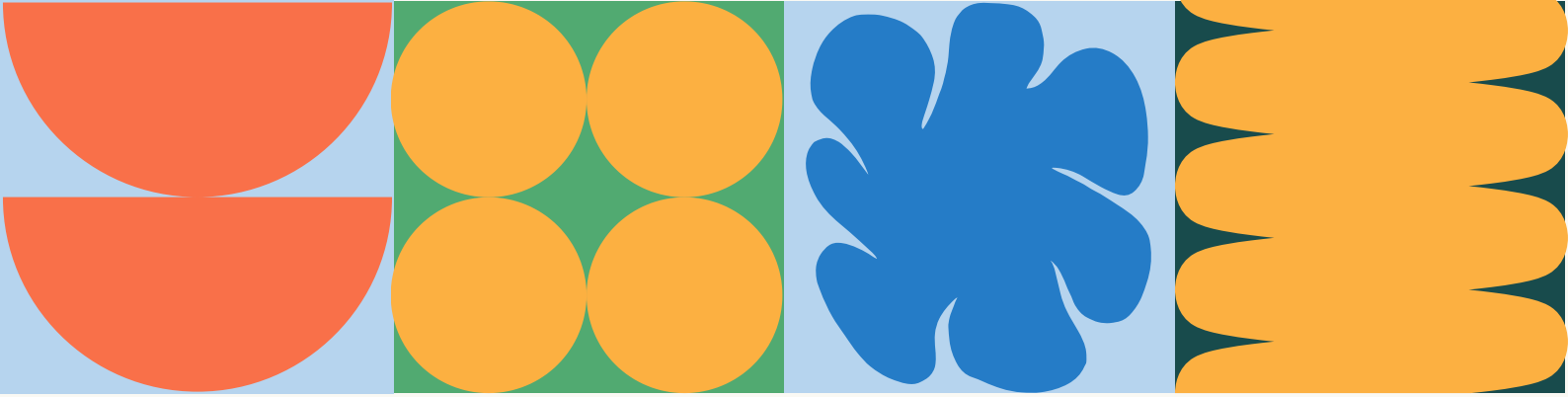

FIRST JOURNEY

"First Step is Half the Journey"

Exploring Adventure-Based Outdoor Education for Well-Being and Inclusion of Young Migrants in Norway, Spain and Germany

February 2026

Co-funded by the European Union

"First Step is Half the Journey"

Educational Manual

This publication is the result of the project “First Step is Half the Journey: Exploring Adventure-Based Outdoor Education for Well-Being and Inclusion of Young Migrants"
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Introduction & Context

In recent years, the mental health and social inclusion of young migrants and refugees has become a growing concern across Europe. Many young people arriving in a new country face overlapping challenges at the same time: navigating new systems, learning a language, rebuilding routines, and coping with uncertainty about their legal, social, and economic situation. These pressures are often combined with social isolation and, for some, experiences of displacement and loss. As a result, many young people disengage from community life, hesitate to join local activities, and struggle to build the social connections that make integration possible.

Integration support is often organised primarily by the reception and integration services, which tend to focus on the immediate practical priorities, such as language acquisition, administrative procedures, and access to main services. These interventions are essential, but they rarely create the conditions for what many young people need just as urgently: a sense of safety, trust, belonging, and positive contact with others outside formal settings.

The Erasmus+ project “First Step is Half the Journey” (First Journey) responds to this gap through a partnership between International Volda (Norway), Highlights e.V. (Germany), and Costa Connect (Spain). The project explores how Outdoor Education and Adventure-Based Learning can be used as a low-threshold, practical tool to support mental well-being and social inclusion for migrant and refugee youth. The approach is not based on extreme sports or performance. Instead, it focuses on accessible outdoor sessions and structured reflection - designed to strengthen confidence, reduce stress, and create meaningful group connections.

First Journey is an Erasmus+ small-scale partnership implemented by International Volda (Norway), Highlights e.V. (Germany), and Costa Connect (Spain). The project's core objective is to develop and test practical outdoor and adventure-based methods that can support well-being, stress regulation, and social inclusion for young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

The project follows a clear structure. WP1 mapped local realities through national needs assessments, documenting barriers and enabling factors for participation in outdoor activities. WP2 translated these findings into an educational framework and training approach for practitioners. WP3 focused on applying and adapting the methods locally through follow-up activities in each partner country, generating practice-based learning and examples. WP4 connects this learning to wider stakeholders through networking and recommendations, supporting stronger cooperation between youth work, integration services, and local actors in the outdoor/sport and community sectors.

The target group is consistent across the project: young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including forcibly displaced young people, as well as educators and youth workers working with them. In WP1 field research, participating young people were primarily 18–30, residing in Germany, Spain, and Norway

About the partner organisations

International Volda (Norway) is the project coordinator and is based in the town of Volda. The organisation works with diverse target groups, including young people with migrant and refugee backgrounds, and uses intercultural exchange and outdoor education as practical tools for integration and well-being. Its local work includes workshops and community-based outdoor activities such as hiking, skiing, climbing, and other nature-focused events, alongside regular community formats like the International Café, which brings people together through shared activities and dialogue.

Costa Connect (Spain) is a non-profit association based in Benalmádena Pueblo (Andalucía). It works primarily with young people from migrant, expat, and refugee backgrounds in the Costa del Sol region, including those living in areas with fewer opportunities and limited access to non-formal education. The organisation supports young people through educational workshops, mentoring, and outdoor and sport initiatives, with a focus on participation, confidence-building, and local community connection. Within this partnership, Costa Connect contributes to the implementation of local follow-up activities and leads parts of dissemination through visual documentation, including video production linked to WP3 outputs.

Highlights e.V. (Germany) is a non-profit organisation based in Erlangen (Bavaria). It works on mental health and the development of entrepreneurial and intercultural skills among young people, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups, including migrants and refugees. Its work includes international youth exchanges, local workshops, and community meetups, and it brings experience from Erasmus+ projects that address mental health, inclusion, and youth participation.

Philosophy and general approach

The project begins with a consistent finding from the national indexes: outdoor activities are a normal part of everyday life in all three partner contexts, yet many young migrants and refugees participate far less than local youth. This is not explained by a lack of interest, but by barriers that often overlap. WP1 highlighted practical obstacles such as cost and lack of suitable equipment, transport and distance, and limited or unclear information about where to go, what to expect, and how to join. These barriers are reinforced by social and psychological factors, including unfamiliar norms around outdoor culture, fear of not being "good enough", low confidence, and the feeling of not belonging in outdoor spaces that are perceived as "for others".

First Journey's approach is therefore intentionally low-threshold and facilitator-led. Outdoor education is not treated as an optional extra, but as a structured youth work method that creates safe group experiences in nature and reduces the usual entry barriers. Sessions are designed so participants can engage without high language proficiency, prior outdoor experience, or strong local networks. The focus is not on extreme activities or performance, but on accessible formats, cooperative tasks, and manageable group challenges, combined with reflection methods that support learning, emotional regulation, and connection within the group. The project did not aim to deliver or measure clinical mental health outcomes; instead, it focused on practical, observable results that practitioners and participants identified as meaningful.

Who this manual is for

This methodological book translates the project's learning into a usable resource. It is designed primarily for youth workers, educators, and NGO staff working with young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including in integration services, community organisations, and informal learning settings. It can also be useful for local stakeholders who support youth inclusion-such as youth centres, municipalities, community and sports organisations, and volunteer groups-especially when they want to build inclusive, cooperative approaches rather than running isolated activities. The book provides a practical framework, an activity bank, guidance on facilitation and safety, and examples from the partner countries, so organisations can apply and adapt the methods in their own local context.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Landscape

Before guiding a group into the forest or onto the water, an outdoor educator must first read the terrain. The same principle applies to social inclusion work. To design an effective, accessible outdoor education program, we must first understand the lived realities, desires, and struggles of the young people we aim to support.

For this reason, Work Package 1 of the First Journey project focused on mapping the current situation in Norway, Germany, and Spain. The partnership collected practice-based information through focus groups, surveys, and expert interviews, involving young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as well as youth workers and practitioners with experience in outdoor and integration work. The goal was to identify both the opportunities and the main barriers to participation in outdoor activities.

The findings point to a clear pattern. Many young people associate time in nature with benefits such as feeling calmer, having fewer worries, and being able to disconnect from daily stress. At the same time, participation is often blocked by a combination of practical, social, and psychological barriers. This chapter summarises the key results of WP1 and shows how they directly inform the programme design and methods presented in the following chapters.

The Current Reality: Insights from Norway, Germany, and Spain

The WP1 needs assessments show a consistent overall picture: many young migrants and refugees value time in nature and are interested in outdoor activities, but participation is shaped by local conditions and by barriers that look different across the three partner contexts.

Norway

In Norway, outdoor life (friluftsliv) is a well-established part of everyday culture, and access to nature is often close. In WP1, young migrants described a strong interest in exploring the Norwegian landscape and linked activities such as hiking and camping with feeling calmer, taking a break from everyday stress, and experiencing peace in nature. At the same time, the Norwegian outdoor context can feel demanding for newcomers. Unpredictable weather, uncertainty about what is expected, and the impression that “proper” clothing and equipment are required can make outdoor activities seem like something you need to already know how to do-and already be equipped for-before you are welcome.

WP1 also highlighted concrete practical barriers. Young people described the weather as a major factor influencing motivation and enjoyment, and they pointed to distance and limited public transport as obstacles when reaching hiking areas or activity locations without a car.

Costs were another recurring issue, especially when participation depends on suitable clothing and equipment or involves transport expenses. Taken together, these barriers can make participation feel unnecessarily complicated, even when interest is high.

Practitioners added an important perspective: some of the "obvious" norms in Norwegian outdoor culture-what to wear, what to bring, how to behave, and what friluftsliv means in practice-can become hidden barriers if they are not made explicit. Youth workers and outdoor educators therefore emphasised the need for clear, practical information (ideally available in more than one language), realistic planning adapted to the climate, access to shared or borrowed equipment, and active outreach beyond existing networks. They also stressed that inclusion depends on group conditions: stable facilitation and emotionally safe settings where participants can try new things without fear of embarrassment and can build confidence step by step through "learning by doing."

Finally, WP1 underlined that outdoor education in Norway supports not only individual well-being but also social connection. Participants described higher motivation when they felt welcomed and respected within the group and when youth workers provided consistent, low-key support-someone to go with, to talk with, or simply to spend time with outdoors. This social dimension is central: outdoor activities can create accessible opportunities outside school or work to meet new people, practise language in a natural way, and build a stronger sense of belonging in the local community.

Germany

In the German context, especially in more urban settings, WP1 shows that nature is often perceived as a practical counterbalance to city life. Young migrants described outdoor time as a way to slow down, feel more present, and get distance from constant stimulation-both from the city environment and from digital life. Participants associated being outdoors with feeling “less stressed,” “more grounded,” and better able to disconnect from everyday pressures.

Interest in outdoor and adventure-based activities was high, particularly for formats that are realistic to join without specialist skills. Participants most often mentioned hiking/trekking, kayaking and other water-based activities, climbing and bouldering, and camping or nature retreats as attractive options. This preference points to a demand for activities that are accessible, social, and clearly structured-rather than highly technical or performance-driven.

However, WP1 also shows why interest does not automatically translate into participation. Beyond the costs of gear and equipment and the practical challenge of transport, many young people pointed to a basic barrier: not knowing what is available, where activities take place, and how to join without feeling out of place. Importantly, the obstacles were not only logistical. Several participants described hesitation linked to doubts about their fitness level, uncertainty about what will be expected of them, and discomfort with unfamiliar group settings-factors that can make even low-threshold outdoor activities feel intimidating or unsafe.

The data also highlights a key social dimension. While some participants felt included through work or NGO contexts, others described a more segmented experience-feeling connected within international or migrant circles but less connected to local German peer networks. WP1 therefore suggests that outdoor programmes should not assume that "being together outdoors" automatically creates integration. Mixed-group formats work best when interaction is designed and facilitated-for example through small mixed teams, task-based cooperation, and clear roles that reduce uncertainty and help participants connect beyond their existing peer groups.

Finally, WP1 adds two very practical implications for delivery in Germany. First, outreach: young people reported learning about activities mainly through trusted, informal channels such as WhatsApp/Telegram groups, direct invitations and word-of-mouth, rather than official institutional announcements-suggesting that peer-based dissemination and easily shareable messages are more effective than open calls on Instagram or Facebook. Second, continuity: confidence and trust are unlikely to develop through one-off events. Regular, predictable activities give participants time to become familiar with the group and the format, which gradually reduces hesitation and supports sustained participation.

Spain

In the Spanish context, WP1 points strongly to the role of community-led and informal outdoor initiatives, especially in areas where young people have fewer structured opportunities and where organisations working specifically with migrant and refugee youth are not always visible or easy to find.

The survey data shows high interest in a wide range of outdoor formats, with water-based activities and hiking standing out most clearly. Participants also expressed strong interest in nature education, as well as climbing, camping, and team challenges. Importantly, the Spanish findings describe a participation gap driven by recurring barriers - cost, transport, and information gaps, which are amplified for young people living in more remote areas.

What makes the Spanish index particularly valuable is the set of concrete case examples showing how inclusion happens in practice. One case describes how an organisation in a rural natural park context renovated an abandoned campsite and turned it into a functioning youth and community space for non-formal education - an example of how access to outdoor environments can be created through local cooperation and practical infrastructure.

Another case focuses on a long-term outdoor programme in Tarifa that combines wellness elements (e.g., yoga and fitness) with water sports and collaborations with local partners, highlighting how outdoor formats can build confidence, teamwork, and communication while remaining attractive for mixed groups.

Spain

A third case from Benalmádena Pueblo shows the power of simple, informal structures: a multicultural hiking group that grew into a support network (up to 24 members) coordinated through word-of-mouth and WhatsApp. Beyond walking, participants use the hikes for language exchange across several languages, learn local history through trails, build practical navigation skills (GPS apps and maps), and add low-cost community activities such as foraging, crafts, photography, camping, and local nature learning. The organiser explicitly describes nature as something that "levels the playing field" by creating common ground across very different backgrounds. At the same time, the case also names realistic sustainability questions-especially liability and insurance-and suggests low-effort improvements such as gear donation points and simple checklists that increase accessibility without destroying the informal character.

Across Norway, Germany, and Spain, WP1 indicates the same overarching conclusion:

Llimited participation is not primarily driven by low motivation. Many young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers already recognise the benefits of spending time outdoors-reduced stress, improved well-being, and opportunities for social connection-and express clear interest in joining such activities. The key challenge for educators and NGOs is therefore to lower entry barriers (cost, transport, access to equipment, and accessible information) and to deliver well-facilitated, inclusive formats that enable participation without requiring prior outdoor experience, high language proficiency, or established local networks.

Mental Health & Nature

Why go through the effort of dismantling these barriers? Because the psychological payoff is transformative.
The stress of migrating - whether fleeing conflict or seeking a new life overloads the human nervous system. Language barriers, bureaucratic waiting periods, and social isolation keep many young migrants in a prolonged state of "fight or flight." Our research confirmed that structured and facilitated outdoor adventure activities do positively influence the participants.

1) Nervous system regulation and digital disconnection

In the needs assessment activities across all three countries, participants described a similar experience: being outdoors helps them shift out of constant tension and into a calmer, more stable state. In the German focus group, young people explicitly described outdoor time as making them “more grounded and clear-minded,” “less stressed,” and more present - away from the “noise of the city.”
In Norway, this mechanism appeared just as clearly. Participants linked outdoor activities with “recharging,” “clearing the mind,” and taking a break from daily stress, especially when activities felt safe and well organised. They described time in nature and physical movement as ways to reduce stress, manage anxiety and negative thoughts, and restore energy-sometimes highlighting specific contexts (walking, hiking, camping, and particularly being near water) as especially restorative.

In other words, the effect is not framed as “nature is nice,” but as nature functioning as a practical coping resource in everyday life.

A second element that emerged strongly-especially in Germany and Norway-is the value of temporary disconnection from digital environments. In Germany, participants repeatedly connected well-being benefits to reduced phone use or limited mobile network coverage; one participant stated plainly that the “absence of mobile networks helps a lot.” In Norway, “digital overload” was mentioned directly as part of daily stress, and outdoor activities were valued as a real break from that constant input. This is highly relevant for young migrants and refugees, whose stress is often sustained not only by local adaptation pressures, but also by continuous online exposure to news from home countries, ongoing family concerns, and social media cycles that keep uncertainty “always on.”

The Spanish national index reinforces this overall picture from another angle: survey responses showed a strong and nuanced belief in outdoor education’s capacity to reduce stress and anxiety, pointing to “cognitive relief,” social integration, and stress management as mechanisms, and naming challenges such as loneliness, grief, and the need for acceptance as part of the migration experience that outdoor activities are well positioned to address.

Taken together, WP1 suggests a clear practical implication for programme design: outdoor sessions create well-being benefits not simply because they happen outside, but because they reliably produce two conditions that many participants lack in daily life-(1) embodied presence through movement and sensory input, and (2) a safe time period with less digital pressure. When programmes are structured so that participants can slow down, feel safe, and disconnect temporarily, the outdoors becomes a concrete setting for stress regulation rather than just a recreational space.

2) “Learning by Doing”

A consistent theme across the research phase is that outdoor and adventure-based activities create a learning environment where participation depends less on formal credentials and more on practical engagement. Language level, educational background, and familiarity with local institutions often shape who speaks, leads, and is seen as “capable” in many integration service providers settings. For young migrants and refugees, this can limit participation and confidence. Outdoor sessions shift how competence is expressed: it becomes visible through showing up, trying, cooperating with others, solving practical tasks, and completing manageable challenges. In the German focus group, participants linked the positive effect of outdoor activities to the active role they take in planning and carrying out the session-making practical decisions, preparing, and following through-which helped them feel more stable and in control.

WP1 findings also show that the activities young people are most attracted to are precisely those that produce clear “learning-by-doing” moments. In Germany, participants expressed interest in concrete, action-oriented formats such as hiking/trekking, climbing or bouldering, kayaking, and similar activities. In Norway, the list was comparable-hiking, climbing, camping, kayaking, rafting-activities where progression is felt immediately (you move forward, you reach a point, you complete a task) and where the group naturally has to organise itself. Spain’s data adds the same logic through its survey results: respondents identified outdoor education as effective for building confidence, resilience, teamwork, communication, and practical coping skills, particularly when activities combine physical engagement with social cooperation.

What practitioners emphasised in WP1 is that empowerment does not come from “hard challenges,” but from well-calibrated challenges: tasks that are real, slightly demanding, and achievable with support. In Norway, outdoor educators stressed that participants need to feel emotionally safe enough to try, make mistakes, and gradually build competence through experience-especially in a context where local outdoor culture can feel intimidating. In Spain, the Benalmádena case provides a very concrete example of how this empowerment is built: through repeated hikes and outdoor sessions where participants learn practical navigation (GPS apps and maps), develop confidence moving in nature, and contribute different skills to the group beyond language-photography, planning, crafts, foraging, and basic camping knowledge.

In practice, these “learning-by-doing” moments generate a specific type of confidence: self-efficacy-the sense that “I can handle something unfamiliar.” That is why facilitators in WP1 repeatedly linked outdoor learning to everyday integration outcomes. When a young person successfully manages a route, supports a team task, or completes an activity they initially doubted they could do, the experience becomes evidence they can rely on later-during language learning, job-seeking, appointments, or any situation where uncertainty and fear of failure are common. This is also why WP1 suggests that outdoor education works best when it is not a one-off event, but a sequence of predictable sessions: repeated success, even at a small scale, is what turns participation into real confidence.

3) Authentic Social Connection

WP1 shows that outdoor education is not only relevant for individual well-being; it also creates concrete conditions for social connection-especially for young people who otherwise struggle to build relationships beyond migrant-specific circles or formal service settings. In the German focus group, participants explicitly described a social gap: while they often feel connected within international or migrant communities, many have limited contact with local German peer networks. This is not simply a question of “socialising more”; it reflects how difficult it can be to enter existing local friendship circles without shared routines, shared spaces, and shared activities.

Outdoor activities help because they produce a shared focus and a shared task. Instead of being built around abstract conversation, interaction happens through doing: walking together, keeping pace, making decisions, organising food and materials, solving small practical problems, or supporting someone who is tired or unsure. These situations create repeated, natural moments of cooperation that do not require high language confidence. They also create visible opportunities for contribution-someone is good at navigation, someone notices safety issues, someone motivates the group, someone knows how to cook, someone helps carry equipment. This shifts the dynamic from “who speaks best and confident” to “how we function together.”

WP1 also suggests that connection emerges most reliably when mixed-group interaction is not left to chance, but intentionally facilitated. In Germany, the expressed disconnect from local networks points to a need for programmes that actively design for interaction-small mixed teams, shared responsibilities, cooperative tasks, and reflection moments that make space for respectful exchange without putting individuals under pressure to “tell their story.”

The Spanish case examples illustrate this dynamic in a very practical way. The multicultural hiking group described in the Benalmádena case became more than an “activity”; it developed into an informal support network coordinated through everyday communication channels. Participants used hiking not only for exercise, but as a space for language exchange in several languages, for learning local history through trails, and for building trust through repeated shared experiences.

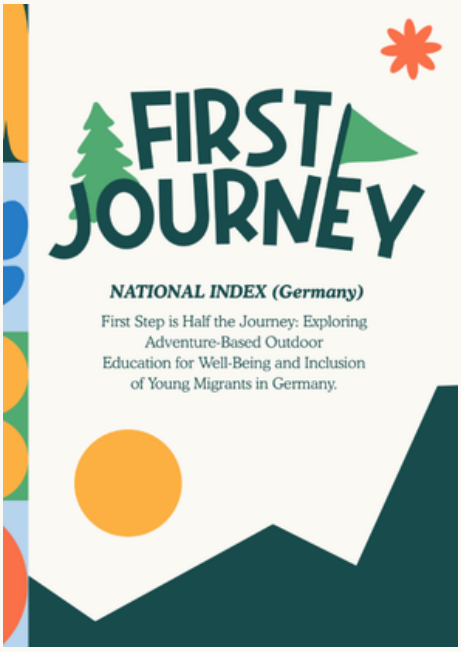
The organiser describes nature as “a great equaliser,” precisely because people meet first as fellow participants-walking, learning, and supporting each other-rather than as categories or labels.

In Norway, practitioners emphasised the same principle from the perspective of group safety: stable groups and emotionally safe facilitation increase the likelihood that participants will connect, feel welcomed, and return. Several WP1 insights point to belonging as an outcome that depends on group culture-being treated with respect, having predictable routines, and feeling supported to try new things without embarrassment.

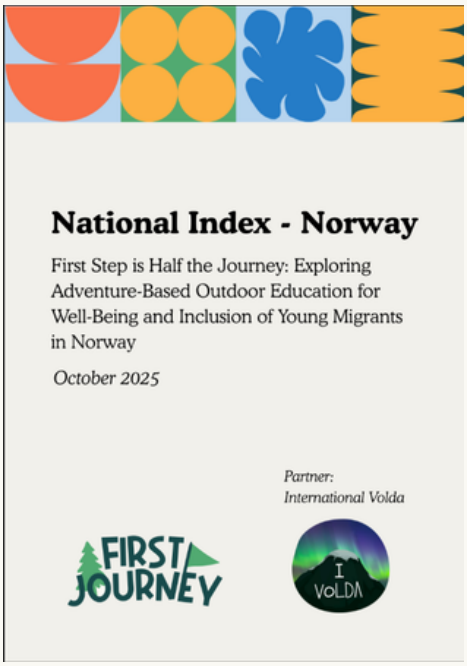
Taken together, WP1 supports a clear conclusion for practice: outdoor education creates social inclusion not automatically, but through the specific social conditions it makes possible-shared tasks, mutual dependence, and repeated contact in settings where contribution is visible and status differences are reduced. When programmes are designed for mixed participation and actively facilitated, outdoor activities can become one of the few low-threshold contexts where young migrants, refugees, and local peers build trust through experience rather than through formal “integration” discussion.

National Indexes

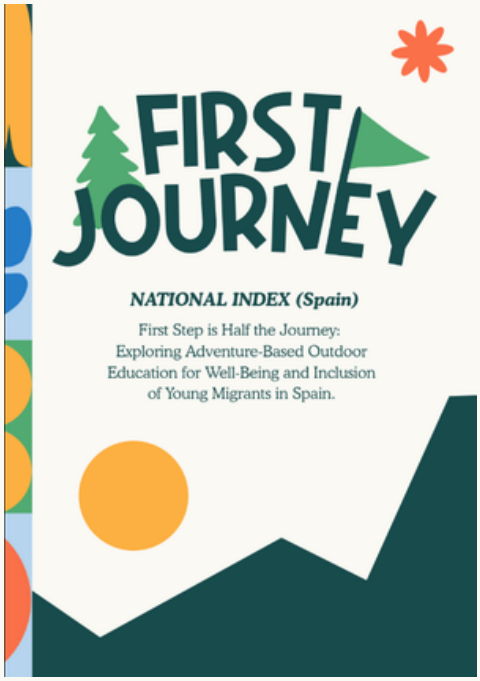
National Index - Germany



National Index - Norway



National Index - Spain



Chapter 2: The Methodological Framework: Adventure-Based Learning

Taking a group of young people outdoors can be a valuable recreational experience. Turning that experience into a structured educational methodology aimed at social inclusion, resilience, and personal development, however, requires deliberate facilitation and a clear approach. For this reason, the partnership organised the First Journey Capacity Building Training Course (WP2) in Volda, Norway, where youth workers from the consortium worked with practical pedagogical tools designed to strengthen the learning and inclusion impact of outdoor sessions.

This chapter presents the core methodological framework used in the project. It is based on Adventure-Based Learning- an approach in which participants learn through guided experience, take part in manageable challenges under safe conditions, and use structured reflection to link what happens outdoors to skills and attitudes that are relevant in everyday life.

1. Experiential Education and Kolb's Learning Cycle

First Journey uses experiential education: learning through structured experience. This approach is particularly practical when working with young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, because participation in formal learning settings is often limited by language level, confidence, and fatigue from continuous appointments and courses. Outdoors, learning is organised around action, cooperation, and real tasks, which makes participation more accessible and often more equal within the group.

To ensure that outdoor activities produce learning outcomes- not only “a nice day outside”-the project applies Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle. The cycle is used as a simple facilitation logic that can be repeated in every session.
The process starts with a concrete experience: participants engage in a real task, such as setting up a tent, following a route using a map, preparing something as a group, or completing a cooperative challenge. The activity is designed to be achievable, but meaningful enough to require coordination, decisions, and shared effort.

Next comes reflective observation. The facilitator creates a short, structured pause during or after the activity to review what happened. Typical questions are practical and specific: How did we organise ourselves? What helped the group progress? Where did we lose time or get confused? How did we communicate when something became difficult?

The third step is abstract conceptualisation, where the group identifies what the experience shows in a more general way. This is where “events” become “insights.” Examples include: clear roles improve teamwork; listening prevents mistakes; asking for help is effective; errors are part of learning; pace and planning influence group safety and motivation. The facilitator supports this step by helping participants name the key lesson in simple, concrete language.

Finally, the group moves to active experimentation. Participants apply the learning to the next task or the next session-assigning roles before starting, agreeing on a pace, checking information together, or improving how they support one another. Where appropriate, the facilitator also connects this step to everyday life: planning, cooperation, dealing with uncertainty, and staying calm under pressure are relevant beyond the outdoor setting.

To sum it up: an outdoor activity becomes an educational method when it includes structured reflection and a clear transfer step. The facilitator's role is to guide participants through the full cycle-experience, review, learning, and application-so that the session produces outcomes that can be repeated and strengthened over time.

2. Adventure Education Principles

Adventure education differs from general outdoor education because it is designed around challenge. It deliberately introduces uncertainty and managed risk-within clear safety boundaries-so that participants can practice coping skills, teamwork, and decision-making in real time. In WP1, practitioners described this as one of the main strengths of the method: obstacles in nature (fatigue, cold, unclear routes, unfamiliar tasks, changing conditions) often mirror the kinds of obstacles young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers face when arriving to a new country. The difference is that outdoors, these obstacles can be approached in a structured way, with support, and with a clear sense of progress.

This potential only works if challenge is introduced with care. Many participants live with chronic stress, and some have experienced trauma. In these situations, an activity that feels “motivating” for one person can feel overwhelming for another. For that reason, trauma-informed adventure education focuses less on pushing limits and more on calibrating the level of challenge so that learning remains possible.

A practical way to understand this is through the three zones of learning. In the comfort zone, participants feel safe and familiar, but learning remains limited because nothing new is required. In the stretch or growth zone, participants feel challenged and slightly uncomfortable, yet still capable-this is where learning is strongest. In the panic zone, fear or stress becomes dominant and the person’s ability to engage and learn drops sharply.

This is where the principle of “challenge by choice” becomes essential. Participants must have real control over how they engage. Choice can be built into any activity: someone may decide to take a support role rather than the most demanding role, to pause, to observe first, or to stop at a certain point. In trauma-informed practice, this is not treated as failure. It is treated as participation with agency. For people who have experienced limited control over their circumstances, being able to make choices-and having those choices respected-supports trust and psychological safety within the group.

Finally, trauma-informed adventure education relies on step-by-step progression. Confidence is built through predictable experiences that gradually increase in complexity. Instead of starting with a demanding full-day hike or a technically challenging activity, programmes begin with short, accessible sessions-such as simple cooperative task-so participants can learn the format, understand expectations, test equipment, and get used to the group. Only once familiarity and trust are established does the programme increase the level of challenge. This progression reduces drop-out, strengthens group cohesion, and allows learning to accumulate across sessions rather than depending on a single intense experience.

3. Safety & Risk Management

In adventure education, risk is part of the method: participants learn by dealing with uncertainty, effort, and small obstacles in real conditions. The role of the organiser is to make sure that risk remains managed and proportionate. In First Journey, safety is understood in two dimensions that always belong together: physical safety and psychological safety. If either of them is neglected, the learning effect declines and participation drops.

Physical safety starts with preparation. WP1 findings, particularly in Norway, show that unfamiliarity with local conditions-especially weather-can quickly turn an otherwise simple activity into an unsafe experience. Participants may underestimate cold, rain, wind, or changing terrain, or they may lack the clothing that local outdoor culture considers basic.

This is why organisers should provide clear, practical guidance in advance, ideally with visuals: what to wear, what to bring, what is optional, and what is non-negotiable for safety. Simple messages such as “wool is gold” are useful because they translate local knowledge into accessible language. Where possible, access barriers should be reduced through shared or borrowed gear, since equipment costs were repeatedly identified as a participation barrier across WP1.

Facilitation structure is also a safety measure. Practitioners involved in WP1 strongly recommended co-facilitation, especially when working with groups that include newcomers and participants with different fitness levels and experience. Working in pairs allows a clear division of attention: one facilitator can focus on technical and logistical oversight (route choice, timing, weather checks, first aid readiness, safety protocols), while the other focuses on the group process (pace management, inclusion, energy levels, and interpersonal dynamics). This reduces blind spots and allows problems to be noticed early, before they become incidents.

Psychological safety requires active observation and early intervention. Participants rarely say directly that they feel overwhelmed. Instead, WP1 practitioners emphasised the importance of recognising behavioural signals that a participant’s stress level is rising beyond the learning zone. Common “red flags” include withdrawal, unusual silence, visible agitation, irritability, refusal to participate without explanation, or sudden changes in mood. In a trauma-informed approach, these reactions are treated as signals to adjust the situation-slowing down, offering a role change, giving space, or providing a clear exit option-rather than as non-cooperation.

Finally, WP1 insights underline that the facilitator's attitude is one of the most effective safety tools available. Groups take emotional cues from the person leading them. In moments of discomfort-unexpected rain, route changes, tiredness, small setbacks-participants watch how the facilitator responds. A calm, structured, and solution-oriented approach helps contain stress in the group and prevents escalation. This does not mean ignoring difficulty; it means naming it clearly, taking practical steps, and reinforcing predictability. In this sense, good facilitation is not separate from safety-it is the condition that makes both learning and inclusion possible.

4. Group Dynamics & Cohesion

Outdoor settings often reduce the social signals that shape interaction indoors. In nature, communication becomes more practical, roles emerge through contribution, and shared effort matters more than social status or language fluency. For First Journey, this is not a side benefit-it is part of the inclusion logic. At the same time, WP1 makes clear that mixed participation does not happen automatically. If the aim is meaningful interaction between local youth and young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, group dynamics need to be designed and facilitated deliberately.

A first principle is task-based cooperation. Programmes should not rely primarily on conversation or "getting to know each other" formats as the main integration mechanism. Shared tasks create natural interaction with lower language demands: preparing food together, setting up a common space, navigating a short route, or completing a group challenge.

These tasks generate teamwork through action-planning, dividing roles, coordinating steps, and solving small problems-and they create moments of mutual support that build trust faster than discussion alone. Importantly, action reduces pressure on participants who feel insecure about language and lowers the risk that a few confident speakers dominate the group.

A second principle is small mixed groups with clear tasks. Bringing locals and newcomers into the same activity space is rarely enough to create connection. Structured interaction is more effective when the group is divided into small mixed teams-typically three to four people-working on specific tasks (for example a navigation exercise, a simple scavenger hunt, or a cooperative problem to solve). This format makes participation easier, reduces the social risk of approaching strangers, and creates repeated opportunities for everyone to contribute.

A third principle is normalising mistakes as part of learning. Outdoor sessions inevitably include small errors-wrong turns, failed attempts, miscommunication, or practical setbacks. In First Journey, these moments are treated as part of the method rather than as problems to hide. When facilitators respond with calmness, humour, and constructive support, the group learns that it is safe to try, fail, and try again. This is especially important for vulnerable participants who may already associate mistakes with embarrassment or exclusion. A group culture that handles failure well builds trust, encourages participation, and strengthens cohesion over time.

5. The Art of Debriefing

As Kolb's cycle makes clear, an activity becomes learning when participants have space to reflect on it. Debriefing is the structured moment where facilitators help a group make sense of what happened, identify what they learned, and connect the experience to everyday life. For youth workers, this is the key step that turns an outdoor session from "a good day outside" into a meaningful learning and inclusion process.

When debriefing with young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, three principles are particularly important.

First, keep the reflection simple and structured. The "What, So what, Now what?" framework is effective because it guides the group step by step: What happened and what did we do? So what-why did it matter, what was difficult or helpful, what did we notice about ourselves and the group? Now what-what can we take from this into the next activity, and where does it connect to daily life (communication, confidence, dealing with uncertainty, supporting others, asking for help)?

Second, plan for different language levels. Traditional debriefing often depends on abstract vocabulary and long answers, which can exclude participants with limited proficiency or low confidence. Use methods that allow participation without advanced speaking: simple prompts, pair reflection, short sentence starters, and visual tools such as Dixit-style image cards or an emotion wheel where participants can point rather than explain.

Physical reflection also works well-for example, asking participants to stand on a line to show how challenging an activity felt, or to choose a position that represents their energy level. These tools make reflection accessible while still producing meaningful learning.

Third, build psychological safety into the debrief. A reflection circle helps, but sharing should remain voluntary. Give participants the explicit “right to pass and stay silent” and offer alternatives such as writing a few words, reflecting in pairs, or simply listening to what others say. For some participants, the most important outcome may be feeling included in the group and experiencing the activity safely. Debriefing should support that process-not pressure people into personal disclosure.

Chapter 3: The Educational Program for Youth Workers and How the Experience Translates to Their Work with Youth

You cannot effectively guide a group of young people through a designed adventure, if you have not learned how to navigate one yourself.

During the Capacity Building Training Course in Volda, Norway, youth workers from the partnership took part in a structured programme that combined outdoor practice with pedagogical reflection. They worked with activities such as climbing and hiking, navigated mountain routes to remote cabins, and adapted plans in response to changing weather conditions. The training also included simulations related to risk and safety management and tested practical well-being tools-such as grounding and breathing exercises-directly in outdoor settings. The purpose was to develop facilitation competence through direct experience: how to plan, brief, pace, support a group, respond calmly to unexpected situations, and turn experiences into learning through debriefing.

This chapter presents the training programme as a set of two interconnected dimensions of learning and provides transferable workshops and methods to replicate this learning in local conditions.

Dimension 1: Adventure as a path for personal growth

In adventure education, personal growth and group dynamics develop together. What counts as a “challenge” is not fixed; it is individual and depends on experience, confidence, and personal background. For one participant, the key challenge may be a steep incline or a climbing route. For another, it may be spending a night in a tent, coping with cold and discomfort, or being offline and separated from a phone.

When activities are designed to bring participants slightly beyond what feels familiar-the stretch zone-people begin to notice their own responses to stress, fear, uncertainty, and fatigue. At the same time, these thresholds are rarely crossed alone. In outdoor settings, progress depends on interdependence: the group’s pace, shared tasks, practical support, and small non-verbal acts of encouragement. This is one of the strengths of the method. Cooperation is not taught as a concept; it becomes necessary and visible through shared action.

During the training in Volda, youth workers experienced these interconnected dynamics directly. In the bouldering sessions, participants had to stay fully present and manage common fears such as falling or failing-while relying on the group for spotting, encouragement, and a safe atmosphere. The hike to Patchellhytta added a different form of challenge: sustained physical effort, variable weather, and the cumulative effect of carrying a backpack over time. Youth workers experienced how quickly mood and motivation can shift with fatigue or discomfort, and how practical cooperation-shared navigation, pacing, and carrying collective equipment-turns a set of individuals into a coordinated and supportive unit.

How to Guide a Group in the Outdoors (practical methods for youth workers)

This workshop trains youth workers to lead groups safely and inclusively during hikes and other outdoor activities. The focus is not on “being strict,” but on creating a clear structure that prevents group fragmentation, reduces stress, and makes participation easier for everyone-especially in mixed groups with different fitness levels, confidence, and outdoor experience. The methods below work best when they are introduced as simple routines at the start of an activity and applied consistently throughout the day.

- **Group structure: clear guide positioning**

A basic guide structure prevents confusion and keeps the group intact. As a minimum standard, assign one guide at the front and one guide at the back. Agree on one clear rule: nobody walks ahead of the front guide and nobody walks behind the back guide. This immediately reduces the risk of people getting lost and makes it easier to notice when someone slows down or stops. For larger groups, add one or more guides in the middle to support cohesion, respond to emerging needs, and keep communication flowing between the front and the back.

- **Pace management: inclusion through rhythm**

Pace is one of the strongest inclusion tools in outdoor work. The default principle is simple: the group moves at a pace that the slowest participants can sustain. This reduces pressure, prevents exhaustion, and keeps the group together. Pair participants who walk more slowly with a supportive peer or guide, not to "push" them, but to maintain motivation and reduce stress. If faster walkers become impatient, a practical strategy is to place slower participants closer to the front, so the group pace stabilises naturally. Frame this in a constructive way: a steady pace improves safety and allows the group to stay more attentive-to nature, to the process, and to each other.

- **Preventing people from going missing: practical trail routines**

Small routines can prevent larger problems. One simple rule used in the training was: nobody leaves the trail with their backpack. If someone needs a toilet break, a short pause, or wants to pick berries, they leave the backpack visibly on the trail. This gives the back guide an immediate signal that someone stepped off-route and supports regrouping before the group continues.

- **Safe distancing on difficult terrain**

When the terrain becomes steep, slippery, or snowy, adjust the group's spacing. Increase distance between participants so everyone has enough time and space to focus on footing and step choice. The steeper or more unstable the ground, the greater the distance should be. This reduces the likelihood of chain-reaction falls and keeps attention on safety rather than conversation. The same principle applies both uphill and downhill.

Used together, these methods create a predictable structure that improves safety, strengthens group cohesion, and supports inclusion-without requiring complex equipment or advanced outdoor expertise.

Bouldering Games (learning through play)

This workshop presents bouldering as a structured, low-threshold adventure format that can be used to develop teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and confidence. Because bouldering happens at low height with mats and clear boundaries, it offers a strong balance between challenge and safety. The focus is not athletic performance. It is the learning process: how participants try, fail safely, receive support, and try again-together.

- **Warm-up and group connection**

The session begins on the mats with simple movement games that activate the body and bring attention into the group. Name games combined with movement work well because they reduce tension quickly and create a shared rhythm. Pair exercises such as mirroring, balance tasks, or coordinated stepping help build trust and coordination without requiring much language. Before moving to the wall, facilitators introduce basic safety behaviour: how to fall safely, how to stay aware of others, and how to respect climbing and mat zones.

- **Team route challenges (cooperation over speed)**

Participants then work with short, simple routes in small teams. The learning goal is cooperation, not difficulty level. One person climbs while the rest of the team supports from the ground with clear, encouraging instructions. This format makes group communication visible: participants practice giving guidance that is precise and calm, and climbers learn to receive input without pressure. After each attempt, the facilitator briefly checks what worked: Which instructions were helpful? Which were confusing? What tone supported confidence?

- **Silent climbing (non-verbal communication and empathy)**

To reduce reliance on language and strengthen observation skills, the workshop includes a silent challenge. A participant climbs a short route without speaking, and the team supports using gestures, positioning, and eye contact. The exercise reveals how much communication is possible without words and often increases empathy: the group becomes more attentive to small signals of stress, hesitation, and confidence.

- **“Add a Move” (shared memory and group ownership)**

In this game, the group builds a sequence together. The first participant makes one move. The second repeats it and adds one new move. The sequence grows step by step. This creates a playful learning environment that trains concentration, memory, and shared responsibility-participants succeed by paying attention to each other rather than by “being strong.”

- **Support and confidence building**

Throughout the session, facilitators use short reflective micro-interventions that reinforce progress. One effective tool is “Spot the strength”: after an attempt, the group names one concrete thing the climber did well (e.g., calm breathing, good foot placement, persistence, asking for help). This shifts attention from success/failure to learning and helps participants feel seen for effort and improvement. The general rule is consistent: invite people to stretch slightly, but never force participation.

- **Inclusion and safety standards**

Bouldering games are only effective when safety and accessibility are actively managed. Route difficulty should match the group's level and be adjusted quickly if frustration rises. Participants who prefer not to climb high should have equivalent alternatives such as low traverses, balance challenges, or support roles that keep them involved. Mat zones should remain clear, and supervision must be active at all times. Finally, facilitators reinforce group norms that make the method work: patience, respect, and encouragement as non-negotiable values.

Dimension 2: Outdoor Practice as Mental Health

This dimension shifts the role of nature from a background setting to an intentional space for emotional regulation and recovery. For many young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, prolonged uncertainty and adaptation pressure can keep the nervous system in a heightened state of alertness. Outdoor environments can help counterbalance this by changing the quality of attention. Moving through nature often engages what psychology describes as “soft fascination”: attention is drawn gently and without constant effort-by landscape, light, wind, water, and natural sound-so cognitive load decreases and mental resources can recover.

Outdoor settings also provide a low-stigma context for well-being support. Instead of approaching mental health only through formal or clinical formats, participants can experience regulation through simple, practical practices: slowing down, noticing sensations, reconnecting with breathing, and allowing thoughts to settle. When facilitated carefully, these moments support self-awareness, reduce overstimulation, and strengthen a sense of safety and presence.

In Volda, well-being practices were integrated into the daily programme rather than treated as a separate add-on. During hikes and outdoor sessions, facilitators introduced planned pauses for grounding, mindful observation of the landscape, and short periods of silence. The training demonstrated a practical point: youth workers do not need clinical training to support well-being in outdoor settings.

Some Methods applicable for Youth Work

Mindfulness Practices While Hiking (Silent Walk)

This workshop integrates mindfulness into a hike by using two complementary elements: structured silence and guided reflection. The aim is to create a clear rhythm between personal space and connection with others. It works well with groups that need stress reduction, improved self-awareness, and calmer communication-without requiring complex materials or advanced facilitation.

Part 1: Silent walk (individual reflection in motion)

Choose easy, non-technical terrain where participants can walk safely without needing constant guidance. Before starting, explain the rules clearly:

- walk in silence
- keep approximately 2–3 metres distance from the person in front and behind
- no phone use, no music, no side conversations

The silent walk lasts around 30–60 minutes, depending on the group and the route. Before the group starts walking, the facilitator offers two to four open reflection prompts. These should be broad enough that participants can interpret them in their own way and do not feel pressured into personal disclosure. Examples include:

- What gives you energy at the moment?
- What do you want more of in your life?
- What do you want to let go of?
- What matters most to you right now?

During the walk, the facilitator's role is mainly to hold the structure and ensure safety. The silence gives participants space to notice thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without having to perform socially or explain themselves.

Part 2: Pair sharing (deep listening)

After the silent walk, participants form pairs and discuss the same prompts for about 30 minutes. Give simple listening rules to keep the exchange supportive and respectful:

- no interrupting
- no advice-giving
- focus on understanding, not fixing

This stage helps participants translate private reflection into communication and strengthens trust in a low-pressure format.

Part 3: Small group sharing (optional extension)

If time and setting allow-during a break or at the end-two pairs can merge into a group of four. Participants share insights voluntarily and reflect on similarities and differences. This stage builds empathy and helps the group connect without turning the session into a forced "sharing circle."

Adaptation tip

Adjust the balance between silence and sharing depending on group development. With newly formed groups, keep the silent walk shorter and give more time to pair sharing to support relationship-building. With groups that have already spent several days together, extend the silent part to provide mental rest and create space after intensive social interaction.

Date with the nature

This workshop supports grounding and self-awareness through a short guided practice followed by structured solo time in nature. It is designed to be simple to facilitate and accessible for participants with different language levels, because the main work happens through attention, breath, and observation rather than discussion.

Part 1: Guided standing meditation (grounding and sensory awareness)

Invite participants to stand comfortably with feet about hip-width apart. Ask them to close their eyes if they feel comfortable doing so. Guide the group through three steps:
Arrival through breathing

Encourage slow breathing through the nose, with the exhale slightly longer than the inhale. Keep the instruction simple and repeat it once or twice to establish rhythm.

Grounding through body awareness

Bring attention to the feet touching the ground. Guide a slow body scan from feet to legs, hips, spine, shoulders, neck, and the top of the head. The aim is not analysis, but noticing sensations.

Balance and stability through weight shifting

Ask participants to gently shift their weight onto the right foot, then return to centre, then onto the left foot and back. Continue with a small shift forward onto the toes and back to centre, then onto the heels and back to centre. This makes balance tangible and brings attention into the body.

To close the meditation, guide a brief sensory expansion: relax shoulders, notice smells in the air, then listen for sounds at different distances (far, then near). Invite participants to notice wind or temperature on the skin. If appropriate, they can lift their hands and slowly move them through the air to feel the wind. End with a short silence so participants can stay with the overall feeling for a moment.

Part 2: “One hour date with nature” (solo time)
Participants spend approximately one hour alone, each choosing a spot where they can sit or stand comfortably without interacting with others. Set clear boundaries: the area everyone stays within, the time the group will regroup, and a clear rule of no phone use. The instruction is simple: observe the environment, and also observe thoughts and emotions without judging them or trying to “solve” anything. At the agreed time, the facilitator calls participants back using a sound signal or voice.

Part 3: Integration (pair sharing)
After regrouping, participants form pairs and share briefly. Provide two or three prompts such as: What did you notice? What surprised you? How do you feel now compared to before? Encourage active listening: no interrupting and no advice-giving. This final step helps participants translate a personal experience into words and reinforces calm, respectful communication.

Forest Bathing / Nature Connectedness

This workshop introduces forest bathing as a simple, guided practice for slowing down and reconnecting with nature. It is structured as a sequence of gentle “invitations” that participants can follow in their own way. The aim is not performance or deep personal disclosure, but calm attention, sensory awareness, and a respectful relationship with the environment.

Preparation and framing

Choose a safe and quiet location in advance-such as a park, garden, or forest area-with clear natural elements (trees, plants, stones, water, wind, sounds). Check practical factors: accessibility, group size, weather exposure, and any restrictions. At the start, explain the idea in one or two sentences: nature connectedness means being present in nature and noticing how it affects mood, attention, and wellbeing. Set clear boundaries (where the group stays, when you regroup) and remind participants to interact respectfully with the place (leave no trace, no damage).

Invitation 1: Sensory awareness (arriving in the moment)

Invite participants to find a comfortable position sitting or standing. If appropriate, they may close their eyes. Guide attention gently through the senses: first touch (feet on ground, hands on clothing or bark), then smell, then hearing, and finally sight when they open their eyes. Keep instructions short and allow silence. End with a simple prompt participants can keep private: What do you notice now that you did not notice at the start?

Invitation 2: Slow walking and curiosity

Invite participants to walk slowly, without a destination, staying within the agreed boundaries. The focus is detail, not distance. Offer prompts such as: What draws your attention naturally? Why might it stand out? Can you interact with it without harming it? Participants can touch tree bark, hold a stone, observe moss closely, or simply watch movement in leaves or water. After a few minutes, pause again briefly and ask participants to notice how they feel compared to before.

Invitation 3: "Artist's hat" (creative connection without pressure)

Invite participants to respond creatively to what they noticed. The output is optional and does not need to be "good." The value is in the process of engaging with the environment. Examples include arranging leaves and sticks into a small pattern, making a simple sketch, writing a few lines, or creating a short story inspired by the place. Emphasise that nothing should damage the environment and that participants can keep their work private.

Final invitation: silent reflection and closure

Close the workshop with a short silent reflection. Offer one or two questions that participants can answer internally: After spending time here, what is this place for you now? What-if anything-has shifted in your body, thoughts, or mood? Regroup the team calmly, thank the place explicitly through a "leave it as we found it" check, and exit together with a clear end point.

Chapter 4: Casebook of Pilots

Theory provides the map, but the true test of any educational methodology happens on the ground-when the waves are rough, the climbing wall is steep, or a diverse group is meeting for the very first time.
During the local follow-up phase (Work Package 3) of the First Journey project, the youth workers who participated in our international Capacity Building Training Course returned to their home countries to put their new skills to the test. They were tasked with designing, organizing, and facilitating local outdoor activities tailored to the specific needs of migrant and refugee youth in their communities.
This chapter serves as a practical casebook. By examining the local piloting activities implemented in Norway, Germany, and Spain, we can see exactly how the core principles of experiential learning, managed risk, and mental health support adapt to vastly different environments.

Local Pilots from Across Europe

Norway – "First Surfing Journey"

Led by International Volda

Following the training course, the Norwegian youth workers implemented a two-day surfing camp on the coast, including two overnight stays by the ocean. The pilot brought together 26 refugee young people from the communities of Ulsteinvik and Volda and was designed as a real-life test of the First Journey approach in a demanding, unfamiliar setting.

A defining feature of this pilot was facilitator ownership. The youth workers who had attended the First Journey training took full responsibility for planning and delivery. They coordinated transport, logistics, food shopping, and daily scheduling, and they facilitated structured team-building activities to establish safety and cohesion from the beginning. This ensured that the outdoor experience was not treated as an isolated event, but as a deliberately facilitated learning process.

For most participants, it was their first time surfing. Conditions added a significant level of challenge: the waves were strong for beginners, and the weather was cold and windy. Although the activity remained safe, the environment could easily have become overwhelming for participants with no prior experience. This is where the methodology became visible in practice. The youth workers applied step-by-step progression, kept expectations clear, and maintained a calm and supportive facilitation style throughout the sessions. They paid close attention to participants who were anxious, offered encouragement without pressure, and provided practical emotional support so that individuals could remain engaged rather than withdraw.

Despite the demanding conditions, the pilot achieved its purpose. The youth workers worked in a coordinated way, the group remained stable, and participants showed clear increases in confidence and motivation over the course of the camp. By facing a new challenge together-supported by consistent facilitation-the young people moved from hesitation to active participation, strengthening both individual self-belief and group cohesion.

Germany – Climbing Towards Trust

Led by Highlights e.V.

On 26 November 2025, the German team organised a piloting event at the largest indoor climbing centre in Erlangen. The format was intentionally designed as an open and welcoming entry point for migrants and young people with fewer opportunities, including participants with no previous climbing experience. The purpose was to offer an urban adventure setting where participants could try something new in a controlled environment and experience how challenge-based activities can support confidence and connection.

The session began with a clear framing. The project manager introduced the First Journey approach and explained why this type of activity matters in the context of well-being and social inclusion. From the start, participants were guided to understand the activity as more than sport: it was presented as a structured learning experience. To ensure accessibility and safety, participants were then divided into small groups based on their comfort levels and supported by professional trainers, who provided continuous supervision and maintained high physical safety standards.

The methodological element became visible in how the activity was facilitated. Trainers did not only teach technique and safety routines; they actively guided participants to notice what the experience demanded and what it developed. Participants were encouraged to reflect on concentration, body awareness, decision-making under pressure, and trust-especially the trust required when attempting a route while relying on support from others on the ground. This made the link between “physical challenge” and “personal and social learning” explicit throughout the session.

Over the course of the afternoon, the group dynamic shifted in a clear way. What started as an individual challenge developed into a collective learning experience: participants encouraged each other, celebrated small progress, and offered practical support when someone hesitated. The pilot showed that indoor climbing can function as a highly effective urban format for adventure-based learning-combining low-threshold access, strong safety conditions, and a natural framework for building confidence, cooperation, and community.

Spain – "Hike, Meditate & Connect"

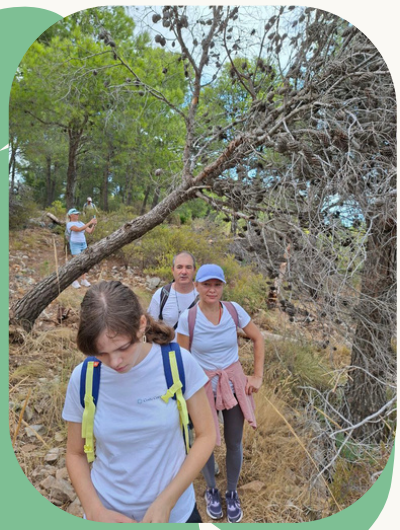
Led by Costa Connect

To open their piloting phase, the Spanish team chose a low-threshold, community-wide format designed to reduce social isolation and bring people together across existing social circles. They organised an open event titled “Hike, Meditate & Connect” in the natural surroundings near a local Buddhist temple, using the setting both as a calm meeting point and as a practical example of how outdoor environments can support well-being.

Implementation focused strongly on accessibility and outreach. Instead of relying only on online channels that often circulate within the same networks, the team used a grassroots communication strategy aimed at reaching both migrants and local residents in everyday public spaces. Announcements were placed in locations such as the city hall, youth centre, sports complex, and local notice boards, and the event was also promoted through the Erasmus Days platform. This approach helped the team reach participants who might not otherwise come across youth work or integration activities.

Methodologically, the event combined movement with simple, guided mental health tools. It included a nature walk, a facilitated meditation session, and an open, non-stigmatising conversation about how outdoor activities can support stress reduction and well-being. Youth workers who had attended the training in Norway took active facilitation roles, sharing both the methods and the practical learning they had gained during the course. The day concluded with a shared lunch at a local café, reinforcing the social component of the programme and providing time for informal conversation.

The pilot demonstrated that effective inclusion does not require high-intensity adventure sports. By keeping physical demands moderate and placing strong emphasis on mindfulness, conversation, and shared social time, the event brought together participants of different nationalities and ages and supported meaningful contact across cultures and generations.



2. Visual Storytelling: Documenting the Journey

Visual storytelling was integrated throughout the project in Norway, Germany, and Spain. Videos were recorded during activities to document the process and support a participant-centred narrative, rather than presenting migrant youth only through institutional perspectives. Participants and youth workers captured preparation, setbacks, teamwork, and everyday scenes.

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Chapter 5: Advocacy & Integration Strategy

For adventure-based learning to have a lasting impact on communities, it must move beyond isolated, one-off events and become a recognized, sustainable, and well-funded pillar of youth work and integration services.

During Work Package 4 of the First Journey project, our consortium focused on advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and promotion of adventure-based methods.
For youth organisations, civil society groups, and integration centres, introducing outdoor education does not require a change of mission or a complete redesign of existing services. In practice, the most effective approach is to treat the outdoors as an extension of your current toolkit-another setting where your educational, social, and support work can take place.

A good starting point is to keep the model simple and local. You do not need long expeditions or specialised infrastructure to achieve meaningful outcomes. Regular sessions in nearby parks, along local rivers, in community gardens, or on easy trails reduce costs and logistical complexity and make it realistic to integrate outdoor time into weekly or bi-weekly programming. This also helps participants build familiarity and trust over time, which is more valuable than a single intensive event.

Outdoor methods also work best when they are connected to existing formats rather than added as a separate project. Many organisations already run activities that can be adapted with minimal effort: a language café can become a “walk and talk” format, mentoring meetings can include a short nature-based element, and group support sessions can be moved into an outdoor setting when appropriate. Combining familiar services with outdoor environments lowers the threshold for participation and creates a more informal, less pressured atmosphere for social interaction.

Sustainability increases significantly when programmes are not only delivered to migrant and refugee youth, but increasingly delivered with them. Identifying participants who show motivation and leadership during sessions and offering them a pathway to become co-facilitators strengthens ownership and continuity. Peer-supported formats-where someone shares language, background, or lived experience-often build trust faster and reach participants who would otherwise hesitate to join activities led only by professionals.

Finally, organisations should treat communication and visibility as part of programme delivery. Visual documentation-short videos, photos, and participant-centred storytelling-helps organisations demonstrate impact in a concrete way, support fundraising, and communicate a stronger narrative of youth agency. When young migrants and refugees are shown confidently participating, cooperating, and developing skills outdoors, it challenges the passive “beneficiary” framing and makes the value of the work visible to partners, donors, and the wider community.

For Policymakers: Reviewing Integration Services

The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) strongly recommends increasing opportunities for migrants and local communities to meet, exchange, and build cohesive societies. However, formal integration policies often over-rely on classroom-based language instruction and bureaucratic orientation.

We urge local authorities and policymakers to recognize that well-being is a prerequisite for integration. A young person suffering from the chronic stress of displacement cannot effectively learn a new language or enter the workforce.
From a policy perspective, we believe these three areas can be greatly improved and are ready to advocate for that.

First, recognition and eligibility. Outdoor learning and adventure-based methods should be explicitly acknowledged as valid forms of non-formal education and social inclusion work within local integration strategies. This does not mean replacing core services; it means making space for approaches that address social connection and well-being in parallel. Where funding streams for migrant support exist, eligibility criteria can be written in a way that clearly welcomes proposals that use nature, sport, and experiential learning-provided they meet safeguarding, inclusion, and risk-management standards.

Second, funding the accessibility, not only activities. Across contexts, the most common barriers are practical: transport, equipment, and clear information. Policies that invest only in “programme delivery” but ignore these access barriers will repeatedly fund formats that reach the same already-connected participants. A more effective approach is to support enabling infrastructure: local equipment-lending models, targeted transport solutions to reach natural areas, and partnerships that allow organisations to access safe outdoor spaces without high fees. Small investments in these areas can significantly widen participation.

Third, interdisciplinary capacity. Adventure-based methods become scalable when they are not limited to a small number of specialised organisations. Policymakers can support this by funding training pathways: social workers, youth workers, and language teachers can receive basic outdoor facilitation and risk-management training; and outdoor instructors, sport coaches, and guides can receive training on inclusion, intercultural communication, and trauma-informed practice. This two-way capacity building raises quality, improves safeguarding, and helps mainstream services cooperate with community and outdoor actors rather than operating in parallel.

Taken together, or separately, our consortium believes these measures help integration services move from a narrow focus on instruction and administration toward a broader approach that also strengthens the social and psychological conditions young people need in order to participate and progress in the society.

Some Final Thoughts

Integration is not a destination; it is a continuous journey of mutual adaptation between newcomers and the host society. By stepping out of the office and into the outdoors, we create spaces where this journey can happen naturally, joyfully, and equitably.

We hope this manual has equipped you with the theory, the practical tools, and the strategic vision to guide young migrants and refugees toward greater resilience.

“The heaviest backpack is often the one we carry in our own minds, but out there in nature, we can learn to carry it together”

Conclusion

Throughout the project, the partnership has explored a practical premise: outdoor and adventure-based learning can strengthen social inclusion and well-being for young migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers when it is delivered as a structured youth work method. Traditional reception and integration services remain essential. At the same time, the project shows that many of the social and psychological conditions that support integration: trust, confidence, peer connection, and stress regulation, often develop most effectively in informal, shared environments. Outdoor settings offer exactly this: a space where people meet through doing, where contribution is visible beyond language level, and where group experience can support both belonging and personal growth.

Findings from Norway, Germany, and Spain confirm that barriers to participation are real and often cumulative: limited access to equipment, transport constraints, unclear information, and hesitation linked to unfamiliar norms or low confidence. The pilots also demonstrated that these barriers can be addressed through good activity design. When youth workers provide clear preparation, predictable structure, and multiple ways to participate, outdoor activities become accessible rather than intimidating. When challenge is introduced progressively and participation remains voluntary, activities support learning and resilience without creating unnecessary pressure.

Conclusion

The project also confirms an important point for practice: there is no need for extreme settings to achieve meaningful outcomes, using adventure-based methods. The effectiveness of the methodology depends less on the intensity of the activity and more on the quality of facilitation, more specifically, how you structure the group, how you manage safety, how you make participation inclusive, and how you guide reflection so that experiences translate into everyday skills. Whether the setting is an urban environment, an indoor climbing wall, a coastal walk, or a longer hike, the same core applies: shared experience, mutual support, and intentional learning design.

We hope this manual supports youth workers, educators, NGOs, and local decision-makers in applying the approach in their own contexts. Start with what is available locally, build partnerships that reduce access barriers, and create pathways for young people to take active roles in shaping and leading activities. In that sense, the project title is also a practical reminder: meaningful change begins with a first step-planned well, delivered consistently, and taken together.

“First Step is Half the Journey: Exploring Adventure-Based Outdoor Education for Well-Being and Inclusion of Young Migrants"

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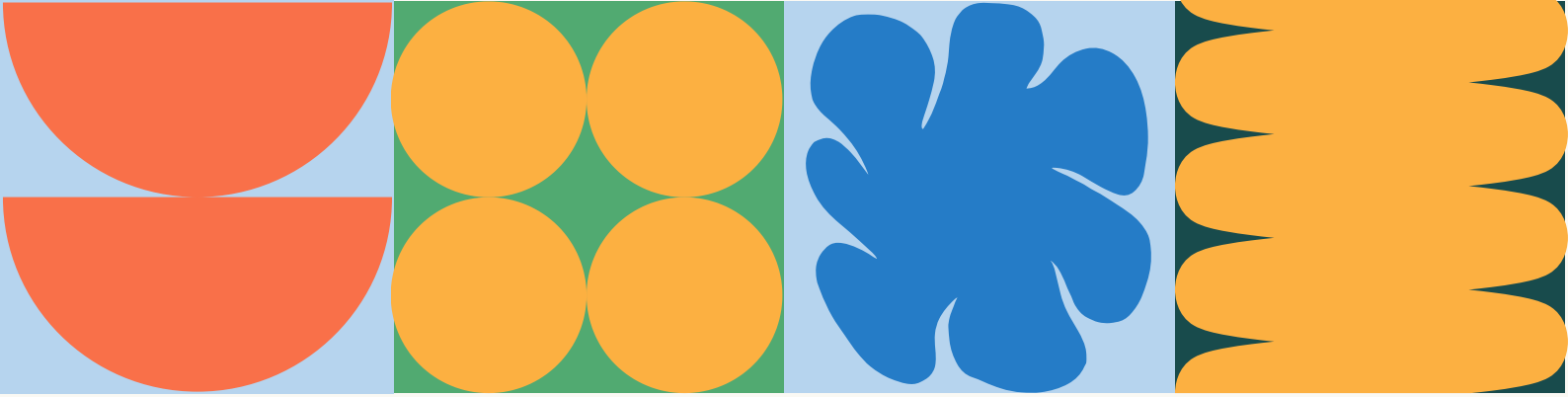
Costa Connect

Highlights e.V.
MIND, TECH, LIFELONG LEARNING



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