**MSc International Development Studies**

**Final Thesis**

*Values, doubts, contradictions and life choices: a day in the life of a young activist.*

*A Case Study of IPSIA NGO in Temporary Reception Centers (TRCs) in Bosnia Herzegovina.*

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# Abstract

This research delves into the narratives of young activists within IPSIA, exploring their motivations, challenges, and successes in advocating for migrant well-being in Bosnian Temporary Reception Centers (TRCs). It situates youth activism in a broader socio-economic context to investigate how contextual factors influence the impact of activism on the field. Finally, it seeks to understand how youth activism can be further supported and empowered. IPSIA works to improve migrants' well-being in this transit country and to foster cultural connections between migrants and the local community emphasising the role of cultural exchange. The fieldwork and research activities involved interviewing IPSIA activists to gain deeper insights into their personal narratives. By combining interviews with on-field observation of activities within the "Social Cafè" and analysis of the contextual factors in Bosnia, the thesis demonstrates that the experiences lived by young people in the family or community environment are crucial in pushing some young people towards activism, provided they have the opportunity to work in organizations that support young people in both tangible and intangible ways, for example through training in the correct use of digital platforms.

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# Table of Contents

# List of Figures and Tables

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a transit country on the Balkan Route, subjected to flows of irregular migration transiting to reach Western Europe. It is a nation still grappling with the effects of war, characterized by a strong cultural identity but hampered by widespread corruption and scarce economic resources (Kraske, 2022). Beyond the challenging context and attempts to isolate migrants in the Temporary Reception Centers (TRCs) of Lipa and Borici around the city of Bihac, there exists a robust network of organizations advocating for migrants' well-being within these structures. Among this network is IPSIA, an Italian NGO operating in both TRCs, which focuses on supporting migrants on the Balkan Route and empowering youth activism. The new wave of youth activism, which transcends political ideologies to promote international solidarity (Ubachs, 2022), is the primary focus o50f this research. Amit and Wulff (1995) first introduced the concept of Youth Studies, advocating for a shift from viewing young people as opposing the system to recognizing their proactive contributions to societal change. Since then, the knowledge about youth activism in the migration field has been limited. Drawing on in-depth interviews with IPSIA's young activists and ethnographic observations within TRCs this research aims to fill this gap by amplifying their voices, foregrounding their personal narratives, and examining their collective efforts. It seeks to understand the role they play in social justice and identify the tangible and intangible resources they need to feel further empowered (Rowlands, 1995). Additionally, the research will emphasize the importance of digital media presence in reaching a broader pool of young people, gaining more recognition, and enhancing the impact of youth activism in humanitarian contexts.

## 1.2 Aim of Research and Research Questions

The purpose of this ethnographic research is to explore youth activism in the context of migration, focusing specifically on the personal narratives, challenges, and impacts of young activists who work within IPSIA NGO at TRCs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The main research question is as follow:

> *"How do the narratives of youth activists working with the IPSIA NGO reveal their motivations, challenges, and successes in driving positive change for migrants passing through Temporary Reception Centers (TRCs) in Bosnia-Herzegovina?"*

Relatedly, this thesis aims to unpack the impact of the "Social Cafè" psychosocial project for migrants in transit on the Balkan Route, as well as to examine how contextual factors such as the Bosnian socio-economic situation and the environment within the TRCs influence the success of these initiatives. The aim of this research is to identify key insights from activists' perspectives to improve youth activism in this framework and possible ways to empower young activists. The supporting research sub-questions are:

1. *"How do IPSIA activists' interventions, namely the "Social Cafè" socio-psychological project, contribute to the well-being of undocumented migrants in BiH?"*
2. *"How do contextual factors, such as local policies, cultural nuances, and socio-economic conditions, influence the success or failure of NGO and activist initiatives in improving the lives of migrants in camps?"*
3. *"What are the implications for empowering youth activism and migrant support initiatives?"*

## 1.3 Relevance in Development Field

Acknowledging youth as catalyst of change, this study explores the motivations and challenges young people face in activism and investigate possible approaches to further empower their work on the field, including a shift towards digital activism. By describing IPSIA initiatives, the research examines how critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and informal education can enlarge the impact of psychosocial interventions on the well-being of migrants. Genuine solidarity and peer support are used as a tool to overcome paternalistic interventions based on power imbalances, creating the conditions to allow the pursuit of re-humanization of people. To expand the knowledge about youth studies and activism the research places the narratives of young people in the broader contextual framework. Understanding how socio-economic conditions and working environment influence the work of activists also help to envisage possible methods for empowerment. By recognizing their efforts to promote justice in the migration field, the research aims to give them visibility and to understand their material and immaterial needs.

## 1.4 Structure of Thesis

Following the introduction, the theoretical framework will outline the theoretical grounds of the research. The methodology chapter will explain the methodological approach taken to justify ethnography as the research qualitative methodology explaining methods of data collection and address risks, limitations and ethical standards of the research. The findings

chapter is structured following the order of the research questions, addressing their key elements through the voices of young IPSIA's activists. The results will be followed by a critical discussion chapter, referencing the theoretical framework. The thesis concludes underlying the efforts and impact of IPSIA's activists in Bosnian TRCs and analysing those resources needed to empower their initiatives.

# 2. Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Youth and Development

Defining youth is challenging, as Bourdieu (1980) noted, since it is an artificial social construct. Parsons (1942) was the first one youth culture, highlighting gender roles and defining youth in opposition to adult responsibilities. Youth was seen as a rebellious transition from childhood to adulthood, focused on work and marriage. Cunningham (2000) later argued that adolescence and post-adolescence are significant phases where young people develop their own interests and values. Galland (2003) proposed that post-adolescence is a functional phase for building adult life, emphasizing the cultural differences between youth and adults. Galland asserted that youth is defined by learning responsibilities rather than irresponsibility. For the purpose of this thesis the concept of youth is analyzed within the development field. Ansell (2016) support the idea that youth are active agents in local and international organizations, and in general in the non-profit sector. Youth considered as a social group should be empowered and not oppressed to strive towards development of society. Marginalization and oppression can happen when young people are subjected to conditions such as powerlessness, exploitation, and stereotyping by the dominant adult society (Young, 2009). Development projects, having an impact on young people, should avoid their marginalization and engage them as well in the decision-making processes. This is the reason why youth should be one of the main targets of local, national, and international development initiatives (Ansell, 2016). Furthermore, development is based on collective effort and, as such, must consider young people not as single individuals but as in relation to others to empower their agency (Hopkins & Pain, 2007). The most important notion drawn from development literature is the evaluation of youth's potential. Attention must be given to young people's own agency, investing in their education and experiences on the field (Beauvais & Higham, 2016). It is important then to describe also the initiatives in which youth is involved, from recognizing young people as proactive agents to understanding their role in activism.

## 2.2 Youth Studies and Activism

Scholars such as Amit and Wulff (1995) state that due to this lack of recognition of youth as a specific phase of life, youth studies have often neglected the active role of young people in shaping their cultural and activist contexts. Instead, they argue for recognizing a distinct youth culture, underlining the capability of young people to create their own cultural meanings. This new theoretical approach examines cultural generations and their manifestations, including both personal and cultural factors. Amit and Wulff (1995) praise the ability of young people to

transform cultural artefacts to create their own culture, and their ability to develop their own cultural frameworks when their parents' are inapplicable. Overcoming Parson's theory (1942) they highlight how young people, through local and international connections, shape and re-shape cultural identities, going beyond age and sexual roles. Likewise, in Ubachs's (2022) work the globalized nature of youth activism is highlighted, emphasizing how young people use the networks they create to drive social transformation and to frame collective identities. This new wave of activism transcends partisan political ideologies, committing to shared ideals and goals rather structured political parties or institutions. These perspectives stress the transformative potential of youth, underlining their ability to critically analyse, reshape and innovate within their cultural and activist landscapes. Focusing on the active role of young people, these scholars argue for a shift from adult-centred narratives to a recognition of youth agency, highlighting the importance of supporting and empowering youth as they navigate and influence their social realities.

Freire's (1970) concept of humanization described in his work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" further expand this view, supporting the idea that young people can choose a new viable path becoming active cultural agents. He argues that genuine humanization involves reflection and action. The oppressors are those who deny the need for dialogue and they perpetuate their oppression by offering a false generosity based on the failure to recognize others as capable of acting for themselves. His pedagogical proposal is guided by an authentic humanist generosity, which implies a continuous dialogue that promotes co-intentional education and support to create knowledge. This dialogical theory is based on empathy, solidarity and the balance between authority and freedom. This thesis considers critical pedagogy in its dialogical form as a resource for psychosocial projects involving both activists and migrants, supporting the idea that paternalistic humanitarianism is not the path that young activists want to take. Activists working for IPSIA aim to engage in constant dialogue with the beneficiaries of their projects, learning from experiences and sharing new insights, always recognizing the capacity for self-understanding and action. Young people can be considered, following this theory, as cultural agents able to overcome outdated practices that involve power imbalances, to engage in a more meaningful path that recognizes the dignity of everyone involved. Figure 1 represents the application of Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy.

**The Principles, Aims, and Approaches of Critical Pedagogy**

**Critical Pedagogy**

**Principles**
Knowledge should relate to and develop from the lived experience of participants.
Knowledge should be co-created between all participants in the learning process.
Education is inherently political.

**Aims**
To become aware of one's own and other's oppressions.
To make connections between personal experiences and wider societal forces.
To develop critical thinkers who create new knowledge.

**Approaches**
Co-create a flexible curriculum using authentic materials, generative themes, and finding teachable moments.
Cultivate hope and symbolic resistance.
Pursue democracy and equality in learning environments.

*Figure 1: Critical Pedagogy and Informal Education (Smith & Seal, 2021).*

However, as Vismara (2021) noted, there are criticisms of Freire's critical pedagogy. The most relevant for this research is that educators, teachers, and activists must inevitably convey their political beliefs and ideology, making education directive rather than neutral. IPSIA activists reject the notion of promoting a single political ideology. Instead, they aim to foster a sense of community in the receiving countries, integrating diverse cultures and political beliefs based on the concept of solidarity.

## 2.3 Empowerment

Therefore, empowerment is needed to enhance activism and attract more young people. The needs of new generations must be recognized and supported, developing a collective identity that transcends political ideologies and includes various media platforms. For this reason, the final foundational concept on which this thesis is grounded is empowerment, a frequently adopted yet ambiguously defined term in the development field. This research considers Jo Rowlands' (1995) analysis of empowerment, which is based on power. Generative power, involving access to material and immaterial resources and awareness of one's interests and goals in relation to others, is the most important one for this research underscoring the importance of young people perceiving themselves as entitled to participate in activism. This conception of empowerment aligns with Freire's theory (1970), where individuals develop critical consciousness, understand external dynamics, and become active agents in their lives. Rowlands emphasizes the concept of collective power wherein individuals—in this case young

people—choose to collaborate to achieve a greater impact than they could individually. This research concurs that empowerment is not solely about resources but also about recognizing one's value within the world, developing skills, and engaging in collective action. This idea is also reflected in the UN definition of empowerment (2012), which is *"the process of enabling people to increase control over their lives, to gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives, to increase their resources and qualities, and to build capacities to gain access, partners, networks, and a voice in order to gain control."* Young activists freely decide to be part of a group to amplify their voices and operate on equitable terms with their peers. At the same time, working together poses significant challenges, and young people must develop their capabilities to overcome inter-group barriers (Peterson et al., 2020). As stated by Musleh (2020), nowadays youth groups are composed of members from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, which must be mediated and understood for effective activism. Within the field of migration and humanitarian aid, youth activism plays a crucial role, but it must not be forgotten that accessing places like TRCs is not easy for informal groups or individuals (Bellini, 2023). This is why NGOs like IPSIA play an important role in empowering youth activism by providing a structure within which to operate. Furthermore, as stated by Lester (2005), despite many contradictions, NGOs remain accountable and have formal procedures to handle ethical issues and cooperate within the system. However, the presence of youth in activism must not be taken for granted, as it often faces marginalization and potential consequential disillusionment (Liou & Literat, 2020). As claimed by Rowlands (1995), empowerment is related to power, and as confirmed by the UN Empowerment definition (2012), empowering means providing both tangible and intangible resources needed to operate effectively and to be aware of one's position within the system and one's capacity to lead societal change. Svirsky (2010) further underlines this aspect, stating the need for a connection between discourses about empowerment and tangible factors. The new generation of activists is handling a digital shift (Ubachs, 2022). In a globalized world, advocacy is becoming paramount. A resource highly needed for youth activism empowerment is a profound knowledge of media platforms and the ability to use them to reach a broad audience and spotlight specific issues (Jenkins et al., 2016).
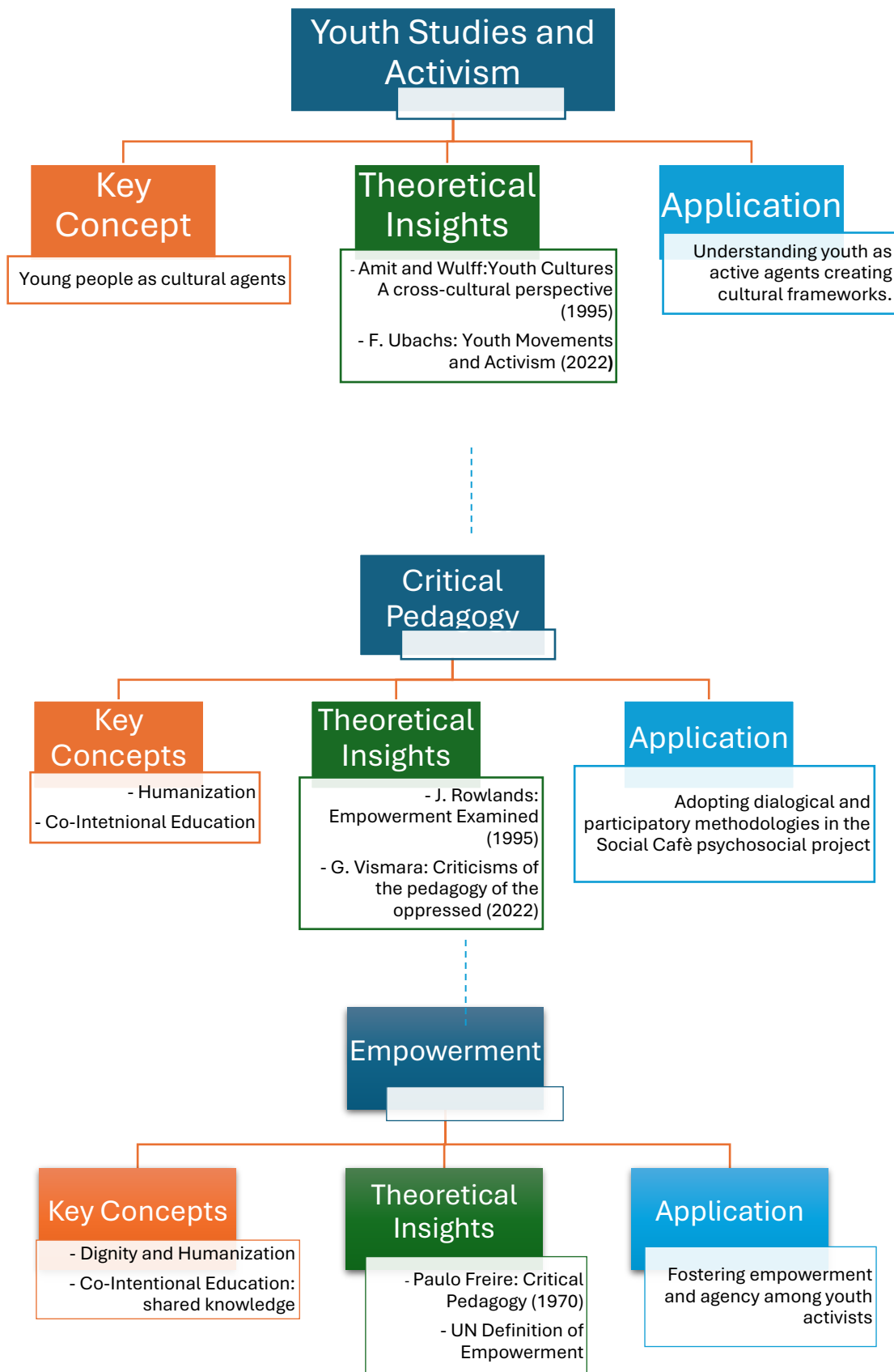
## 2.4 Youth Activism and Digital Presence

As Ubachs (2022) observed, youth activism and the academic research about it have become increasingly globalized since the 20th century. Today, the involvement of young people transcends political ideologies, taking on a fluid nature mainly based on solidarity ideals. This

involvement is based on informal networks rather than political parties or institutions and has as its main objective the creation of collective identities, thanks to which they coordinate actions based on shared missions and ideals, participating as equals. Accordingly, Kahne, Hodgin and Eidman-Aadahl (2016) state that activism is increasingly relying on peer-based and participatory politics, not led by traditional institutions. The term "activism" has been subjected to judgment avoiding recognizing it as a source of positive transformation and preferring more neutral terms such as "participation" (Peterson et al., 2020). Ubachs (2022) pointed out that the new wave of youth activism is able to create new cultural values when parental ones are outdated, also exploiting digital platforms to shape new collective identities. The goal of this ethnographic research is to consider young activists' narratives to better understand the reasons that motivate them to take action. It highlights young people's ability to critically build values and practices, keeping into account the role that family and networks play in shaping their ideals and opportunities. Another important aspect highlighted by Ubachs (2022), and central to this thesis, is the value of networking and intergenerational activism. Cooperation between generations benefits activist groups by combining the innovative and digital ideas of young people with the experience and support of adults. He also argues that activism is evolving in response to social changes, including new forms of communication. As confirmed by a more recent analysis by Cebul (2023) the main successful factor of many societal movements is the engagement of youth on the forefront. Young people lead changes and their importance as agents of change must be recognized because they will be able to shape new cultural forms through new languages and different media to support and create networks. In a globalized world, advocacy is becoming paramount, requiring a profound knowledge of media platforms to reach broad audiences and spotlight specific issues (Jenkins et al., 2016). However, the literature's underestimation of youth's role reflects in their marginalization in the field, as society often treats young people as needing adult structuring to develop effective activism. Earl, Maher, and Elliott (2017) defined this marginalization as "youth deficit," implicating adult guidance and education. Being subjected to these misbeliefs, young activists feel frustrated and misunderstood, also in the digital dimension (Liou & Literat, 2020). Despite these challenges, the new wave of activism is able to plan events and mobilize a broader group of young people through digital media but expresses the need to see their efforts recognized (Elliott & Earl, 2018).

# 3. Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework offers a visual understanding of the key concepts of this thesis. By highlighting the interconnectedness of youth studies and critical pedagogy it is possible to draw a comprehensive approach to empowerment. Theoretical insights from Amit and Wulff (1995) and Ubachs (2022) underline the cultural agency of young people stating their capability to shape their cultural. The application of these theories can be found in projects such as the "Social Cafè", which adopts dialogical approaches where young people participate to shared education processes. Young people are engaged as active agents in informal educations settings, fostering the creation of shared knowledge with beneficiaries of the project, leading to the recognition of dignity of everyone. This interconnection creates an environment where practices are led by empowered agents, understanding empowerment as one's self-awareness and capability to lead change. Tangible and intangible resources for youth range from sufficient economic resources to online presence.

## Youth Studies and Activism

### Key Concept
Young people as cultural agents

### Theoretical Insights
- Amit and Wulff:Youth Cultures A cross-cultural perspective (1995)
- F. Ubachs: Youth Movements and Activism (2022)

### Application
Understanding youth as active agents creating cultural frameworks.

## Critical Pedagogy

### Key Concepts
- Humanization
- Co-Intentional Education

### Theoretical Insights
- J. Rowlands: Empowerment Examined (1995)
- G. Vismara: Criticisms of the pedagogy of the oppressed (2022)

### Application
Adopting dialogical and participatory methodologies in the Social Cafè psychosocial project

## Empowerment

### Key Concepts
- Dignity and Humanization
- Co-Intentional Education: shared knowledge

### Theoretical Insights
- Paulo Freire: Critical Pedagogy (1970)
- UN Definition of Empowerment

### Application
Fostering empowerment and agency among youth activists

# 4. Context

This chapter examines Bosnia-Herzegovina`s position alongside the Balkan Route, outlining its socio-economic adversities, political fragmentation, and regulation of migrant flows. It additionally explores the pivotal function of organizations like IPSIA and the dynamics in the Temporary Reception Centers in the city of Bihac and Una-Sana Canton where the organization works (Figure 2), delineating the complexities of migration reception and cooperation efforts in the country.

**City of Bihac, Una-Sana Canton, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina**
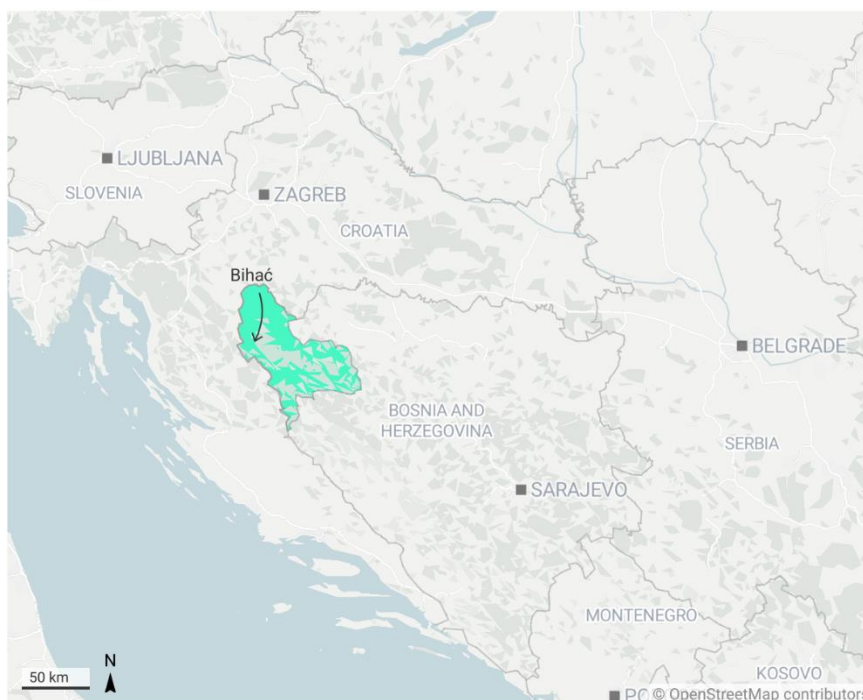


Created with Datawrapper

*Figure 2: Map of the City of Bihać, Una-Sana Canton, Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Pilu, 2024).*

## 4.1 Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Balkan Route: a transit country

Bosnia-Herzegovina, still grappling with the consequences of the 1990s Yugoslav wars, suffers socio-economic challenges. Its financial system is characterised high unemployment rates, corruption, and a stagnant tread of development. This fragile socio-economic situation has led to an exodus of the new generations; for years, in fact, young people have been emigrating en masse from the country because of a lack of opportunities and faith in their institutions (Kraske, 2022). The political panorama is fragmented, with deep ethnic divisions that paralyze efficient governance. Within this context, Bosnia has struggled to control the flows of migrants

attempting to access into the EU. The Western Balkans Route is currently a key migratory route, that serves as a transit hub for migrants predominantly from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. This route involves crossing borders of different countries like Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (European Council, 2023). Again, in regard to the Western Balkans Route, it's miles to introduce the concept of "The Game" (Figure 3): that is the term used by migrants to describe the multiple attempts to reach Europe. It is a tactic to overcome barriers to legal entry into the EU exploiting gaps in border controls, which demonstrates migrants' determination to find or create new routes, networks and opportunities to overcome border policy challenges (Minca & Collins, 2021). Being a transit country on this route, Bosnia serves as a temporary stopover for migrants aiming to enter the European Union and Western Europe in particular. Their reception has always been fraught with difficulties. The country's limited resources and infrastructures have been overwhelmed, leading to the creation of inadequate living conditions within the constantly overcrowded camps. Many migrants cannot access any reception facilities, forcing them to survive alone all year round in very difficult conditions. A report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in May 2021 noted that, as of the end of April 2021, 3,220 migrants were living in informal camps outside official centers, nearly as many as those receiving aid, albeit limited. This confinement in undefined structures are the representation of the country`s attempt to cope with migration (Brambilla et al., 2021). Local communities, already strained through economic hardships, have proven different reactions, starting from empathy to hostility. A new subject matter has been rising in political agendas: blaming the IOM and the EU for encouraging migrant arrivals through the creation of temporary camps (Brambilla et al., 2021). The worldwide network has criticized Bosnia for its dealing with of the migrant crisis, highlighting the want for more aid and coordinated efforts to cope with humanitarian needs and the wider socio-economic problems affecting the country.
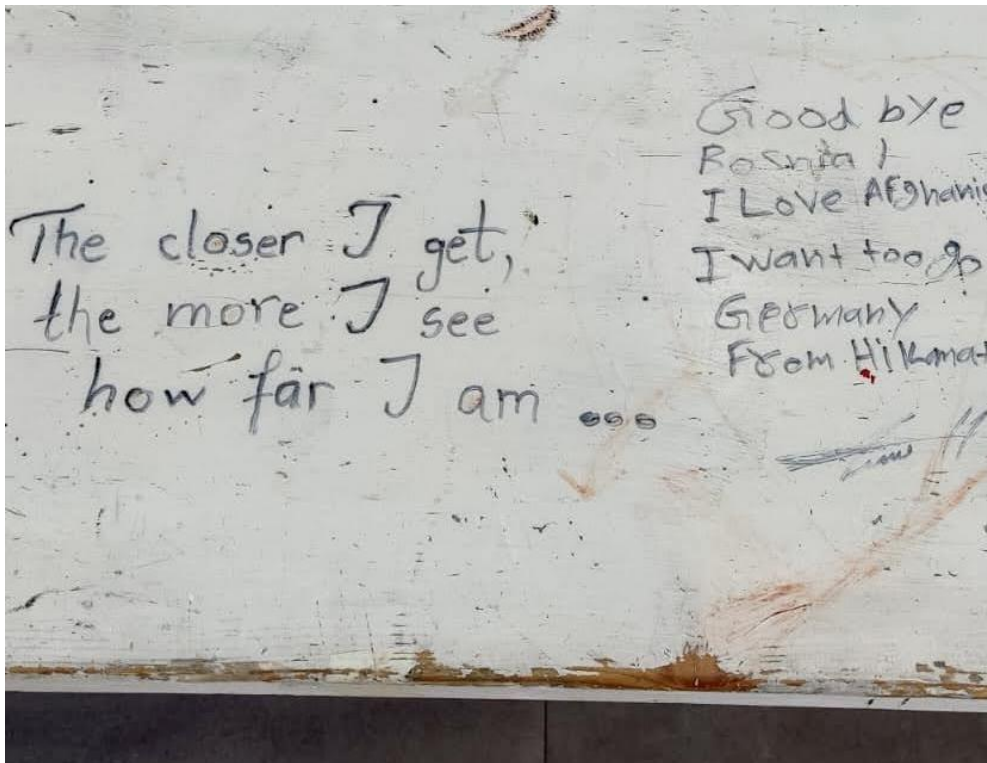
*Figure 3: A Table in the Social Cafè: the concept of the Game (Pilu, 2024).*

## 4.2 IPSIA NGO and the Organizations working for migrants

IPSIA, an important Italian NGO, has been active in the Balkans since 1997, collaborating with other NGOs, the Bosnian government, and the Italian government. Their initiatives, dating back to 1985, amalgamate associationism and social development, fostering solidarity among communities. IPSIA's primary focus is on supporting migrants along the Balkan Route, empowering youth activism, engaging in advocacy, and assisting the local communities. Particularly emphasizing youth involvement, IPSIA employs four young Italian activists every year, supplemented by rotating youth volunteers aged 18 to 30. Complemented by a team of four Bosnian members aged 20 to 40, the organization, led by project manager Silvia Maraone, is dedicated to guiding young people toward sustainable development, civil coexistence, and peace. In Bosnia, IPSIA initiated a hot tea distribution service in TRCs in 2018, evolving it into the so-called "Social Café." Two teams of activists distribute teas each morning while organizing recreational activities, transcending mere beverage distribution to instill profound social value. Tables, benches, and board games, create a genuine communal space, restoring dignity to individuals often relegated to mere statistics. Amidst diverse languages and cultures, ping-pong tournaments and card games, music and stories intertwine, fostering connections and reaffirming hope for a brighter tomorrow (Produzioni dal Basso, 2019).

Migrants residing in TRCs can interact only with authorized operators, whose actions and expressions are necessarily subject to limits (Brambilla et al., 2021). Various organizations operate in the TRCs, providing food, shelter and medical assistance: the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Service for Foreign Affairs (SFA) have the greatest decision-making power. As to the camps where IPSIA operates, the Red Cross manages a canteen that offers meals everyday. The other organisations, whose employees live in Bihać and commute to Lipa (Bellini, 2023), operate from Monday to Friday: the Danish Refugee Council provides healthcare, while Médicins du Monde offers psychological support. The Jesuit Refugee Service provides barber tools and the NGO IPSIA runs the Social Café with recreational activities and language courses.

## 4.3 Temporary Reception Centers (TRCs)

Since late 2017, the number of migrants transiting through Bosnia and Herzegovina increased, prompting IOM to support the government in setting up and managing a reception system that meets international standards and ensures dignity and basic needs for migrants. IOM collaborated with the Ministry of Security and the Service for Foreigners' Affairs to open seven TRCs in Sarajevo and Una-Sana Cantons, accommodating over 8,000 people at a time (IOM, 2023). The migration flows consist of people originating from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Morocco, and Syria. Although the majority are single-men, the migrants also include families with children, unaccompanied minors, and other vulnerable individuals. IPSIA operates within the TRCs of Lipa and Borići in the Una Sana Canton (Figure 4). The first one, situated in the surrounding area of the city of Bihać and managed by the Service for Foreigners Affairs (SFA) with support from IOM and partners, hosts men over 18 years old coming alone; the latter, located in the city of Bihać, hosts families, vulnerable migrants, and unaccompanied minors. However, as Agier (2008) stated, the state of emergency and exception of the camp became the normality, in some cases also normalizing a kind of segregation of migrants in the camp, especially in the case of Lipa TRC, which is situated 28 kilometers from the city of Bihać, at an altitude of 800 meters. Lipa exemplifies the "externalization of the frontier," where the EU finances non-member countries to detain individuals it refuses to admit (Bellini, 2023). Due to its geographical location and structural limitations, the camp is destined to maintain very basic living conditions just above the survival threshold. Confining thousands of people there will likely result in segregation, marginalization, and violence, particularly affecting vulnerable groups. Moreover, as the Lipa camp is far from urban areas and migrant transit routes to the EU, many will try to live closer

to the city by occupying abandoned houses creating intolerance among the local community (Brambilla et al., 2021).
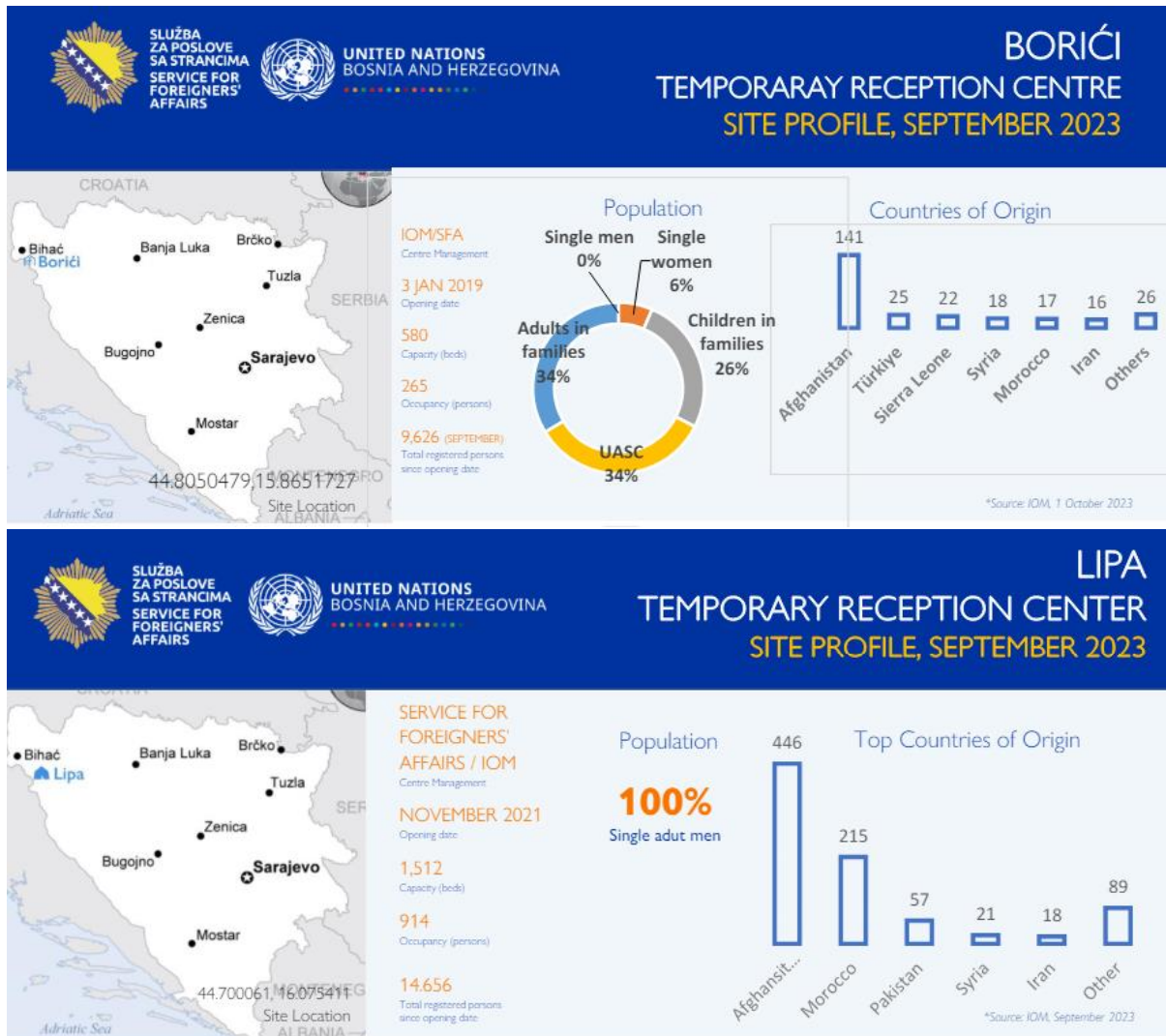


*Figure 4: The composition of the guests of Lipa and Borici TRCs by marital status, age and country of origin (IOM, 2023).*

# 5. Research Design

Ethnography is the qualitative method used in this research to investigate the narratives and experiences of IPSIA's young activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This approach, based on the observation of contexts and dynamics and on interviews, maps cultures and groups from an insider's perspective (Fetterman, 1989). The key element of ethnography is fieldwork, which involves gaining access and immersing oneself in a group to explore personal accounts within a specific cultural context and to enhance understanding of dynamic systems by testing one's knowledge (Seligmann & Estes, 2019).

The advantages offered by ethnography are numerous. Through immersion within the community, it is possible to build trust and capture daily interactions. Consequently, it allows for the exploration of personal experiences beyond superficial encounters. Furthermore, human interactions are analyzed within their context, emphasizing the interpretation of environments, objects, and events (Herbert, 2000). This approach is particularly relevant to the study of the humanitarian field, which is rarely neutral. Specifically, this research follows the principles of collaborative ethnography, which involves research with activist aims, creating a more impartial and collaborative relationship with participants. In this approach, researchers promote empowerment by defining research objectives with participants, aiming for a more horizontal and equitable relationship (Seligmann & Estes, 2019). However, ethnographers also face research challenges. Despite advocating for objectivity, achieving complete impartiality is impossible. Researchers inevitably bring their own cultural background into the field (Fetterman, 1989), but the crucial factor is being aware of potential biases. This research acknowledges these limitations and emphasizes reflexivity throughout the analysis process.

Fieldwork must be planned, which is why the experience began with an access phase, establishing initial contact with IPSIA and explaining the purpose of my research to all members, while listening to their opinions and concerns. This first step proved to be the most challenging as it is not easy to build friendships while establishing oneself as a researcher. For this reason, the IPSIA Project Manager played a crucial role as a key informant, facilitating my integration and providing valuable insights into the NGO's dynamics (Fetterman, 1989). Collaboration during the three months of fieldwork included living with the young activists and working daily with the team, engaging in open communication and allowing the research objectives to be shaped, in part, by their contributions. The core of the fieldwork consisted of data collection such as semi-structured interviews and field notes. Besides being a researcher,

I actively participated in the organization's daily activities while trying to maintain a critical distance for effective data collection (Fetterman, 1989).

## 5.1 Data Collection and research participants

As mentioned previously, participant observation and field notes were a central data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection technique and they were conducted with a group of 9 participants, including activists and the project manager of IPSIA (as represented in table 1 through the use of pseudonyms to humanise the participants). The research participants were Bosnian and Italian youth activists at IPSIA and ranged from 18 to 30 years old. An interview guide was developed beforehand allowing a certain degree of flexibility meaning that core research questions and themes were replicated to ensure consistency and to allow for the analysis of patterns but leaving space to sudden topics or changes. Interviews usually took place in a quiet room of the shared house or in the office after the work shift lasting indicatively one hour and as suggested by Fetterman (1989) they were all planned according to the activists' schedules. Most interviews were held in Italian with a few ones in English. Additionally, field notes were taken everyday to describe in detail the setting and the rules of the TRCs as well as to summarize key interactions and dynamics of the day.

| Name (Pseudonym) | Organization | Age | Gender | Nationality | Role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ilario | IPSIA | 23 | Male | Bosnian | Activist |
| Isabella | IPSIA | 29 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Erika | IPSIA | 27 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Carla | IPSIA | 27 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Fabiola | IPSIA | 26 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Allegra | IPSIA | 29 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Elisa | IPSIA | 27 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Alessia | IPSIA | 27 | Female | Italian | Activist |
| Silvia | IPSIA | Adult | Female | Italian | Project Manager |

*Table 1: Participants*

## 5.2 Data Analysis

Data gathered from recorded in-depth interviews have been transcribed and subsequently coded. Coding has been performed manually using a code tree and relative code book. The hierarchical code tree showed themes and sub-themes, guiding the categorization of data. The code book included explanation for each code. Finally, the main quotes chosen for each code have been then translated from Italian to English.

## 5.3 Positionality

Lipa TRC was devastated by a fire in the winter of 2020, and news images of men standing in the snow stirred my emotions. This prompted my interest in this humanitarian tragedy, leading me to explore migration flows along the Balkan Route, with a focus on Bosnia-Herzegovina as a transit country. Since then, I have been following IPSIA, an Italian NGO, on social media and applied for an internship to write my Master's thesis. Two main reasons drove this decision: one ideological and the other practical. Ideologically, I am motivated by my belief in social justice and the desire to merge academic research with a political and social project, influenced by political anthropology concepts (Konopinski, 2014). Additionally, as I come from Italy, a country involved in migration issues and debates, I have always felt the need to engage in volunteering experiences on the field. Practically, accessibility was a concern. While aiming to work in the field, gaining access to TRCs is challenging. IPSIA offered this opportunity, though it involved considerable paperwork, allowing me to work closely with migrants in the camps.

During my internship, IPSIA provided accommodation alongside young female Italian activists. My role was to participate in the daily work in TRCs while conducting observations and interviews. While I learned beforehand that directly interviewing migrants would not be possible, I viewed this as an opportunity to focus on youth activism. As it is easy to imagine, working for an organization means holding the reputation of it inside and outside work. Young activists feel represented by the NGO and they could find it difficult to talk about possible negative aspects. I was aware of this risk, and I tried my best to make them feel in a safe space and asking them to elaborate their own narratives as evaluating the negative or positive aspects of IPSIA was not the scope of my project. Additionally, I found it challenging to find the time to interview participants as everyone was tired after work. However, living with some of them allowed me to use our free time at home to hold interviews, remaining aware of my positionality as researcher even if in a friendly context.

As an Italian woman working daily in TRCs with migrants and closely interacting with activists, my positionality significantly shapes my research. My background gives me certain privileges and perspectives that influence my interactions and observations, acknowledging the power dynamics at play (Ramakrishnan & Stavinoha, 2024). Moreover, TRCs are potentially dangerous places. However, as a woman I never felt unsafe, everyone respected me and IPSIA offered support in any circumstance. On the other hand, living and working with activists allowed me to deeply understand the daily realities of migration work, engaging in "fieldwork by immersion" (Hannerz, 2006) and maintaining ethnographic integrity, offering a distinct

viewpoint. However, it also required constant reflection on my biases. In conclusion, I agree with Ramakrishnan and Stavinoha (2024) that testimonies become transformative when involving self-reflection on one's limits, privileges, contradictions, and inequalities, continually re-evaluating their relationship with the 'other'. This reflective approach has been crucial in my field experiences, enhancing my understanding of migration complexities and fostering empathetic interactions with migrants.

## 5.4 Research limitations and gaps

Possible research limitations include the subjectivity inherent in ethnographic data collection and interpretation. Listening to young IPSIA activists means relying on a small and specific sample, which could lead to a bias in personal statements aimed at protecting the organization's reputation. Furthermore, even when addressing the broader topic of activism, the findings may not be generalizable to other local contexts or organizations. Additionally, the concept of transit imposes clear temporal constraints on both migrants and activists, allowing only for a snapshot of activists' narratives and experiences without considering changes over a long period. This research does not perform an intersectional analysis, which could provide a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the choice to become an activist and the different conceptions of empowerment. The theme of gender could be further analysed to understand why IPSIA team is predominantly made up of women, prompting further investigation about this disparity.

## 5.5 Ethical Considerations

To ensure protection of all participants, ethical standards were respected throughout the study. Participants had the possibility to read it through the informed consent and to understand the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation, signing a written consent. To ensure anonymity pseudonyms were selected in place of real names. Additionally, it was explained that all data such as records of the interviews and transcripts were accessible just to the researcher and to the supervisor.

# 6. Results

## 6.1 Activism: the personal narratives of young activists

In the intercultural disorder of the TRCs Lipa and Borici, the young activists of IPSIA play a critical and proactive role in supporting migrants' well-being. They move in these spaces as active agents who engage in collective action guided by deep-rooted personal motivations. Focusing on personal narratives, this section portrays both the achievements and difficulties of these young people in their on-the-ground activism. Ethnographically, this approach offers insight into their daily lives, revealing the depth of their commitment and the complexity of their roles and related dynamics. Youth activism, as Frank Ubachs (2022) observes, has undergone a transformation from its politically connected roots in the 20th century into a more global and cosmopolitan form. Its scope of action is broad: it finds its foundations in a set of shared ideals and is then expressed both in concrete and collective actions in the field and in awareness-raising efforts; often the initiatives of activists (who, it is worth remembering, unlike volunteers can also occupy paid professional positions) take the form of denunciation which has the aim of systematically redefining the mechanisms of society, highlighting new approaches and practices for some thematic areas (Svirsky, 2010). To achieve these macro-objectives, activism exercises a constant examination of social life and its dynamics, challenging the norms and conventions imposed by social systems; often, however, despite their energy, the key role of young activists in driving social change is overshadowed by the focus on adult leadership and norms (Ubachs, 2022). The young activists of the NGO IPSIA, working in the Bosnian TRCs as part of the "Social Café" project, embody this new wave of activism. They are involved in a wide range of initiatives, showing knowledge of migration issues, organizational skills and the ability to collaborate effectively to achieve their own and the organization's goals. Their personal stories reveal a deep commitment to their cause, fueled by a blend of personal ideals, previous volunteering experience and the desire to advocate for global solidarity.

### 6.1.1 Motivations

Following Herbert's (2000) approach, according to which ethnography seeks to understand the actions and intentions of people as conscious agents, semi-structured interviews were carried out from which the motivations that lead these young people to choose to commit concretely emerge. Many of them are guided by a sensitivity for human rights which leads them to strive to have a direct understanding of the difficulties of migrants: personal experiences are the fuel

that boosts their beliefs and their passion, often leading them to reflect on the perception that the higher the socioeconomic status of a person in Western society, the less likely it is that they will encounter the reality of migrants in their territory and daily lives: one more reason, for them, to increase their commitment to change the state of things. Elisa, one of the participants, growing up in a privileged neighborhood, dedicated her free time to volunteering and developed a stronger awareness of social injustices, fueling her commitment to help marginalized people: She shares:

> *I have always been very sensitive to rights violations. I recognize my privileged situation and try to do something for those who are not in the same situation as me. I do it because I did many volunteering experiences. I would not say that being born in a privileged situation makes you blind but certainly if you don't throw yourself into the field it is more difficult to realize the disparities (Elisa).*

Most participants said that their previous experiences as volunteers in the Italian non-profit sector, as scouts or children's educators in Church summer camps gave them the opportunity to come into contact with people at risk of social exclusion. These past experiences shaped their perspectives and fueled their desire to contribute to social equality, as described by two young activists who started their first experience of activism on the field after years of volunteering in their Italian towns.

> *In Italy, young people have been experimenting with associations since they were children. The parishes offer many possibilities to be animators during the summer for children. This does not mean that you have to be religious to become an activist but perhaps having experienced these activities you are stimulated to repeat them in your adult life, though in different forms (Elisa).*

> *I come from a small town in Italy, I have always participated in municipal political life. It helped me create a small network in my area. Now, despite being very busy here on the field, I still participate to the online meetings of the committee, and I help them to organize workshops and events when I have the possibility (Allegra).*

However, the experiences gained in the various areas of the Italian non-profit sector have not instilled in their minds the idea that being involved in social activities can save the lives of other people. Instead, many participants stated that, while they are aware of their contribution to greater social justice, their activism is fundamentally motivated by the hope of contributing with small steps to social justice. As Elisa expressed, *"Over time I developed a political*

*awareness and since I started actively participating, I felt like I was adding a piece to justice, in my own small way."*

Support from family and friends plays a crucial role, although it can be a double-edged sword. While many activists receive encouragement from their families and networks to engage in humanitarian work, others face opposition to the cause within their family. The family's support has been portrayed by Fabiola:

> *My mother has always been involved in volunteering and since high school she encouraged me to volunteer work in Africa during summer. This helped me understand that I wanted this to become an integral part of my life. But I am aware that some of my friends' families didn't want them to participate with me.*

Carla, a participant working with IPSIA for four years, critically underlines the reason behind this, stating that *"everyone is be curious about what happens in the world and in the migration field, but if the people around you have a negative attitude towards migratory phenomena, you will hardly open that door."* Within IPSIA's sample of activists, the majority confirmed that their families early instilled in them ideals of empathy, while a minority indicated that their families did not discuss social issues or migration, or had more conservative views. However, all of them were aware of the fact that family values (both progressive and conservative) and academic background in international relations or social sciences are the main factors that have broadened their personal perspectives on the topic of migration.

> *My family has never been against the integration of migrants but is certainly more conservative. When I changed city and attended the University of Diplomatic Sciences my opinions changed, I expanded my knowledge and experiences and revisited some ideas (Allegra).*

This first part of the analysis confirms that even if young people are active agents in the creation of their own culture, they still rely on the point of view of family and friends, but are ultimately able to change these opinions when they become inapplicable or obsolete especially through academic network and experiences.

## 6.1.2 Facing Challenges: mental health and emotional burnout

The challenges faced by young activists working in temporary reception centers are multiple and bring with them a significant emotional and psychological load linked to their activities, as evidenced by their personal narratives. The intense emotional commitment required to

support migrants, combined with the harrowing experiences they witness when they see migrants returning to TRCs after violent pushbacks at the border, can lead to distress and, in the worst case scenario, burnout that is the consequence more commonly experienced as young activists generally report (Conner, Greytak, Evich, & Wray-Lake, 2023). Burnout is defined as an emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged and intense involvement (in this specific case in active support for migrants) which influences all aspects of a person's life from which persons hardly recover as underlined by Carla who studied psychology and shared the fact that "*burnout is not easily recognizable and should not be underestimated. People take up to five years to recover, it is necessary to prevent it.*" It is a phenomenon widely recognized in the humanitarian field, to the point that psychological support is considered a real necessity that IPSIA satisfies through weekly psychological supervision group sessions. Isabella, sensitive to humanitarian issues and border violence, shares her experience:

> *When I learned that IPSIA offered psychological support to activists I was happy because other organizations I got in touch with didn't offer the same support. I think there is a real need for it. Working with migrants means dealing with empathy and heavy emotions which necessitate re-elaboration.*

However, as confirmed by more introverted participants, it is not easy to open up in front of your peers. Allegra echoed this sentiment, sharing, "*when we participate in group supervision, I try to make the most of this opportunity. I appreciate it, but sometimes I feel insecure in sharing deep thoughts because I have always feared judgment.*"

As Ramakrishnan and Stavinoha (2024) recognize, those who bear witness are influenced by colonial histories and ongoing unequal power dynamics, often perpetuated by humanitarian organizations and volunteers, that reflect differences in race and citizenship. So, in relation to the psychological burden experienced by activists, there is a sense of privilege in working with people who, in the common Western view, have nothing. Carla, after more than four years in the field, still struggles with this feeling. However, like many other activists, she has adopted a different mindset to cope with it, affirming:

> *I've made peace with the guilt of being privileged just because I was born in the right part of the world. We tend to think that if you are in a TRC you have nothing but that's not true, people have many different resources to survive. The wheel turns, and when it turns in your favor, it's right to enjoy it because then it will be reflected on others.*

Activists recognize that working for the well-being of migrants and reflecting on their own prejudices, prioritizing the voices of people who come from very distant and different worlds and engaging in continuous self-education about inequalities global can reduce this feeling. Engaging in constant dialogue with migrants helps activists realize that the perception of having nothing is wrong. Although they often have fewer economic resources, they possess intangible resources necessary to survive such a journey, which should not be underestimated.

These reflections that originate from the concrete experience in the TRCs are placed in the process of rethinking the overall approach: if humanitarianism embodies the desire to help, while paternalism implies helping within an unequal power dynamic (Barnett, 2016) then the current wave of activism clearly affirms the need for a shift from a paternalistic conception of humanitarianism to a collective path towards re-humanization and social justice as highlighted by IPSIA Project Manager.

> *Our goal is to recognize the beneficiary not as a bearer of needs, which is very common in the humanitarian field, but as a person with personal history and resources. And to do this it is necessary to start to dialogue. We must strive to go beyond the traditional humanitarian framework (Silvia).*

Despite activists' significant contributions, there is often a lack of recognition and support for their efforts, both socially and within the academic literature, which tends to prioritize adult leadership or portray youth-led initiatives as undermining social order. This lack of visibility is particularly distressing for the young women of IPSIA: some of them stated that as young Italian women, adult authorities and men working within the TRCs often treat them like children by applying mansplaining strategies. Carla remembers her first days of work:

> *As soon as I started working in the TRCs I realized that the men who worked for the authorities addressed us like teenagers who know nothing about rules and procedures. It's nice to receive advice but I had the perception that they underestimated our efforts because we are foreigners, and we are mostly girls.*

### 6.1.3 Ethical Dilemmas

Daily activities give rise to important ethical dilemmas, as activists operate in the often-dehumanizing contexts of TRCs. The state of exception, particularly evident in the Lipa camp, tends to become the norm, somehow perpetuating the segregation of migrants (Agier, 2008). Activists often enter the migration field with idealism and a clear vision of what they want to change, but the reality of the system within which they find themselves operating often makes

it difficult to respect the humanitarian principles and ideals that led them to make an important life choice. This common belief is well summarized by Elisa who comes from a human rights academic background and finds difficult to adapt to the TRCs framework affirming, "*I struggled to get to grips with some mechanisms in the camps. I felt like I was legitimizing something that is unethical, then I understood that I must do my job well for the beneficiaries and this means learning to stay within the system.*" This situation creates the perception that working within the system is equivalent to normalizing and accepting it, posing a significant moral dilemma.

As observed within the TRCs, each migrant is issued an identity card to access services such as the canteen and to be recognized by authorities. This card is issued as soon as migrants arrive in the TRC, and due to language barriers or time constraints, authorities often make mistakes with migrants' first or last names and default to recording their birth dates as January 1 to avoid the effort of verifying their actual dates of birth. This is a minor example which, combined with a life confined to containers far from the city with minimal human contact and care, contributes to the dehumanisation of migrants, reducing them to mere numbers. Therefore, although it is not always easy for young activists to compromise, they are aware that systemic changes require time and persistence, and every small contribution can be seen as part of a journey towards justice.

Intercultural dynamics further increase complexity, requiring adaptability and sensitivity to communicate and collaborate effectively across different cultural contexts. IPSIA's team comes into contact with migrants from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds every day, finding value in these interactions despite the stress of language barriers. As one of the participants stated, the fact that the migrant is not able to explain himself in English when responding to interviews requesting feedback on the project should not be a reason to give up but rather a motivation to solve the problem using different tools (in this case carrying out the interview through Google Translate).

> *We often carry out Social Café evaluation interviews with beneficiaries and language barriers are frequently high, but this does not mean that the person is not suitable to respond. In fact, the biggest but most impactful challenge is letting people express themselves by trying to help them with tools like Google Translate (Isabella).*

> *At first it was difficult for me to overcome the language barriers, I felt unable to communicate or engage people. I was also afraid that an extra sentence or a wrong word*

*could trigger stress in the beneficiaries but then I understood that this challenge could make me grow and I did my best to overcome it (Allegra).*

The TRCs in which IPSIA activists operate are located in Bosnia, a transit country where transit migration is experienced. This is defined as the time that migrants spend - in movement or in a settled situation - in the countries they cross along the route that separates the country of origin from the final destination and consists of a stay ranging from more than a week up to three months in a country that the individual migrant intends to leave again (Schapendonk, 2012). The transitory nature of TRCs, as the word "temporary" suggests, with migrants constantly on the move (defined by IPSIA as "people on the move"), disrupts continuity and complicates efforts to provide ongoing support. Planning and managing integration activities for people who will not remain in Bosnia to seek asylum is a difficult challenge. Furthermore, for some migrants, the idea of being stuck in a transit country, combined with repeated failed attempts to cross the border and reach Europe, is a factor that causes further emotional distress. Activists must address the tensions that exist between migrants on the move and the structural constraints that limit their movements (Fontanari, 2018). For this reason it is not always possible for activists to involve migrants in activities in which it is not known whether they will even be able to participate the following day as affirmed by Allegra, *"I'm collaborating with other organizations to plan structured activities during the week such as a guided tour of the city, but it is difficult to engage people who might not stay the whole week in the camp."* For this reason, the existence of a space like the 'Social Cafè' is even more important, as it guarantees a welcoming environment regardless of the continuity of an individual migrant's presence.

## 6.2 The "Social Cafè" Pyschosocial Project

The psychosocial project "Social Café", implemented by the IPSIA team, plays a significant role in improving the well-being of migrants in transit in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This section outlines the main methodologies that define the implementation of the project, the objectives of the young activists and the forms of their involvement. The main finding about the "Social Café" project is that it has a profound overall impact on the well-being of migrants in Bosnia. It facilitates, as showed in Figure 5, the creation of supportive relationships both within the migrant community and with locals, thus reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and promotes a better understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The main objective of the project is to alleviate people's discomfort during their stay, improving the quality of time

spent within the structure. The meta-analysis conducted by Turrini et al. (2019) provides moderate-quality evidence supporting the positive impact of these types of interventions on post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety symptoms. Despite some limitations, Turrini et al. conclude that such activities can bring significant benefits to the mental health of displaced people which is what IPSIA aims to achieve.



*Figure 5: IPSIA's Goals (IPSIA Instagram page, 2023).*

## 6.2.1 The Role of Youth

Young activists play a crucial role in the "Social Café" project: it can be said that without their contribution the project could not be realized. Their fundamental task is to improve the psychosocial well-being of migrants by promoting a supportive and engaging environment through daily activities. According to their accounts, IPSIA allows them to translate their activism into practical efforts by building and maintaining a cohesive team where everyone is encouraged to contribute their skills; the group operates in a dynamic and open context, which allows each member to propose and implement initiatives that they are passionate about.

> *We work together as a team, and everyone has the possibility to express personal abilities. We don't have a rigid structure with predetermined roles. If another person proposes an activity, the others will help to manage that. If someone, for example, is more*

*passionate about arts he or she will probably organize art and crafts activities more often than others (Carla).*

Activist involvement ranges from leading workshops and support groups, facilitating cultural exchange activities and promoting awareness of migrant issues, whilst maintaining their role as a recognizable source of support for the most vulnerable migrants, who are helped to feel understood and less isolated. Observing the experience of these young activists, understanding both the benefits and potential challenges of involving people like them in psychosocial projects like the Social Café helps to gain a deeper understanding of their role in leading the new wave of youth activism. Their active and conscious participation brings new ideas, enthusiasm, and non-obvious approaches that allow important objectives to be achieved; among these, relationality should not be forgotten, as similar experiences and perspectives are shared with younger migrants, in a relationship whose effectiveness improves thanks to peer support. Elisa, who's passionate about music, describes a typical conversation with young migrants, *"sometimes we talk about films, music and pop culture. We have different knowledge but we understand each other. Everyone is interested and we feel as if we are in a group of friends."* As regards the Social Café, the field notes and TRC statistics indicate that the majority of individuals, especially in Lipa, are aged between 18 and 30, i.e. the age group in which the activists of IPSIA fall. Through informal conversations, it was observed that many of them improve their knowledge of European youth culture.

The role of youth remains a debated topic within the research; some participants suggest that young people are more willing to participate and be proactive in the field of migration, while others argue that the presence of adults in the team is still essential because they make a very important contribution. Isabella and Carla express these opposing opinions, sharing anyway the conviction that young people bring a high degree of energy on the field:

> *Young people have a different kind of energy, and they want to spend time listening to beneficiaries of the project. Active listening is important and sometimes is lacking with adults, because after years of experience in the humanitarian field they become used to hear hard stories (Isabella).*

> *It is true that young people must participate in activism especially while they are young and enthusiast, but it is also true that their brain is still not fully developed, they are impulsive. This is why I don't think it is a good idea to participate while too young without the guidance of adults (Carla).*

However, it is clear that in general young activists, aware and committed to the effort to avoid becoming passive subjects of adult systems that impose pre-established norms (Liou & Literat, 2020), appreciate being part of an intergenerational team like that of IPSIA, which not only allows them to participate but also and above all to develop valuable skills such as leadership, project management and intercultural communication as confirmed by Elisa, "sometimes *there are projects that need to be written to receive funds and we learn to do that, usually in pairs."* Understanding the role young people play in this project serves then to explain the goals that the team decide to pursue, and the final aim of the activities organized.

## 6.2.2 A Place of Decompression

As confirmed by several participants, the Social Café tries every day to be a place of decompression; this is a highly studied concept in psychology that is often adapted into humanitarian contexts. Essentially, it refers to the process by which an individual, who has experienced intense stress, can relax and reach a more balanced state. Elisa describes practically this idea:

> *When I organize activities, I see that many beneficiaries struggle to concentrate. Many lose the sense of time and come late to activities, others need you to repeat multiple times the rules, others just get nervous if they don't understand immediately the task. This does not happen because they are not able to understand, but because they struggle with stress. This is why decompression is fundamental here.*

In the specific case described, the camps are located in a transit country, in which the primary objective of a psychosocial project cannot be limited to the sole, albeit fundamental, saving of lives but must be extended to give relief and allow decompression to the beneficiaries following an approach decidedly in contrast with that of paternalistic humanitarianism, as explained in the previous section. This is the reason why psychology students as Carla underline the importance of re-humanization stating that, *"offering a space for decompression is important. It restores a human dimension, and from this relaxation arise a sense of solidarity and hope."* IPSIA activists are therefore very clear about the need to provide spaces where migrants can regain their lost dignity and strengthen self-esteem: this essentially happens by carrying out skills-development activities and creating support networks that allow migrants to show their true self through constant dialogue with team members and putting one's skills into practice.

### 6.2.3 The role of Informal Education

The Social Café's psychosocial project, while adhering to the TRC's strict safety rules and procedures, is not based on a formal methodology. Isabella, one of the most creative members of the group, gives her interpretation of informal education stating, *"our methodology is not strictly defined but it is mostly based on the role of informal education. Shared knowledge and play can be powerful tools to convey all messages."* Instead, flexibility is favored to adapt to people's needs during a certain period, as noted by Ciaramella, Monacelli and Cocimano (2022), who underline that every aspect of the intervention, from planning to the design of the methodology must be considered according to the changeability of the contexts in which the intervention takes place. The main methodology on which the IPSIA project is based is informal education. It is based, at least in part, on Freire's (1970) pedagogy which emphasizes continuous dialogue capable of promoting co-intentional education, in which both activists and migrants participate in activities together. This approach values empathy, solidarity and the search for the delicate balance between authority and freedom as confirmed by Carla, *"I struggle to balance structure and flexibility, having to be flexible with people but not too permissive because rules are needed.*

In this context, an interesting aspect concerns the use of words, which must be consistent with the general spirit of the project. Field observations showed that the NGO staff calls migrants "people on the move" (to underline their humanity) and especially "beneficiaries", where the term refers to those who receive services under the project. These terms were chosen to avoid labeling individuals as "migrants", which would further emphasize their marginalized status within the system and cause further distress. Carla reflects on the limbo experienced by beneficiaries:

> *Once they start this journey, beneficiaries somehow renounce to their role in their society. They leave families, friends and jobs. If in their countries they were mechanics or doctors now they cannot perform their jobs. This must be considered when dealing with people on the move. It is our aim to give back humanity and to start a meaningful dialogue from person to person (Carla).*

However, in everyday interactions, none of these labels are used; activists strive to remember people's names and address them in a friendly manner without requiring identification cards or numbers (Figure 6 represents a friendly moment between an activist and a beneficiary).

Although seemingly of little importance, this approach, as stated by most young activists, helps to restore dignity to individuals who may currently feel displaced.



*Figure 6: Distribution of cupcakes at the Social Cafè (Pilu, 2024).*

Field observations confirm that the Social Café is not mainly based on formal theory and methodologies; rather, it is a highly dynamic space shaped by a mix of daily routines and flexible initiatives. Every morning, activists distribute tea and coffee, and organize recreational activities for the beneficiaries, creating a welcoming atmosphere and recreating what in many cultures is often seen as a moment shared between friends and family. Alessia, after an intense study of middle eastern cultures, affirms that, *"the distribution of coffee has a cultural value. Especially in middle eastern cultures it is a way to make people feel welcomed and at home. It is time used to chat and update each other; it creates a good atmosphere."* The distribution creates a cultural bridge among people, stimulating a situation of informal chat where beneficiaries feel listened and have the possibility to interact as peers. As confirmed by field notes, the introduction of tables, benches, drawings and board games has transformed the space into a real Social Café, where people find a place to gather without the obligation to present the identity card. The importance of keeping environments clean and tidy is made clear to everyone, and activists carry out cleaning tasks every day after the end of their shift. Ilario explains the motivations behind cleaning stating that it is rather based on the awareness that migrants need order and comfort in a life often marked by stress:

> *We don't care about the mess or dirt that is in all the other spaces of the TRC, we care that when a beneficiary come to us he finds everything in order and clean and every day*

*at end of our shift we clean the space and we put materials in order. This helps them find a mental and physical order that is often lost.*

Although the distribution of tea is the moment that gives rise to the entire project, the "Social Café" offers various activities that typically take place in the afternoon to respond to the psychosocial needs of the beneficiaries. Grassroots activities include language courses (Figure 7), where young activists teach the European languages they know, while beneficiaries mainly share their knowledge of Arabic following Freire's concept of co-intentional education (1970). Furthermore, art-and-craft workshops are held to create decorations that embellish the common spaces (Figure 8). The main goal of these activities is to foster a sense of collaboration, where everyone contributes, as described by Isabella:

*Everyone has potential, and it is our scope to make them express themselves. When we organize an activity that requires materials both activists and beneficiaries go to the warehouse to take the materials, to carry them in the container if they are heavier or to organize them on the tables. Everyone must feel useful and empowered.*



*Figure 7: Language Classes (IPSIA Instagram page, 2024).*

*Figure 8: Art-and-Craft (Pilu, 2024).*

It is true, as Carla explains, that activities such as writing simple Italian words or coloring may seem as infantilizing beneficiaries. However, many of them did not experience a playful childhood, so they may feel the need to experience innocence for the first time in their lives.

> *Some activities may seem infantilizing but some people have never had a childhood, many tell us that in their countries of origin they started working as children. We offer the possibility of cultivating this inner child while they have free time. I could see that many participants did never hold a pencil.*

In addition to these daily activities, other special initiatives are organized, such as cultural workshops for specific occasions. For example, on International Women's Day, a workshop on gender roles was organized to collectively discuss which activities are traditionally associated with specific genders, with the aim of reaching a consensus that everyone is capable of anything. Elisa who put effort in organizing all the materials and guidelines for the activity expresses her surprise in seeing the interaction among people for the activity, "*for March 8th we did a workshop, and it was nice because I saw the involvement in a topic that I was afraid wouldn't interest them too much.*" Other celebrations for events such as the first day of Ramadan or Nowruz (the Persian New Year) are accompanied by music and food. Sports tournaments are organized in which teams made up of migrants and activists participate and

organize the calendar into time slots to complete them (Figure 10). Additionally, there are fun events like the MasterChef challenge, where two teams compete to prepare food in the kitchen and have it tasted by people working in the TRCs to determine a winner (Figure 9). All of these initiatives emphasize mental health awareness, coping strategies and building resilience, along with cultural exchange activities aimed at promoting understanding between people from different backgrounds.

> *Cultural exchange requires a lot of dialogue and empathy. I realize that certain discussions with the beneficiaries, for example about the role of women in society, make me nervous. Then I understand that many of them have lived in societies where it is normal for women to take care of children or not work. So, I try to listen to them actively, but at the same time, make them understand that they must integrate into a society where things are not like that. It is fair that they understand the differences just as much as I try to do (Elisa).*

> *Informal education for us includes teaching how to interact in a new society that people are not used to, and this starts from valuing and respecting cultural differences. Those must be the starting points to build a new identity that includes the previous one, they can coexist. (Silvia).*



*Figure 9: Collective Kitchen (IPSIA Instagram page, 2023).*

*Figure 10: Football Tournament (IPSIA Instagram page, 2023).*

All these activities, while informal and playful, have proven powerful in fostering sense of community and belonging. Moving forward, it is insightful to assess the impact and outcomes of these initiatives in supporting beneficiaries.

## 6.2.4 Impact and Assessment

Project management is based on a constant evaluation of the results achieved. IPSIA periodically conducts surveys, translated into different languages, to collect feedback from beneficiaries on what they appreciate and what they would improve. As explained by many activists, the most common response is the desire for the Social Café to remain open on weekends, as its closure leaves them with limited social activities: it is an answer, as Alessia evaluates affirming *"people feel safe and find a social place. They feel sad when we close for weekends or when there are holidays"*, that highlights a limitation of the project and which at the same time also reflects the high esteem and appreciation for the activities implemented. Isabella and Silvia further expand on this evaluation:

> *When we leave the Social Cafè on Friday a lot of people come to ask if we will be open during the weekend, and when we say that we will come back just on Monday they are sad. There are no other social spaces or activities like this in the TRCs, and beneficiaries' feel stuck in a cage (Isabella).*

*There are beneficiaries who passed through the TRCs who contact us on social media saying that we made their days better. Providing relief is one of our goals. Every now and then, someone ask for some sort of certificate stating that they participated in IPSIA's activities. It's an informal thing that they think might help them when entering the job market. These are some of our informal methods for evaluating the project in the long term; otherwise, being a transit country, it would be impossible (Silvia).*

## 6.3 Contextual Factors

IPSIA NGO operates within the TRCs not in isolation but as part of an extensive network that involves authorities, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the broader community. As MConnachie (2016) points out: *"every camp is a complex governance environment in its own right, the product of pluralistic legal and political interactions and of extensive historical and cultural influences".* This interconnected environment highlights the complexities young people encounter in handling responsibilities within the camps. The TRCs are overseen by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Service for Foreigners' Affairs (SFA), which hold significant decision-making power. Within this framework, various governmental and non-governmental entities provide essential services such as meal distribution, healthcare services, psychological support, and recreational activities. Analyzing contextual factors helps to understand the broader environment in which the "Social Cafè" operates enabling a comprehensive evaluation of its impact. For instance, socio-economic conditions influence community support and participation, cooperation affects the collective impact, and authorities can facilitate or hinder initiatives.

### 6.3.1 Relationship with Authorities

While efforts by various NGOs, especially IPSIA, provide relief to migrants and create a more sociable space, it is important to remember that TRCs are facilities under constant surveillance due to security measures and legal constraints. Migrants are free to move in and out of the camps but must show their ID cards at each entry and exit point and to access any service. TRCs staff must strictly observe the rules imposed by IOM and SFA. For instance, learning security protocols, wearing visibility jackets, and avoiding physical contact with migrants. Moreover, the presence of NGOs, especially in Lipa, is often perceived as precarious. They operate in a context where social and psychosocial activities are seen as non-essential, and any mistake can be grounds for their expulsion. This burden was highlighted by Fabiola who experienced the fear of having caused trouble to the team, *"the NGO is also a guest in TRCs,*

*there is a real risk of being expelled; due to my carelessness during an activity, we risked a lot. However, this taught me a lesson."* This precarious position is keenly felt by young activists, who understand the responsibility of representing both themselves and their organization. According to activists, creating a network of peer support among the team is important to support each other. Weekly team meetings take place in the IPSIA office to review the week because building a resilient team enhances the overall impact of the project.

### 6.3.2 Cooperation and Competition among Organizations

At the same time, IPSIA works within a broader horizontal network of organizations. Young activists perceive IPSIA, as a foreign Italian NGO, to be undervalued due to a perceived lack of resources in the humanitarian field in Bosnia. Local workers often view foreign organizations as threats to their salaries and to resources allocated by international donors for their projects. Effective collaboration can be hindered by competition and limited international funding. This is the reason why for IPSIA it is paramount to engage in clear communication and to build a positive reputation with local stakeholders. This involves emphasizing mutual goals. Elisa, after many attempts to establish cooperation with other organizations, affirms that *"we offer other organizations the opportunity to collaborate on some activities in our spaces. It may seem a simple thing, but it demonstrates that resources need to be shared to reach better impact."* Establishing joint initiatives can help mitigate competition and foster a more cooperative environment.

On the other hand, young people share a dedicated willingness to support each other within the TRCs. When physical help is needed, whether to set up materials or distributing supplies, girls and boys friendly collaborate, often assisted by young beneficiaries. Through teamwork activists build a sense of belonging that transcend the names of their organizations, creating a collective identity (Ubachs, 2022).

### 6.3.3 Local Context and relationship with Community

As it becomes clearer, being an international organization like IPSIA means handling complex relationships with authorities and organizations while embedding itself within the broader local context. The TRCs are integral to Bosnia's socio-economic landscape, which is still recovering from war and facing slow development. This situation has led to an exodus of young people, who, lacking faith in their country's prospects, seek opportunities abroad (Kraske, 2022). Given this context, IPSIA faces several challenges, including building a positive reputation within the community and engaging local youth. As explained by Silvia, despite efforts by young activists

to organize initiatives, youth involvement remains limited, and this is a major unexpected finding in the research:

> *We try to involve Bihać's young people, but the response is very low. Bosnian youth is not based on ideals or volunteer experiences; young people, due to economic reasons, think about working or leaving as soon as they finish high school. It is more feasible to involve local people in one-time activities that do not require continuous participation (Silvia).*

Lack of trust in the institutions and financial constraints hinder willingness of young people to participate in activism unless it offers good salaries, as affirmed by Ilario, a local guy working for IPSIA, *"it may seem selfish, but the real incentive to involve young Bosnians would be the assurance of sufficient pay for their livelihood and that of their families."* Moreover, initiatives for migrants' integration usually attract locals that are already in favour of intercultural exchange, while more conservative ones will remain against it. One of the most successful activities demonstrating the potential for cultural exchange that brought together activists, the local community, and migrants from the TRCs was organized during Ramadan. IPSIA participated to a project called "Sharing Is Caring." This initiative involved meeting in a venue in Bihać for an evening, where local Bosnian women cooked traditional food, a few migrants from the TRCs were invited, and a local professor gave a short lecture on common cultural traits between Arab and Bosnian cultures. During the event people could enjoy a shared Iftar meal to break the fast (Figure 11). A debrief followed the meal, where migrants and young locals talked about the discovery of common cultural traits and a sense of family gathering. This activity contributed to show the potential of meaningful cultural exchange as described by the Project Manager, *"the aim of this activity and of activism here is to recognize each individual in his or her integrity, recognizing ourselves in the other."*

*Figure 11: Shared Iftar (IPSIA Instagram page, 2024).*

Empowering youth activism within this framework means actively listening to the needs of young people to foster greater impact and participation.

## 6.4 Empowerment

Empowerment analysis in this research contributes to development through the voices of IPSIA's activists. For the purpose of the study the concept of empowerment will be grounded on Rowland's (1995) analysis of collective power, investigating access to decision making, awareness of personal goals, and collaboration. This is showcased by IPSIA's goal to empower youth activism and associationism, going beyond mere resources and recognizing the role of agency. A clear framework with well-defined objectives is essential to ensure success and replicability of projects, as it provides a direction for all stakeholders and can serve as a starting point for future projects in the migration field. This is the reason why one of the current scopes of the team is to elaborate Standard Operating Procedures to institutionalize the basic features of the Social Cafè project. Alessia, being also a coordinator, is taking care of this process describing them as "*procedures that can define how to open and manage a Social Café,*

*formalizing and standardizing this type of activity."* This clarity facilitates a shared understanding and commitment to the project's goals.

Furthermore, voices of young IPSIA's activists are pivotal in understanding the success factors of the "Social Cafè" project. As they operate at the forefront, they can offer firsthand insights into what is functional and what is not. Giving them the space to express themselves is a priority for the organization. For instance, each member of the team is requested to provide a monthly report that describes the activities, the achievements, the failures, and the challenges. Furthermore, the project manager states the willingness to create a safe space where it is possible to freely complain about something; this is the reason why if something happens there are two teamleaders to whom people can refer. Silvia, the project manager, reflected on the importance of management tools:

> *We have very flexible and constantly innovating team management tools. The main one is the coordination meeting that takes place once a week, which is a moment to update and share. The second is the individual weekly reports to monitor and understand each person's needs. Finally, there are two team leaders who should also take care of group dynamics, trying to maintain direct communication and find creative solutions to conflicts. Learning to communicate is always a challenge.*

As confirmed by my own observations and field notes, the most effective moment to share insights about the week, remains the weekly meeting that takes place in IPSIA office every Friday afternoon, where everyone participates on the same level as everyone else.

However, when asked to provide contributions to improve the project, participants felt almost confused reflecting the fact that young people still feel underheard and it is not common for most of them to be fully part of the decision-making and management part of a project. Another important point of analysis is that since IPSIA is an organization that offers a good structure to carry out activism on the ground, it is not easy for participants to critically distance themselves. As Isabella states, *"activists here work within IPSIA and represent it inside and outside the TRCs, a good reputation is crucial."* Nevertheless, all participants were able to bring very practical contributions and recommendations. They underlined the possibility of involving more short-term volunteers who can spend a period ranging from one to three months with IPSIA as expressed by Elisa *"I would open the doors to more volunteers. IPSIA would stand a chance of receiving much more support"*; the opportunity to design workshops with some young local experts to provide beneficiaries with work skills (such as mechanics or electricians)

even if it is recognized that the transitory nature of TRCs does not allow commitment as stated by Carla *"it would be nice to have the possibility of holding professional courses for people"*; and finally to be present in the TRCs also on weekends as suggested by Isabella *"I would introduce activists available all day, or at least on the weekend."*

### 6.4.1 Future and Career: Building a Network

The statements above show the willingness of young people to engage more in the project and at the same time carry forward the main objectives of the organization. It is however important to remind that, as explained in the first section, activism differs from volunteering because, apart from ideals and collective effort, it is often a full-time occupation that requires knowledge and skills. This means that career is important for many of the activists who are planning their future, and this is the reason why a need for good salaries has been claimed by many of the respondents. The real claim is that working on the field and especially in TRCs is still perceived as a temporary job with no prospects while young people would often want to keep on working in this field. Related to this issue there is also the need for the creation of a valuable network of organizations and institutions that promote and offer vacancies (that could turn into real job opportunities at a later stage) to young people. Activists are aware of the temporality of projects which are constrained by international fundings and state support. Allegra reflects on the constant turnover and temporariness of activism involvement, stating her worries for the future:

> *If there was the possibility, I wouldn't mind staying here to collaborate with some project that facilitates inclusion or cooperation between the local community and the migrant community. However, I find it difficult to find out vacancies or opportunities on the field through online websites for foreign people as me (Allegra).*

Moreover, these young people are aware that education is essential both to evolve activism and to access higher positions within the field. That is the reason why most of the participants would like to participate in updated traineeships to improve their abilities and apprehend new methodologies. These findings are in line with Rowland's conception of empowerment based on a critical awareness of one's position and ability to participate in decision-making, but also on the recognition of both the material and immaterial resources necessary for young people to feel supported in their activism (1995).

### 6.4.2 Advocacy and Digital Activism

The logic behind the need to create a network and participate in decision-making and evaluation processes is to allow them to express themselves and be recognized as interlocutors

who are up to the task. The recognition of this role strengthens the incentive to undertake proactive, bottom-up efforts (Ardizzone, 2007). This consideration is linked to another significant aspect that emerged from the research: the role of advocacy for the empowerment of activism. Silvia, for example, shared her experience about fluctuating interest about the Balkan Route:

*When the Balkan Route becomes a current topic again, there are also more people who become interested in participating; otherwise, no. We live in a world unfortunately full of poverty, conflicts and displacement. It is naturally impossible to stay constantly informed about everything. The role of advocacy is precisely to try as much as possible to continue to give importance to a specific issue.*

The new generation of activists, while being capable of maintaining the roots of its commitment in strong ideals and concrete actions indicates that social media are powerful tools for conveying ideals and showing the progress of projects in the field. While excessive self-promotion is often believed to be a demonstration of a lack of true altruism, the context of activism calls this notion into question. Physically accessing TRCs' spaces is not feasible for many people, making a strong social media presence crucial to spreading awareness about initiatives within TRCs, reaching a broader audience interested in the reality of migration. Some activists argue that the narrative should shift from traditional reports and articles, which currently target a niche audience, towards a more engaging presence on widely used social networks as claimed by Fabiola who worked also for news agencies, *"I read journals that publish reports on the Balkan Route but I realize that they are niche publications that do not reach a broad and young audience."*

However, IPSIA activists involved in communications highlight the challenge of effectively engaging a broader pool of young people on social media, whilst creating content that also attracts the attention of other organizations and formal donors able to support the project. Erika, a girl who has been an activist on the field and is now taking care of IPSIA communication, affirmed *"we opened an Instagram page relatively recently. Learning how to use social media is crucial but it remains difficult to balance formal communication for donors and targeting at the same time youth audience."*

Encouraging and supporting young activists in establishing a strong online presence is paramount in today's digital age. This means focusing on training in the effective use of social media, digital marketing and online campaigns. As stated by Fabiola, this does not mean

advertising migratory issues, but rather being updated and always aware of the potential that new tools have *"we should try to train ourselves in marketing, which does not mean making everything an advertisement but means spreading the word."* The creation of networking platforms, such as conferences, workshops and online forums, facilitates knowledge exchange and collaboration between activists.

# 7. Discussion

## 7.1 Empowering Youth Activism in Humanitarian Contexts

This chapter discusses the most relevant models and findings on youth activism and empowerment based on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapters. An important finding that will be discussed in this context will be the role of digital platforms as a tool for empowerment. The main themes of the thesis are youth activism and collective empowerment, considered in the context of the "Social Café" field project and the local framework within which the young activists who participated in the research operate. The analysis focuses, using ethnographic tools, on their personal narratives, connecting their individual experiences to those developed in much broader contexts of empowerment. The research explains how personal experiences and ideals shape and contribute to the development of collective action in the context of humanitarian commitment. Finally, this thesis is proposed as a contribution to the expansion of the existing literature on young people, activism and empowerment. The fundamental connection that is highlighted is that between the new wave of activism and the digitalisation of its expression to enable a better understanding of the progressive and transformative power of young people's actions.

## 7.2 Youth Studies and Activism

Recognizing the proactive action of young activists in shaping their cultural world, scholars of youth studies and activism such as Amit, Wulff and Ubachs propose a paradigm shift: young people should no longer be considered as passive recipients of norms imposed by adults but rather as active agents of social change. Amit and Wulff (1995) describe the uniqueness of youth culture built on practices and beliefs while Ubachs (2022) highlights the globalized nature of youth activism. The findings align with and expand existing literature on youth activism, reflecting the shift from roots rooted in politics to more supportive forms of activism. These perspectives highlight the need to support and empower young activists working in the field of migration. The study's ethnographic approach allows for a deeper understanding of activists' motivations and personal challenges, as well as the emotional and psychological costs of activism in the field, particularly burnout, dealing with unethical environments, and the transitory nature of activism in places such as TRCs, echoed by Conner et al. (2023); the same approach allows us to highlight the need for psychological support, as supported by Herbert (2000), a staunch defender of these tools. Addressing this burden appears to be the main

challenge activists face, confirming the findings of the study conducted by Conner, Greytak, Evich, and Wray-Lake (2023) according to which, although young people generally report more benefits from their activist work than and costs, the latter are significantly correlated with worsening mental health.

However, these challenges also serve as catalysts for innovation and resilience. The voices of IPSIA activists reflect a profound commitment to overcoming adversity through dialogue, solidarity, and continuous learning. Their personal narratives reveal a conscious interplay between idealism and pragmatism, driven by empathy and a commitment to social justice. Activists working and advocating for migrants' well-being within IPSIA jointly plan and manage the "Social Café" psychosocial project, which serves as a setting where young people can share their skills and knowledge while contributing to migrants' well-being offering a replicable model for fostering solidarity. Providing a feeling of relief and a safe space for decompression is the main aim of psychosocial interventions. Consequently, there is a positive impact on the temporary permanence and mental health of migrants in the TRCs. Following this line of thought, this positive impact of psychosocial projects, as supported by Turrini et al. (2019), is reflected in the success of the "Social Café" project.

## 7.3 Critical Pedagogy and Activism

Grounded in Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), critical pedagogy serves as a guiding principle for psychosocial projects like the "Social Café." This approach emphasizes dialogue, solidarity, and co-intentional education, opposing and fighting power imbalances between activists and beneficiaries. Through continuous dialogical efforts, activists strive to build true solidarity, being collectively aware of everyone's capabilities and promoting independence and self-determination. Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan (2020) highlight the potential of critical pedagogy to foster equitable relationships between citizens and non-citizens and challenge prevailing humanitarian discourses that dehumanize and depoliticize migrants. Cultural exchange, a key component of these efforts, can bring significant value to everyone's lives when executed with effort and passion. DeLong et al. (2011) suggest that successful cultural exchange occurs with minimal stress from cross-cultural misunderstandings, leading to positive outcomes for all parties involved. Despite criticisms of Freire's pedagogy, such as Vismara's opinion that it inevitably imparts a political direction, IPSIA's activists strive to maintain a non-imposing approach. They integrate diverse cultures and political beliefs based on the concept of solidarity, fostering peer support and collective knowledge creation through continuous dialogue with migrants.

## 7.4 Empowerment and Collective Action

Rowlands' (1995) analysis of empowerment provides a framework for understanding the shift from personal narratives to a collective path toward societal change. Aligning with Freire's (1970) theory, young activists recognize their agency in shaping their cultural world and their path toward their desired life. Collective empowerment, as advocated by Rowlands, underscores the importance of collaboration and collective action in achieving societal change. The research within IPSIA confirms the effectiveness of fostering peer support among young activists through group activities and weekly meetings. This supportive organizational network enhances the sustainability of activism, reflecting the UN's definition of empowerment as enabling individuals to gain control over their lives and build capacities for participation and advocacy. Empowerment's practical implications consist in greater recognition, networking opportunities, and updated training on intercultural communication and project methodologies. Ubachs (2022) predicts a shift toward digital activism, exploiting online outreaching to keep attention on migration issues, particularly on the Balkan Route and TRCs. The potential of digital activism to reach a broader network of young people is claimed also by Jenkins et al. (2016). As highlighted both by Jenkins et al. (2016) and Ubachs (2022) social networks can empower activism by increasing freedom of expression, expanding knowledge of migration issues and conditions within the TRCs but also by boosting participation of youth in fieldwork. This includes the ability, through online presence, to enhance credibility making youth activism more visible and influential within sometimes still adultist systems. Furthermore, media serves as an accountability mechanism by facilitating the sharing of information on humanitarian practices and enabling international responses. Online platforms offer spaces for advocacy, awareness-raising, and mobilization among youth, enhancing the reach and impact of their activism (Elliott & Earl, 2018).

## 7.5 Theoretical and practical implications

Empowerment of youth activism within the migration field doesn't consist in mere amplification of young people's voices. Instead, it is about the recognition of young activists as catalysts for societal change and the support of their initiatives and needs. By the knowledge about their needs the society can foster a supportive environment able to let the experiment and grow, enhancing their agency. Non-governmental organizations can act as structures where young people have the possibility to work and advocate for migrants' rights as well as fostering local and international networks of people sharing the same ideals of social justice. Studying youth as a defined culture not dependent or subjected to adults contributes to the development

field in a progressive direction, avoiding the common view of young people as agents of troubles and opposition to the system. It also challenges the idea of youth as passive and unwilling to take action by underlining the proactive role it plays in on-field humanitarian action and activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The practical psychosocial project of the "Social Cafè" embodies Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy principles by exploiting the power of cultural exchange and dialogue to reach more equitable relations and to foster inclusive communities. Practically, findings emphasise the need for support mechanisms such as psychological support and supervision, intercultural training, and opportunities for digital advocacy. All these initiatives concur to create a new narrative about activism as a source of positive engagement and impact on humanitarian and migration issues.

# 8. Conclusion

The voices of young IPSIA's activists express significant motivations that lead to engage in on-field activism field, as well as important challenges to overcome. Through their contributions it is possible to understand successful factors of the "Social Cafè" project and their stories highlight the interconnection between personal ideals of social justice and collective action. They demonstrate that real solidarity and continuous self-education can overcome paternalistic humanitarianism, establishing more equitable relationships. The transient nature of their work, the emotional and psychological burden of seeing people suffering, and the context of a peculiar country like Bosnia can significantly weaken the impact of their actions but through peer support, psychological supervision and the continuous dialogue they are able to develop a stronger collective identity that goes beyond the temporary nature of TRCs. The "Social Cafè" project is key to IPSIA's psychosocial intervention. Grounded in Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, it emphasizes dialogue, solidarity, and co-intentional education. It creates a safe space of decompression where migrants can share their skills and knowledge, fostering a sense of restored dignity and mutual support. The activities held in the "Social Cafè" overall contribute to the relief of migrants within their journey. Relationships with authorities and cooperation among organizations within the TRCs influence the success or failure of NGO activist initiatives. Authorities can, through strict regulation, facilitate or hinder the efforts of foreign organizations as IPSIA. Socio-economic conditions, including financial resources influence the degree of cooperation of the local community, especially the young one. IPSIA activists situate themselves within the cultural context to foster community building and integration of migrants. Finally, the empowerment of youth activism implicates the acknowledgment of the role of young activists as cultural agents able to catalyse societal change and more just societies. NGOs play a crucial role in providing platforms and tools for effective work, advocating for migrants' rights online and creating networks of organizations engaged in the field of migration. Tangible and intangible support resources include psychological support, intercultural training, and opportunities for digital advocacy. In conclusion, this research builds a new narrative about the new generation of activism finding out those practical implications, especially the critical use of digital platforms, to reach a broader impact that transcends political ideologies and strive towards humanization of people.

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# Appendixes

## Consent Form

**CONSENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY**

**Research title:** *Exploring Youth Activism: a case study of IPSIA NGO in Temporary Reception Centres in Bosnia Herzegovina.*

**Researcher:** Francesca Pilu

**Institution and Faculty:** Utrecht University, MSc International Development Studies, Faculty of Geosciences.

**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Dora Sampaio, Utrecht University.

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form contains information that will help you decide whether to join the study.

**Things you should know:**

- The purpose of the study is to explore the personal narratives, motivations, challenges, and successes of youth activists working for IPSIA NGO in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The research aims to investigate how IPSIA activists' interventions, particularly the "Social Café" socio-psychological project, contribute to the well-being of migrants in temporary reception centers in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, the study seeks to understand how contextual factors, such as local policies, cultural nuances, and socio-economic conditions, influence the success or failure of NGO and activist initiatives in improving the lives of migrants in TRCs. Finally, the research aims to explore implications for empowering youth activism and migrant support initiatives.

- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate to a semi-structured interview. The interview will typically last 50-60 minutes and will involve discussing your role within IPSIA, your involvement in the "Social Café" project, personal experiences, challenges faced, and perceptions of the impact of the project on migrants in the temporary reception centers. The interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy and transcribed for analysis.

- Participation in this study involves minimal risk. However, discussing personal experiences and challenges related to activism and working with migrants may evoke emotional responses. To mitigate potential discomfort, participants will be provided

with opportunities to take breaks during interviews and to decline to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable with. The benefits of participating in this study include contributing to the understanding of youth activism and migrant support initiatives and potentially informing future interventions aimed at improving the involvement of young people in activism in migration field.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

**If you want to withdraw from the study, what should you do?**

You are free to leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty to you. If you decide to leave the study before it is finished, please contact the researcher. If you choose to tell the researcher why you are leaving the study, your reasons may be kept as part of the study record. The researcher will keep the information collected about you for the research unless you ask to delete it from records.

**How will the researcher protect my information?**

Your privacy and confidentiality will be strictly protected throughout the study. All data collected will be anonymized and stored securely. Audio recordings and transcripts will be accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Any quotes or excerpts used in reports or publications will be anonymized to protect your identity.

**What will happen to the information collected in this study?**

I will keep the information we collect about you during the research for study recordkeeping. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be stored securely and separately from the research information I collected from you.

The results of this study could be published in an article or presentation, but will not include any information that would let others know who you are.

**Who can you contact about this study?**

Please contact the researcher whenever you need to:

- Obtain more information about the study
- Ask a question about the study procedures
- Leave the study before it is finished

- Express a concern about the study

**Researcher: Francesca Pilu**

**Email: francescapilu@outlook.it**

**Phone: +39 3383779116**

**Consent/Assent to Participate in the Research Study**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records and I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact me using the contact information provided above.

*I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.*

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

**Consent to use of video recordings, audio recordings or photographs for publications, presentations or for educational purposes.**

I give permission for audio recordings/video recordings/photographs made of me as part the research to be used in publications, presentations or for educational purposes.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

**Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research**

Researcher may wish to keep your contact information to invite you to be in future research projects that may be similar to or completely different from this research project.

_____ Yes, I agree for the researchers to contact me for future research projects.

_____ No, I do not agree for the researchers to contact me for future research projects.

# Interview Guide

Introduzione:

La mia domanda di ricerca mira a indagare il mondo delle ONG e dell'attivismo giovanile, esaminando da vicino l'impatto sul benessere dei migranti nei campi di transito in Bosnia-Erzegovina. Il metodo etnografico permette di concentrare l'attenzione sugli interventi degli attivisti di IPSIA, in particolare sul progetto "Social Café" e di esplorare le storie personali e le sfide degli attivisti, oltre a analizzare fattori esterni come le politiche locali, le sfumature culturali e le condizioni socio-economiche influiscono sul successo delle iniziative.

Scopo dell'intervista:

"Prima di iniziare, potresti condividere brevemente il tuo background (accademico) e il tuo coinvolgimento con l'attivismo o altre attività legate alla migrazione?"

Informazioni di base:

Informazioni Demografiche:

"Per fornire contesto, potresti condividere alcune informazioni demografiche di base come la tua età, genere e occupazione?"

Coinvolgimento attivista:

"Puoi raccontarmi di più sul tuo coinvolgimento specifico con la ONG IPSIA e l'attivismo legato alle questioni dei migranti in Bosnia ed Erzegovina?

- Qual è il tuo ruolo nell'organizzazione?"

Domanda di ricerca principale:

"La mia domanda di ricerca principale si concentra sull'analisi dell'impatto dell'attivismo giovanile sulla qualità della vita e l'integrazione sociale per i migranti che attraversano i campi di transito in Bosnia ed Erzegovina.

- Dal tuo punto di vista, quali sono alcuni aspetti chiave che dovremmo considerare in questo contesto?"

Interventi attivisti IPSIA:

"Andiamo più in profondità sugli interventi specifici di IPSIA. Potresti condividere ulteriori dettagli sul progetto socio-psicologico 'Social Café'?

- Quali sono gli obiettivi di questo progetto?"
- Che ruolo ha l'attivismo giovanile?
- Quali metodologie specifiche o attività sono state adottate nel progetto per coinvolgere attivamente i migranti?"

"Dalla tua esperienza, in che modo 'Social Café' contribuisce al benessere dei migranti in Bosnia ed Erzegovina?

- Puoi condividere storie di successo o sfide specifiche riscontrate durante la sua implementazione?"

"Secondo te come è possibile osservare cambiamenti nel benessere dei migranti dopo il loro coinvolgimento nel progetto?

- Quali sono i punti di forza dei progetti che potrebbero essere replicati?"

Narrazioni personali e sfide:
Esperienze attiviste:

"Secondo la tua esperienza personale, quali sono i fattori più importanti che favoriscono il coinvolgimento dei giovani nell'attivismo nel campo della migrazione?

- Cosa ti ha spinto a prendere parte a questa organizzazione nello specifico?"

"Passando al lato personale, potresti condividere il ruolo che hai nelle iniziative di IPSIA per il benessere delle persone in movimento?

- Puoi condividere un momento particolarmente significativo o gratificante che hai vissuto durante il tuo coinvolgimento con i migranti che ha confermato la tua scelta di partecipare?"

"Quali sono alcune sfide significative che hai affrontato personalmente o osservato tra gli altri attivisti in questo campo?

- In che modo queste sfide influenzano l'efficacia complessiva delle iniziative?"

"Qual è il ruolo del supporto psicologico per gli attivisti? Hai mai fatto ricorso a questo?

- Potresti spiegare il concetto di burnout?"

Fattori contestuali:
Fattori influenti:

"Ora, considerando il contesto più ampio, come le politiche locali in Bosnia ed Erzegovina influenzano il lavoro degli attivisti?

- Ci sono politiche specifiche che hanno facilitato o ostacolato le vostre iniziative?"

"In che modo il coinvolgimento della comunità locale nelle tue attività potrebbe essere potenziato per garantire un impatto più ampio e sostenibile?"

"Puoi condividere esperienze che evidenziano l'importanza delle differenze culturali nelle tue interazioni con i migranti e nelle tue iniziative?

"In che modo il progetto 'Social Café' ha collaborato con altre organizzazioni all'interno dei campi per massimizzare il suo impatto?

- Si sono creati rapporti e/o frizioni?"

"Hai collaborato con le autorità locali, e in caso affermativo, come questa collaborazione ha influenzato gli esiti delle vostre iniziative?"

Conclusione:
Contributi aggiuntivi:

"Per tirare le somme della tua esperienza, come definiresti l'attivismo giovanile?"

"Hai suggerimenti o raccomandazioni specifiche per migliorare l'efficacia delle future iniziative legate alle questioni dei migranti in Bosnia ed Erzegovina?"

"C'è qualcos'altro che vorresti aggiungere o qualche intuizione che ritieni cruciale per la nostra comprensione dell'impatto della partecipazione alle ONG e all'attivismo sulla vita dei migranti in Bosnia ed Erzegovina?"

Ringraziamenti:

"Grazie mille per aver condiviso oggi le tue preziose opinioni. La tua prospettiva è essenziale per arricchire la comprensione di questa importante questione. Se ho domande ulteriori o necessito di chiarimenti, possiamo parlare nuovamente?"

Chiusura:

"Ancora una volta, apprezzo il tuo tempo e la tua disponibilità a partecipare. Buona giornata!"