. Alternatively, spaces can be designed for individual use (quiet rooms, design studios) alongside areas for communal activities and socialising (kitchens, gyms, home theatres).

FLEXIBLE FURNITURE

NextGen Community Centres can feature flexible furnishing systems, consisting of adaptable furniture that performs multiple functions based on user needs. There are various types:

Transformable furniture: that is, furniture with multiple functions, such as sofa beds, folding tables, and storage seats.

Modular furniture: Furniture that can be reconfigured and customized to the user's needs by combining and separating parts.

Multifunctional furniture: Furniture that serves more than one purpose, such as a bookcase that also serves as a desk.

QUALITY OF LIFE IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE COMMUNITY CENTER

Smart technologies enhance usability and comfort. For instance, lighting systems can adjust the atmosphere at different times of day, enabling a single space to serve multiple functions. Users can personalise settings according to their routines and preferences. Smart thermostats and automated blinds improve comfort and energy efficiency.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies allow users to explore and customise space layouts in virtual environments. These tools strengthen the connection between users and the space during both co-design and regular use, enhancing engagement and functionality.

The codesign and technology of the Community Center are important for making the space suitable for community needs. The most important thing when codesigning the Community Center is active involvement from future users of the Center.

4.

BUILDING LONG-TERM COOPERATION WITH LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

Long-term and effective cooperation with local stakeholders does not happen by chance – it is a strategic process that requires intentional planning, constant engagement and above all mutual trust. Below are the key principles, challenges, and concrete practices you can use to build and maintain strong partnerships.

4.1. THE FOUNDATION: TRUST AND RECIPROCITY

The first step in any meaningful partnership is building trust. Without trust, any initiative will remain superficial, and long-term cooperation can become challenging, with conflicts arising more frequently. Equally important is identifying and engaging the right stakeholders. Organisations, associations, and individuals who share a common mission with the community centre, or who can provide financial support, mentorship, technical expertise, or access to networks, play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability, relevance, and impact of the initiative. Carefully selecting partners whose strengths complement one another helps create a balanced and resilient ecosystem in which responsibilities are shared, resources are optimised, and collaborative learning can flourish. From experience we can share the next learning outcomes:

Communicate transparently - Clearly communicate who you are and what your organisation does: outline your resources, capacities, and ambitions from the start.

Consultative co-creation - Every project begins with consultations: organise workshops, focus groups, and meetings with various stakeholders (municipal authorities, schools, businesses, civic initiatives). This step is not merely procedural; it is already part of co-creating the programme.

Follow through on commitments - Demonstrate consistency through actions, even small or symbolic ones – keeping agreements, providing feedback, and involving stakeholders in monitoring progress strengthens the perception of reliability.

4.2. STAKEHOLDER MAPPING AND SHARED VISIONS

To make long-term cooperation successful, you must understand who the local stakeholders are and what their interests, resources, and challenges are.

1. CREATE A STAKEHOLDER MAP

Identify all key actors: local authorities, public institutions (schools, cultural centers), businesses, civic initiatives, individual residents, vulnerable groups, etc. Cooperation is never just “us and the municipality,” but a complex network.

2. ESTABLISH A SHARED VISION

Through meetings and workshops with stakeholders, co-create what you want to achieve together, what the shared goals are, and what expectations exist.

3. DEFINE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In order to reduce conflicts and increase efficiency, clarify who leads the project, who supports it, who provides contacts, who is responsible for local support, logistics and communication.

Each of these steps should be documented and communicated transparently to ensure all participants understand their contribution and influence in the partnership.

4.3. CREATING CHANNELS FOR CONTINUOUS COLLABORATION

One of the biggest risks in partnerships is that communication starts strong but then fades once the project becomes routine. In order to prevent this from happening:

- Organize regular meetings (monthly or quarterly meetings) with stakeholders where you can share progress, challenges and successes.
- In addition to in-person meetings, use multiple communication channels (e-mail, local media, social networks, newsletters, website) to reach broader audiences.
- Build mechanisms for feedback and joint reflection: use evaluations, reflective sessions, and periodic reviews to analyze together what works well and what needs adjustment.

4.4. STRENGTHENING LOCAL CAPACITIES (CAPACITY BUILDING)

It is crucial that cooperations do not remain project-based but lead to lasting change:

- Organize training and workshops for local actors (volunteers, partners, community leaders) to gain skills and tools that are useful beyond the project duration.
- Avoid a one-directional “expert-provider” model. Encourage co-learning, explore solutions jointly with local actors, test different approaches, and share good practices.
- Whenever the community has its own ideas or projects, provide support to local initiatives offering resources, mentoring, and networking. For long-term sustainability it’s vital to build local ownership.

4.5. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND ADAPTABILITY

Cooperation is not always smooth. In long-term partnerships, different interests, disagreements, and conflicts inevitably arise:

- When disagreements occur, don’t wait for things to resolve themselves. Create a space for honest dialogue, acknowledgment of different perspectives, and joint problem-solving. We suggest you get familiar with the method Non-violent communication (NVC), which can support you in the process.
- Plans evolve constantly and if new challenges or opportunities arise, be ready to revise programs together with stakeholders.

4.6. MEASURING SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

To ensure that your cooperation truly produces long-term impact, implement a system of monitoring and evaluation:

- Define indicators collaboratively with stakeholders, including both outcomes and processes (e.g., quality of cooperation, participation, stakeholder satisfaction).
- To ensure sustainability and relevance conduct joint evaluation activities and follow-up sessions after project completion.
- Celebrate achievements publicly. Invite partners, local authorities, media, and community members to events marking successes. Recognize contributions of all involved .For example, when you open the hub, invite the mayor of the municipality, stakeholders, media and people from the local community. Invite local musicians to perform and offer refreshments for guests.
- Share results and lessons learned with other community actors, promoting knowledge exchange and replication of good practices.



5.

DIGITAL DIMENSION OF COMMUNITY CENTRES

Digital platforms can be highly beneficial for community centres when used intentionally and where accessibility and inclusion is prioritized. Social media and digital tools are a rich resource for connecting with users, promoting events or achievements, hosting online activities and bridging rural or distant communities. While this section offers guidance and practical tips, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution; each context, organisation, and user group differs. Digital landscapes evolve rapidly, and platform usage varies depending on age, region, and culture. Take time to research, experiment, and understand how your local community engages digitally. Digital outreach is a continual process that requires ongoing reflection and adaptation.

Before getting into the wide range of choices in digital platforms, it is important that your organization is clear about the reason(s) it will use particular sites and which groups the centre is seeking to connect with most.

For instance:

- Does your centre want to reach more young people?
- Does your organization have investors that are interested in seeing the projects that they are supporting? Are these private donors or professional organizations?
- Would your organization benefit from better connections with stakeholders?
- Is the organization’s user base digitally literate?
- Does the organization need a virtual space to meet?

These considerations determine which platforms and content types the organisation will prioritize. Platforms may be used differently, for example: LinkedIn for stakeholders and investors, Facebook to inform current users, and TikTok or Instagram to attract new users with engaging videos.

5.1. DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Understanding which platforms exist, how these platforms are used and by whom, is important for determining where your centre should place most effort, resources and focus. Below are some short profiles that can be used as a starting point to guide how different digital platforms could be utilized. (This is not an exhaustive list and each platform may be used differently in different contexts).



THE NEXTGEN PLATFORM

Description:

The NextGen Platform is an online space designed to connect young people from different communities, enabling them to exchange ideas, participate in dialogue, and access relevant learning resources.

Main content type:

Educational videos, discussion forums, webinars, podcasts, and multilingual resources related to participation, digital inclusion, and community engagement.

Benefits for community centres:

The platform helps community centres reach young people beyond their immediate local area, strengthen cross-community exchange, and provide accessible digital opportunities for learning and participation. It also offers a model for using technology to reduce barriers caused by distance and unequal access to resources.

Tips/ Considerations:

- Introduce the platform during activities and show young people how to use its main features.
- Encourage users to explore resources, join discussions, and connect with peers from other communities.
- Use videos, webinars, podcasts, and other materials as inspiration for workshops or group reflections.
- Refer participants to the platform after face-to-face activities to support continued learning and exchange.

WEBSITES

Description:

Websites are often a collection of webpages owned by and representing an organization.

Main content type:

About us, current events or activities, information for users and stakeholders, links to resources and social media platforms etc.

Benefits for community centres:

- Websites can give organization legitimacy and make information accessible to individuals without accounts on social media.
- Websites are also completely flexible to the needs of the organization, unlike social media accounts. Organizations can decide how images or information are presented and organized giving much more control.

Tips/ Considerations:

- Because websites are often the first impression of the organization, it is important that they are functional, organized and represent the organization correctly.
- Make sure to keep information up to date.
- Consider how accessible your website is for those with disabilities or that speak another language, E.g. where possible make available translations of pages in common languages and use colours that have enough difference in brightness and hue for those with sight difficulties.

FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

Description:

Facebook and Instagram are both social networking websites. Instagram is more focused on images and video content. Each platform has a slightly different user base with Facebook being used most by those that are 30+ and Instagram used most by those under 40 years old.

Main content type:

Day to day informal content, advertisements for events, sharing of interesting videos or images, Facebook groups can be used to gather like minded individuals around a common interest.

Benefits for community centres:

- Facebook and Instagram are widely used and familiar platforms, making it more likely that a larger audience can be reached.
- It is free to set up an account.
- It can be a good way to reach other audiences and specific communities.
- Instagram and Facebook offer post scheduling through meta business suite that can make it easier to time social media posts.

Tips/ Considerations:

- Facebook and Instagram have made it harder to reach audiences with everyday content. Read the later section on algorithms.
- Due to their wide use, Facebook and Instagram can have toxic and hateful comment sections. Read later about online abuse and ways to mitigate this.

TIKTOK

Description:

TikTok is a social media platform for sharing short form videos.

Main content type:

Users expect videos that are attention grabbing, with concise and simplified concepts and language, and content that is about emotional topics.

Benefits for community centres:

- It can be a good way to reach out to young people that use the platform.
- Social movements and trends spread quickly in this format meaning there is potential for a wider audience to be reached.

Tips/ Considerations:

- The app is used by mainly young audiences and is not widely used in all countries with much content coming from the US.
- The app is heavily trend focused with successful videos often utilising trending sound bites or songs.
- Consider your audience and keep content concise and focused on a single message.
- Honest and less edited content can work well on platforms like tiktok where users value authenticity.

LINKEDIN

Description:

LinkedIn is a networking platform for professionals and businesses.

Main content type:

Industry and career related news, information about job openings, conferences and professional activity updates, sharing of professional and personal stories.

Benefits for community centres:

- Great way to build connections with stakeholders and remain updated on local and relevant news
- Can be a good way for centres to promote the work they do to potential investors and interest future volunteers or employees.

Tips/ Considerations:

- LinkedIn has a very different tone of content to other social media platforms. Although funny or personal content can work well on the site, there is a fine line of professionalism that should also be balanced.
- General community centre users will not be the main target audience of a post to LinkedIn, other platforms are better suited to reaching out to wider audiences.
- LinkedIn networks take time to build. It can be a good idea to engage with the content of other relevant users and organizations. Follow, comment, like and share relevant posts of others.

OTHER PLATFORMS TO RESEARCH AND CONSIDER:

- Online meeting platforms (Discord, Zoom, Google meet, Teams etc.)
- YouTube
- Snapchat
- Messaging platforms (eg. WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram)
- Crowd-funding platforms (eg. GoFundMe, Patreon, Kickstarter)

5.2. RISKS AND CHALLENGES

Alongside many of the benefits and convenience of online platforms there are a variety of problems that can arise and risk factors to consider, especially for smaller organizations or organizations without a dedicated digital team.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Due to their inclusive nature, community centres are often used by those who are most vulnerable in society, such as the elderly or ethnic minorities. Some individuals in these groups can find digital platforms challenging to use. Finding a balance between including digital platform users and those with limited digital abilities is essential.

Tips:

- Invest time into a communication strategy that includes diverse users, where messaging happens through both physical and digital networks and clear language is used.
- Offer digital training for users. Digital literacy is becoming more and more of an essential skill for inclusion in modern society. One way to do this is by organizing digital support sessions where community members that need help with or want to learn more about digital systems are connected with tech savvy volunteers.
- Consider simplifying language and making essential information such as the organization's contact information and opening times as accessible as possible.
- For youth users consider using the NextGens digital literacy and critical thinking resources. Although individuals can be comfortable utilizing digital platforms, they may still be vulnerable to disinformation and radicalization online. The resources make up a three-day course and will be available on the NextGen website.

ALGORITHMS

Many social media platforms reward consistency and particular types of attention-grabbing and emotionally engaging content. For organizations that want their everyday activities and messages to be seen by users or stakeholders it can be challenging to break through these algorithms.

Tips:

- Use pictures or videos of people. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram promote posts with faces more than any other content. If you are unable to use photos of the centre's activities, or are advertising future activities, it may be helpful to use stock images or videos with people.
- Keep captions short and easy to read whenever possible.
- Use emojis, colours, and hashtags that attract viewers' attention and reach non-followers.
- Start posts with questions or an engaging "hook" to generate interest. Research "social media hooks" for additional inspiration.

SAFETY

Maintaining digital spaces that are inclusive and collaborative can be particularly challenging, especially in an online landscape that has become increasingly polarized and hostile in recent years. With users able to create anonymous or fake profiles, bullying and fraud have become commonplace on many digital platforms. Community centres should develop a digital safety plan to address these risks and implement preventive measures.

CONSENT

Ensure that consent is obtained before sharing images of others. It is crucial that individuals are informed about how an image will be used, on which platforms, and whether their name or social media accounts will be included. For vulnerable individuals, such as asylum seekers, this is particularly important, as a social media post could potentially put them and their loved ones at risk.

BULLYING AND ONLINE ABUSE

Comment sections and messaging tools on social media platforms allow anyone to share opinions, whether solicited or not, from anywhere in the world. While this can provide valuable insights and foster community and connection it also exposes individuals and organizations to bullying and online abuse. Marginalized individuals are particularly vulnerable to online abuse and hate speech.

Without protective measures and proactive action, digital platforms may exclude already marginalized individuals who could benefit most from community centre services. Many platforms allow reporting of hateful content, but it is advisable to designate a specific individual(s) responsible for moderating social media accounts and enforcing a set of community guidelines. Moderators can delete or report comments or accounts that do not comply with the centre's guidelines for a safe and inclusive online environment. According to EU law, there is a distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech, and community centres have the right to protect users, volunteers, and staff from online abuse.

FALSE ACCOUNTS AND SCAMS

As with any online account, community centres should consider their own risks for fraud and online scams.

Some tips:

- Establish routines for regularly changing passwords and keeping them secure
- Keep apps and software up to date.
- Check accounts regularly.
- If a fake account is created or an account is hacked, report it to the platform promptly and communicate clearly with users.
- Train staff and volunteers on best practices for digital safety, both for work and personal accounts.

5.3. IMPLEMENTATION AND MAINTENANCE

When you have chosen the goals and digital platforms that the organization intends to use, set aside time to plan how, in practical terms, the centre will maintain an up-to-date online presence by creating and sharing content. Some key elements to consider:

1. Define how your organization will translate its visual and value identity into the content it produces. Take inspiration from other established organizations and experiment with ways to represent events, activities, and updates.
2. Develop visual templates and routines for content, such as posts for promoting events or case studies of activities. This approach can streamline the centre's communication strategy and make posts more recognizable to users.
3. Assign and train individuals responsible for monitoring each platform, and for creating or posting content. This may involve multiple staff members.
4. Use calendars for keeping up to date with relevant events, eg. national or religious holidays, days that reflect particular issues that the centre addresses eg. International Women's Day. This can be used to inspire relevant social media posts or campaigns.

5. Establish a routine for collecting and organizing images, quotes, or updates that can be shared online.
6. Plan content publication times strategically, considering when users are most likely to be online and interact with the centre's content. Make use of features such as meta business suite calendar to post content at these times.





6.

MOBILE TEAMS

Reaching people in remote or underserved areas is not as simple as sending a bus with a team down the road once a month. Mobile teams require careful planning, flexibility, and persistence, but when done correctly, they are an excellent way to bring the community centre directly to people who might otherwise be left out. It requires a commitment to building trust with communities that may have been overlooked. Mobile units are an extension of the community centre, representing the same values and goals, but delivering them in a mobile and adaptable form.

6.1. LOGISTICS AND PLANNING

The first step in mobile work is planning how the team will reach the communities.

Transport solutions should be adapted to the terrain and available resources:

- Vans or minibuses – ideal for transporting larger groups and heavier equipment.
- Bicycles or cargo bikes – effective for local routes or areas that vehicles cannot access.
- In some cases, walking teams carrying modular backpacks may be the most practical solution.
- Vehicles and equipment should be secure, well-organized, and adaptable to different types of activities.

Communities respond well to regular and predictable visits:

- Scheduling is important – establish a calendar with weekly or monthly visits.
- It is important to communicate schedules clearly by using posters, local radio, school announcements, social media, or messaging groups.
- Flexibility must be built into the schedule to accommodate bad weather, poor road conditions, or local events.

Equipment should be light, portable, and multipurpose:

- Folding tables, chairs, laptops, tablets, art supplies, and sports gear allow teams to deliver a wide range of activities.
- Modular kits –sets of portable and interchangeable materials and equipment (e.g., small tables, seating, storage boxes with activity supplies, digital devices) that can be combined or rearranged to suit different spaces, activities, or group sizes, making it easier to adapt the community centre setup to various needs.

Establish partnerships with local schools, libraries, cultural centres, and other institutions:

- Collaborating with local actors will help ensure that the mobile team is perceived as part of the community rather than an external visitor.
- An additional benefit of partnership collaboration is the possibility of accessing temporary venues, which can reduce costs and further embed the team in the community.

6.2. PLANNING ACTIVITIES

Activities delivered by mobile units should reflect the values and goals of the central community centre, but they must also be adapted to the realities of mobile work. Participation and co-creation with local young people are crucial to ensure activities are relevant and engaging:

- Educational sessions can include: digital literacy workshops, language learning, homework support, and tutoring, which can provide skills that are often unavailable in remote areas.
- Creative and cultural activities: art workshops, music sessions, storytelling circles and theatre pop-ups. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that activities are sensitive to local culture and traditions, thereby strengthening identity and community pride.
- Active citizenship and dialogue activities: youth assemblies, debates, gamification, ideathon and simulation games can help young people explore local issues and learn how to collaborate with decision-makers.
- Skill development activities: vocational tasters, entrepreneurship challenges, and career orientation sessions can prepare young people for future opportunities and may be enhanced through partnerships with local mentors or businesses.

- Recreational and well-being activities: team-building games, mindfulness exercises, and outdoor sports are important for social cohesion and mental health, especially in areas with limited youth engagement spaces.

6.3. CHALLENGES OF FIELDWORK

Mobile work presents specific challenges that require careful anticipation and planning.

Accessibility – access may be limited by poor infrastructure, limited public transport, or extreme weather conditions. Contingency plans are necessary to address these obstacles.

Sustainability – regular visits require stable funding to cover staff, transport, equipment, and other operational expenses. Community trust must be built over time, as local residents may be sceptical of external actors. Consistent presence, transparency, and collaboration with local stakeholders will help build trust gradually.

Safety and well-being – teams should follow clear protocols for road safety, emergency communication, and the safeguarding of participants. Fieldwork can also be physically and emotionally demanding for staff. Providing support structures, regular debriefs, peer exchange, and recognition of achievements can help maintain motivation and prevent burnout.

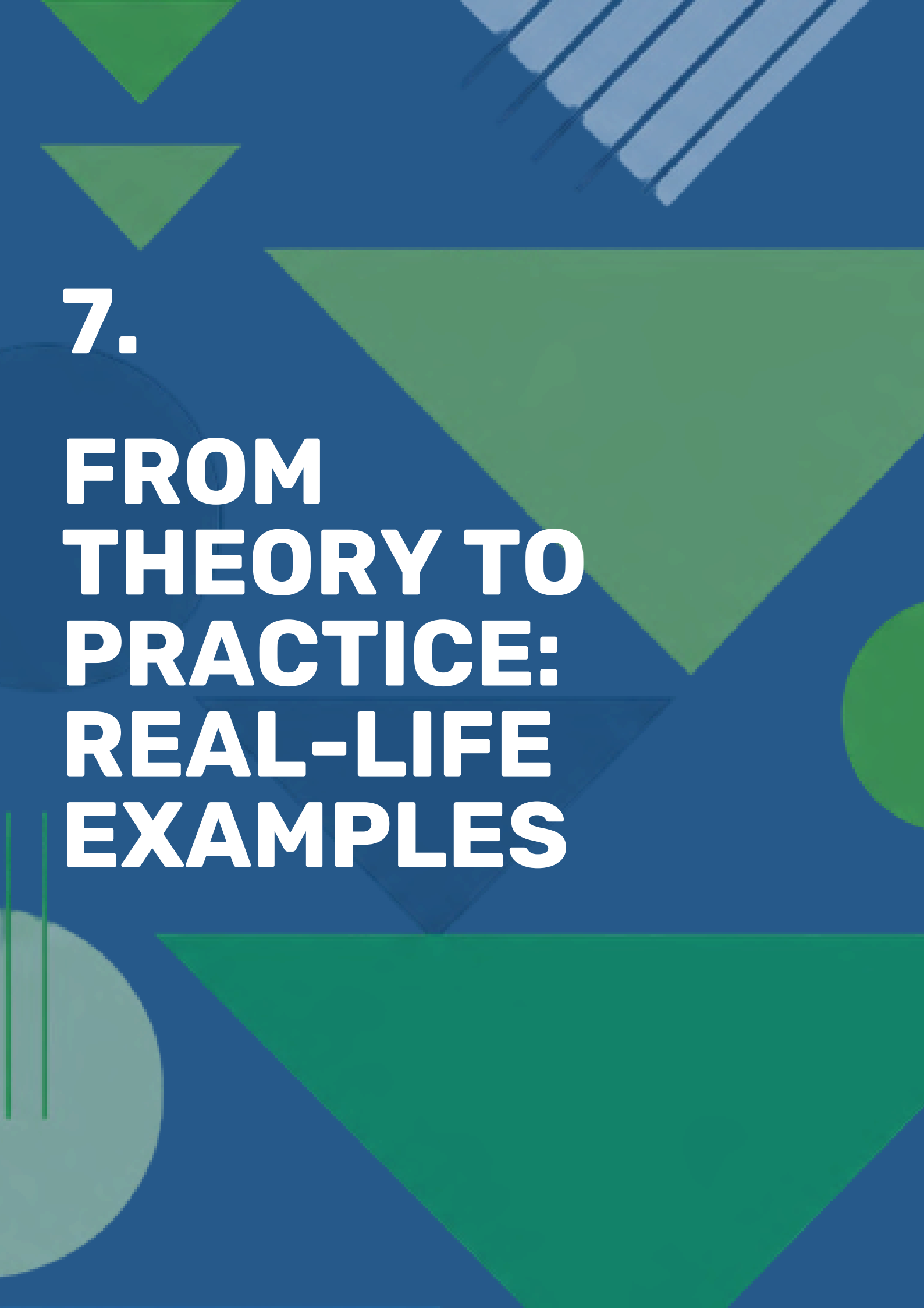
6.4. EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

The following examples illustrate possible ways in which mobile approaches can be implemented in different contexts:

Mobile youth hubs have proven to be highly effective in reaching remote communities.

- In mountainous regions, a **“youth bus”** can visit villages weekly, transforming public squares into interactive youth spaces with games, workshops, and Wi-Fi access.
- **Pop-up learning labs** can be used to teach coding and creative media.
- Temporary **“digital tents”** equipped with solar-powered devices allow teams to work even in places with unreliable electricity.
- **Cultural caravans** can support multicultural rural regions by bringing theatre performances, music sessions, and intercultural dialogue workshops. These activities strengthen identity, mutual understanding, and social cohesion.

From these examples, we can draw several key lessons. Mobile teams help extend access, but they cannot replace the central community centre; close integration with the main hub is essential.



7.

**FROM
THEORY TO
PRACTICE:
REAL-LIFE
EXAMPLES**



This section presents selected community centres and youth-led initiatives as examples of good practice in community development across partner countries. Each case highlights key organisational features, working principles, lessons learned, and one scalable programme activity demonstrating transferable approaches to inclusion, participation, and local engagement.

BAKKEN NÆRMILJØSENTER (NORWAY)



Bakken Nærmiljøsenster is a volunteer-driven community centre in Skien focused on inclusion, belonging, and support for people with limited social networks and resources. Its work is rooted in creating informal, welcoming spaces where people from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds can meet and participate equally.

The centre runs a wide range of low-threshold activities, including weekly community cafés with food and clothing donations, and wellness-oriented excursions. These activities are designed to reduce loneliness and strengthen community ties through regular social contact and shared experiences.



A key dimension of Bakken's work is youth engagement. Young people from local schools are involved as activity leaders, gaining leadership experience, training, and paid roles. This approach strengthens participation and builds responsibility while contributing to a safer and more inclusive local environment.

A central challenge in the development phase was establishing trust and visibility within the community. This was addressed through sustained cooperation with schools, reception centres, and municipal services, ensuring continuous presence and relevance.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Long-term community presence and cross-sector cooperation are essential for building trust and ensuring participation in vulnerable groups.

HIGHLIGHTED ACTIVITY:

Super Wednesdays – a collaborative after-school programme offering free activities and meals for primary school pupils, implemented through partnerships between schools, NGOs, and local services.

FABLAB BERGAMO (ITALY)



FABLAB Bergamo is a collaborative innovation space focused on open technology, digital fabrication, and knowledge-sharing. It engages young professionals and community members in learning and experimentation with tools such as 3D printing, electronics, and open-source hardware.

The organisation regularly hosts public events promoting creativity and technical skills, including international initiatives such as Arduino-focused innovation days. Its model is based on the belief that access to knowledge and technology should be open and shared to support collective growth.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, FABLAB Bergamo played a key civic role by coordinating a volunteer-based production network that developed and distributed protective equipment across Northern Italy. This demonstrated the capacity of maker communities to respond rapidly to local crises.

FABLAB also develops inclusive assistive technologies, including open-source solutions designed to support people with hearing loss, combining social impact with technological innovation.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Open-source collaboration and community-driven production can provide rapid and effective responses to local and global challenges.

HIGHLIGHTED ACTIVITY:

Community-based digital fabrication workshops using open hardware platforms (Arduino, Raspberry Pi, ESP32) to build technical skills and encourage innovation among youth.

MC MOBIL – IDRIJA YOUTH CENTER ASSOCIATION (SLOVENIA)



MC Mobil is a mobile youth centre operating across rural areas of the Municipality of Idrija and surrounding regions. It aims to reduce geographic inequality by bringing youth work directly to communities with limited access to educational and social opportunities.

The mobile unit uses non-formal education methods, volunteering, and participatory activities to engage young people in rural settings. Its core philosophy is inclusion and empowerment, particularly for youth facing barriers due to location or limited infrastructure.



A defining feature of MC Mobil is its participatory model: young people actively co-design activities and even contributed to the creation of the mobile unit itself. This strengthens ownership, engagement, and long-term participation.

Youth work is delivered through peer-based approaches, where young volunteers co-create and implement programmes with guidance from youth workers. Regular consultations with local communities ensure that young people also influence programme planning and budgeting.

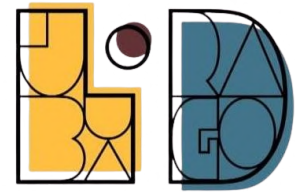
KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Mobile and participatory youth work models can significantly reduce exclusion in rural and remote areas.

HIGHLIGHTED ACTIVITY:

Mobile youth outreach units delivering non-formal education and participatory workshops directly to rural communities.

MOBILE YOUTH CENTRE LJUBA & DRAGO (SLOVENIA)



Ljuba & Drago is a mobile youth centre operating in Ljubljana that addresses the lack of safe and engaging spaces for young people in underserved urban areas. It is designed to bring youth work directly into neighbourhoods where access to structured activities is limited.

The centre operates as a converted bus that functions as a safe, inclusive, and flexible space for social interaction, creativity, and support. Young people are involved in co-designing both the interior and the programme, reinforcing a strong participatory approach.



The initiative follows a “for youth, by youth” principle, ensuring that young people actively shape activities and decision-making processes. This approach strengthens engagement and ensures relevance to local needs.

One of the programme’s notable activities focused on reducing excessive mobile phone use by offering creative, hands-on alternatives such as sewing and craft workshops. These activities support skill development and encourage social interaction.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Bringing services directly into youth environments increases accessibility and engagement, especially when combined with participatory design.

HIGHLIGHTED ACTIVITY:

Mobile youth centre model operating in underserved urban “grey zones,” delivering creative, skill-based workshops and social activities.

P4 YOUTH CULTURAL CENTRE – YOUTH ASSOCIATION V.U.K. (CROATIA)



P4 is an independent youth cultural centre in Varaždin developed by Youth Association V.U.K., focused on culture, education, and social inclusion. It provides a platform for artistic expression, civic participation, and support for young people, particularly those from vulnerable or marginalised groups.

Its programme is structured around cultural activities, educational workshops, and social events. These include media literacy trainings, mental health support, LGBTQ+ initiatives, and cultural programming such as exhibitions, concerts, and theatre events.



P4 operates through strong youth participation. Young people contribute ideas through consultations and surveys, while volunteers actively support programme delivery and organisational tasks. The “design your own programme” approach allows participants to develop and implement their own initiatives.

A significant achievement has been the creation of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, contributing to increased visibility, acceptance, and community support in the region.

Financial sustainability remains a key challenge, alongside maintaining continuity due to the high turnover of young volunteers.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Structured youth participation and co-creation mechanisms strengthen ownership, relevance, and long-term community impact.

HIGHLIGHTED ACTIVITY:

Youth-led programme incubation model (“design your own programme”), enabling young people to conceptualise, develop, and implement community initiatives.

**CONCLUSION:
BUILDING ON
WHAT WE'VE
LEARNED**

Community centres are, above all, spaces of possibility. Their significance does not lie only in their structure, activities, or programmes, but in the relationships they enable and the sense of belonging they create. What makes them meaningful cannot be fully standardised or prescribed—it is built over time, through trust, participation, and shared experience.

Across all chapters, one idea remains constant: there is no single way to build or run a community centre. Context matters. People matter. Local histories, challenges, and aspirations matter. For this reason, this manual has never aimed to offer rigid instructions or fixed formulas. Instead, it provides a framework grounded in experience, reflection, and practice—one that can be adapted, reshaped, and reimagined depending on the needs of each community.

Starting or developing a community centre is rarely a straightforward process. It requires patience, openness, and continuous learning. Challenges—whether in engaging people, maintaining partnerships, or ensuring sustainability—are part of the process. What carries this work forward is a clear sense of purpose and a genuine commitment to the community.

The experiences gathered through the NextGen project show that community centres can make a real difference, particularly when they create space for people to participate actively and meaningfully. Their impact may not always be immediately visible, but it is reflected in stronger connections, increased confidence, and the gradual building of more inclusive and resilient communities.

Looking forward, the relevance of community centres is likely to grow even further. In times marked by social fragmentation, inequality, and declining trust in institutions, these spaces offer something increasingly rare and valuable: opportunities for connection, dialogue, and collective responsibility. They create environments where people can engage not as passive recipients, but as active participants in shaping their communities. The examples included in this manual demonstrate that when these principles are applied, community centres can generate real, measurable, and lasting impact.

This work, however, goes beyond methodology, structures, or programmes. At its core, building and sustaining a community centre is a commitment to care, to collaboration, and to the belief that communities are strongest when people support one another. To everyone who chooses to engage in this work—whether by creating new initiatives or strengthening existing ones—your efforts matter. Building a community centre is not only about organising activities or managing a space; it is about contributing to something larger than any single project.

We are grateful to see this work continue through others who share similar values and motivations. We hope that this manual has been useful along the way, and that it offers support as you move forward.

Thank you for choosing to invest in your community.

NextGen team

HELPFUL RESOURCES



HELPFUL LINKS:

1. **B.Open** – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/864537000773806/>
2. **Bakken Nærmiljøsent, Norway** – <https://bakkennms.no/>
3. **Benchmark School Innovation Lab / Pennsylvania** – <https://www.benchmarkschool.org/academics/innovation-clone>
4. **Defhouse / Milan** – <https://www.defhouse.it/>
5. **Espaço Núcleo Pulso / São Paulo, Brazil** – https://www.facebook.com/nucleopulso/?locale=pt_BR
6. **FABLAB Bergamo, Italy** – <https://www.fablabbergamio.it/>
7. **Factoria Joven** – <https://juventudextremadura.juntaex.es/web/>
8. **Google Campus / Dublin** – <https://www.evolution-design.info/all-projects/commercial/google-dublin>
9. **Hamilton Grange Teen Centre / New York** – <https://www.archdaily.com/233607/hamilton-grange-teen-center-ricelipka-architects>
10. **Kitchen Lab / Alto Adige (Bolzano)** – <https://kitchenlab.noi.bz.it/it.html>
11. **Ljuba & Drago Mobile Youth Centre, Slovenia** – <https://mladizmaji.si/en/our-stars/ljuba-drago>
12. **MC Mobil – Idrija Youth Center Association, Slovenia** – <https://mcidrija.si/en/>
13. **Officine Vispa – Community Kitchen** – <https://officinevispa.com/>
14. **P4 Youth Cultural Centre – Youth Association V.U.K., Croatia** – <https://www.pecetri.com/>
15. **Shabu Lab** – <https://shabulab.com/>
16. **Tawlet Restaurant** – <https://www.soukeltayeb.com/>
17. **The Studios / Seattle** – <https://www.thestudioseattle.com/>

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