

From Insight to Impact: Making Data Work for Youth Programmes and beyond

**RAY
THEMATIC
SEMINAR**

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**REFLECTION
AND
RESOURCES**

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*In cooperation with
the RAY Network
Coordination*

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CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

What happens when actors from research, practice, policy, and programme implementation come together to explore how data can actually shape the future of European youth work? Over three days in Bratislava, the RAY Network hosted a Thematic Seminar to dive into this question.¹ 45 participants from across Europe came together, all with different roles in the youth sector, but a shared commitment to learning and impact. The goal? To strengthen the use of data in the implementation of European youth programmes. To bridge the gap between research and practice. And to equip staff members from National Agencies, responsible for the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, and beneficiaries implementing projects and activities, with tools, confidence, and a sense of community to engage more meaningfully with data.²

This document is for everyone who wants to turn research into action: foremost, for colleagues from National Agencies and beneficiaries within the European

youth programmes, but also researchers and the wider youth research and practice community. It's here to share the knowledge that was gathered. To serve as a reminder of all the practical input that was given. And above all, to help take one step further in integrating data and evidence into youth projects, strategies, and programmes. This report is a collection of memorable moments, shared insights, smart questions, and the energy of learning together (and should be read in this light). It reflects on knowledge and opinions of individuals and is a summary and not a scientific document.



Photo by Marek Hallon

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CORPS**
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NIVAM
NÁRODNÝ INŠTITÚT VZDELÁVANIA A MLÁDEŽ

**FINNISH NATIONAL
AGENCY FOR EDUCATION**

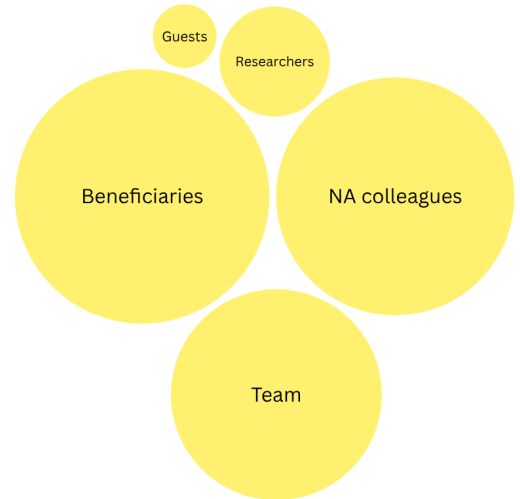
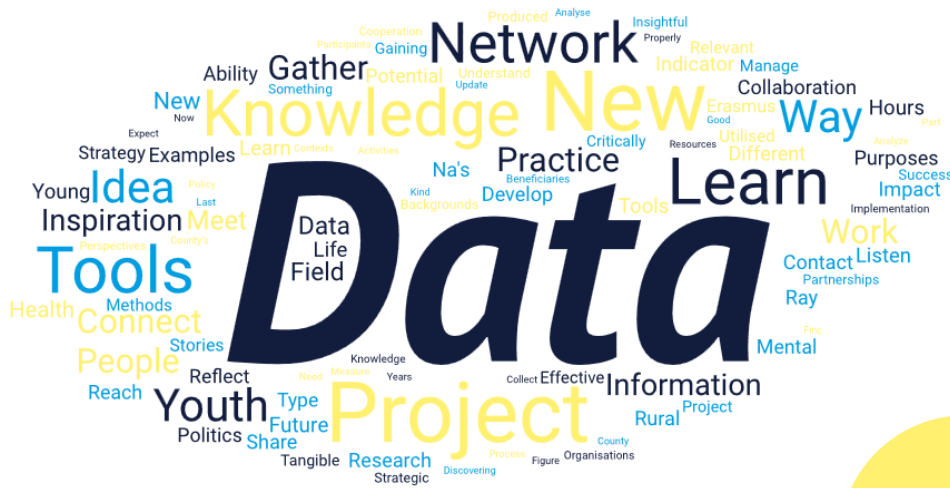
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**HUMAN RESOURCE
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¹ More information on the Thematic Seminar: [LINK](#).

² The RAY Thematic Seminar was co-hosted by the National Agencies of the European Youth Programmes from Slovakia (host) and Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland and Romania (Co-hosts). The RAY Network Coordination (at the Finnish National Agency) led the preparation process and the implementation of the seminar in cooperation with the RAY transnational research team.



*It's great to have research findings – but now what?
Let's work on that together and learn from each other.*

- Carmen Teubl-Kiviniemi, RAY Coordination

RAY NETWORK

- The RAY Network – Research-based analysis of European youth programmes – is a self-governed European youth research network. Currently, 36 National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes and their research partners in 34 countries are involved.³
- Since 2009, the RAY Network has conducted research to explore the effects of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes.
- Aims: to contribute to quality assurance and quality development in the implementation of the European youth programmes; to evidence-based & research-informed youth policy development in the youth field in Europe; to the recognition of non-formal education & learning in the youth field as well as promote the dialogue between research, policy & practice in the youth field.
- The RAY Network is coordinated by the RAY Network Coordination at the Finnish National Agency for Education, Helsinki together with the RAY Transnational Research Team at Youth Policy Labs (YPL), Berlin.

KEY THEMES

Throughout the seminar, key themes began to emerge. Threads woven through presentations, workshops, informal conversations, and reflections shared among participants. They don't summarise the event; instead, they capture its essence: what stood out, what resonated, and what participants said they'd take with them. These themes offer a shared learning lens—and offer inspiration for the work ahead.

CREATING SPACE

Using data meaningfully requires more than just technical skills—it needs time, trust, and the right environment. The seminar highlighted how important it is to create space in projects, organisations, and programmes where data can actually inform decisions, shape activities, and evolve practices. Without that space, even the best insights risk being lost.

I appreciated being among people who ask the same questions I do!

– Reflection from the Shared Learning Wall

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

The seminar highlighted just how powerful it is to be part of a community that shares questions, challenges, and ambitions. But staying connected is only the beginning. The real potential lies in growing into a community of practice—one where people openly share what they know, what they're still figuring out, and where ideas evolve together. Building strong partnerships is essential, because collaboration is what transforms learning into lasting impact.

Networking. New friends. Different countries, different positions.

– Reflection from the Shared Learning Wall

THE POWER OF DATA

Creating impact with data takes time. One metaphor shared during the seminar likened data to water: something to move through with growing confidence and technique. Participants highlighted the many roles data can play as a tool for understanding, a basis for decisions, or a way to tell meaningful stories. Its power depends not just on what is collected, but on how it is used: with purpose, context, and care. The collective takeaway: becoming skilled with data is an ongoing process. It's less about mastery, and more about building the habits, tools, and confidence to move through complexity with purpose.

THE POLITICS OF DATA

Data is never neutral. The way it is collected, framed, and used can reinforce existing power structures—or challenge them. In policy-making and programme design, the question is not only what is most accurate or scientific, but what is most useful, relevant, and responsive to real social concerns. The seminar encouraged a shift in perspective: to see data not just as evidence, but as an active tool for change—asking what works, for whom, and under which conditions.

This lens also brought frustration to the surface. Why isn't data acted on, even when the trends are clear? Why are the same issues visible in the evidence year after year, yet little changes? These questions point to the political life of data—and the responsibility to challenge complacency. In democracies, responsibility is often deferred—but data can be used to push back, to ask uncomfortable questions, and to advocate through evidence.

THE VALUE OF DATA

A recurring insight throughout the seminar was that the real value of data lies in how it's used—not just in how it's collected. Data only becomes meaningful when it leads to action. Whether it's informing a project, shifting a conversation, or

influencing a system, even small findings can create movement. Participants brought a wide range of roles and responsibilities within youth work, from project delivery to policy design. The seminar made clear that data can create value at all of these levels. It's not about having the same tools or approaches, but about finding ways to apply evidence that fit the context, purpose, and potential for impact.

Now I know useful tools that can be used across different projects and different stages.

- Reflection from the Shared Learning Wall

A TREASURE CHEST OF TOOLS

The seminar surfaced both excitement and hesitation when it comes to digital tools. They can streamline work, reveal patterns, or open up new ways of thinking. But no tool is neutral. Created by humans, they come with assumptions, blind spots, and biases. As one presenter put it: "It's kinda creepy how human it is... but it's not."

Some tools were described as life-changing, while others felt out of reach in the rush of daily work. Questions around AI and data ethics were also raised. The key takeaway: no single tool fits all contexts. Building a personal "treasure chest" means starting where it matters—whether to save time, reduce frustration, or strengthen a weak link in how data is gathered, understood, or shared.

Exploring new tools—that was the highlight!

- Reflection from the Shared Learning Wall

I learned more about AI and data narration. I'm excited to see what this topic adds to our work.

- Reflection from the Shared Learning Wall

FROM DATA TO DIRECTION

The seminar challenged participants to rethink data as more than just a tool for accountability. A central theme was the strategic potential of data—to inform choices, shape narratives, and guide the future of youth work. Keynote speaker Cristina Bacalso¹ introduced five types of data: "user, engagement, feedback, outcomes, and impact" and urged participants to see data as building blocks for knowledge, not as absolute truths. "What is the right choice to make? Evidence alone cannot tell us that," she said. "Ask yourselves the bigger questions. What kind of society do we want?"

Across sessions, the importance of context, values, and politics in data use was emphasized. Evidence does not stand alone—it must be interpreted, selected, and communicated with intention. Strategic data practices, as presented in the workshops, included building intuition over time, corroborating multiple sources, and embedding routines into daily work. As speaker Andreas Karsten² noted, "One data point tells you very little. Data over time tells you a story."

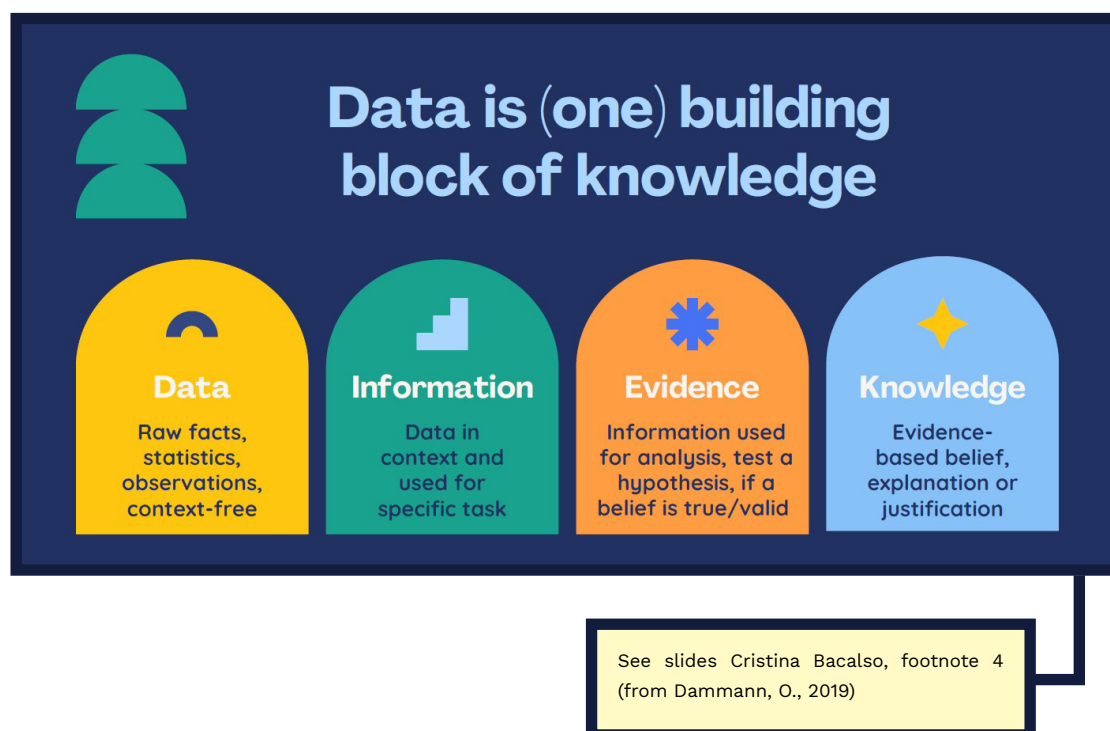
Whether for project design, implementation, evaluation, or reporting, the insights reinforced that effective data use doesn't require perfection—it requires purpose, reflection, and consistency. The seminar offered both practical tools and space to think critically about the role of data in shaping meaningful, youth-centered work.

The power of data gets unlocked when... we are transparent that it is a political choice—which, how, and when evidence is used.

- Cristina Bacalso, researcher

¹ Cristina Bacalso, Key Note "Unpacking the power of data", RAY Thematic Seminar, 12 June 2025 (presentations can be found under Resources & Links)

² Andreas Karsten, Input "When data visualisation goes wild", RAY Thematic Seminar, 13 June 2025 (presentations can be found under Resources & Links)



5 types of data for assessing your work (NPC, 2017):

TYPE OF DATA	ASKS:	ESTABLISHES:	HOW OFTEN TO COLLECT:
1) User data	Who is your programme reaching?	Characteristics of your participants	Routinely (during sign-up, application)
2) Engagement data	What did your programme do and how effective was it?	To what extent the participant engages (e.g. how many trainings)	Routinely (on-going, electronic case management)
3) Feedback data	How do participants feel about the programme?	Satisfaction, feedback	Routinely (e.g. feedback forms)
4) Outcomes data	What have participants gained from your programme in the short-term?	Changes in knowledge, behaviour, skills; Measures performance	Occasionally (e.g. samples, quantitative or qualitative)
5) Impact data	What is the long-term difference achieved for individuals, families, communities?	If outcomes have changed lives for the better	Exceptionally (e.g. impact evaluations, RCTs)

See slides Cristina Bacalso, footnote 4 (from NPC, 2027)

TOOLTIME: TRY, TEST, TINKER

Following discussions on strategy and structure, the seminar shifted into a hands-on phase, where participants engaged with practical tools and real-world approaches to data collection, analysis, and application. From simple surveys to mapping technologies and collaborative platforms, the sessions showcased accessible ways to make data work effectively—even without a background in data science. The key message: anyone can use data well with the right mindset and tools. However, a note of caution was emphasized—these tools require thoughtful handling, such as crafting effective prompts, to truly deliver useful insights.

And while these examples focus on practice, one presentation offered a different kind of insight: a bold reminder that how we visualise data shapes what it means. In *When Data Visualisation Goes Wild*, Andreas Karsten challenged participants to see design not as decoration, but as a powerful force in how data communicates.

TOOLKIT 1: PRACTICAL TOOLS TO WORK WITH DATA

- Collect: LimeSurvey, Typeform, Mentimeter, Whisper
- Analyse: Excel, SPSS, Julius, ChatGPT, Taguette
- Visualise: Canva, Datawrapper, Piktochart
- Communicate: STORM, NotebookLM, AI tools for tone & clarity

*Use tools to support your purpose—
don't adapt your purpose to a tool.*

- Ashley Pitschmann, RAY researcher

TOOLKIT 2: USING DATA IN PROJECTS

- Needs analysis and project design: StormAI, ChatGPT
- Project planning: forecasting, SMART indicators
- Project implementation: LimeSurvey, Typeform, Mentimeter, Slido
- Project evaluation: LimeSurvey, Typeform, Mentimeter, Excel
- Reporting and dissemination: Canva, Mentimeter, Excel Datawrapper

*Data can help to put your project
in the big picture.*

- Andrea Horta, RAY researcher

TAKEAWAYS AND INSIGHTS

Participants appreciated the workshops practical, hands-on approach, which provided space for peer learning and experimentation. The introduction of various digital tools—some powered by AI, others more traditional—encouraged participants to explore new ways of using technology in handling voice data and integrating it into daily practice. As one participant put it, “Now I know useful tools that can be used across different projects and different stages.” Beyond the tools themselves, many emphasized the value of combining data with emotion and narrative to create deeper impact. A key takeaway was the importance of adapting data communication to different audiences—whether engaging policymakers, peers, or young people themselves.

PRACTICES THAT INSPIRE

For some, it's co-creating a toolkit with young people. For others, it's embedding surveys into everyday processes—or building networks that stretch across Europe. Five good practices presented at the seminar highlight how data can be gathered, interpreted, and applied in creative and grounded ways.

COMMON THREADS: WHAT THESE PRACTICES TEACH US

The five practices presented during the seminar were as diverse as their contexts—spanning digital tools, performing arts, policy research, internal processes, and organisational strategy. And yet, across sectors and countries, several shared principles emerged that point the way forward for data-informed youth work.

1. Co-creation builds ownership:

Whether in Rida's theatre project or Diana's focus groups, including young people and educators from the start made the results not only more relevant — but more widely used.

True impact really happens when young people are part of the process, really from the beginning.

– Rida Arif Siddiqui

2. Define purpose before collecting data:

Jonathan and Sonja both reminded us: the data is only as good as the question it's trying to answer. Their tools were simple—pre/post surveys, feedback loops—but grounded in real goals.

A plan is worth nothing if you can't implement it realistically.

– Jonathan van Varik

3. Make it accessible — and inclusive:

From Helsinki to Central Asia, accessibility came up again and again: in language, in digital access, in representation. Data collection is not neutral—who's involved matters.

Representation matters. It's important to think about who you are talking to, where you're getting the data from, and who is responding.

– Rida Arif Siddiqui

4. Data supports credibility and change:

Several contributors highlighted the value of data not just for learning, but for advocacy—from Janina's network approach to Jonathan's fundraising logic. Data builds the case for what works.

It's so important to prove that [these programmes] work and to find evidence-based and holistic ways to show stakeholders and politicians that it works.

– Janina Meyer

5. It's a process — not a product:

Everyone agreed: you don't need to be a data expert. What matters is the habit of asking questions, collecting feedback, and using it. It's less about dashboards—more about dialogue.

The key thing is not to be afraid of data. We are often a little bit afraid. We think data is very mathematical, but it doesn't have to be like that.

– Sonja Witting

RESOURCES & LINKS

SEMINAR

Presentations: [LINK](#)

GENERAL RESOURCES

Tool list (data tools treasure chest): [LINK](#)

Research reports, factsheet and other resources from RAY and other actors within the European youth research, youth work/policy field and programme support: [LINK](#)