

Play International's Methodology in Non- Formal Education: Empowering Youth through Play



Introduction

In an era where young people face complex social challenges, traditional education alone cannot equip them with the skills and values needed to thrive. Flexible, participatory non-

formal education, which is rooted in real-life experience, offers a powerful complement to formal schooling.

At PLAY International, we believe that young people learn best when they are actively engaged, emotionally invested, and given space to lead. Our non-formal education methodology transforms play, sport, and experiential activities into tools for youth empowerment, social inclusion, and personal development.

In Kosovo, PLAY International works with youth aged 15–24 to promote gender equality, employability, and community engagement through sport-based learning. Over 26 years, PLAY International has worked with hundreds of young people across the region to strengthen their roles in their communities.

Why Non-Formal Education for Youth?

Non-formal education (NFE) creates a safe space for young people to develop competencies such as empathy, teamwork, leadership, communication, and critical thinking that go beyond academic knowledge.

Unlike formal education, which follows a structured curriculum, NFE gives youth the freedom to explore, experiment, and reflect. It is learning that happens by doing, feeling, and interacting.

Through non-formal education, PLAY International helps youth:

- **Recognise their strengths and agency;**
- **Understand and challenge social inequalities;**
- **Build the confidence to act as changemakers in their communities.**

Our Approach: Learning by Doing

At the core of PLAY International's youth methodology is a simple belief: learning should be active, meaningful, and transformative.

Each program is designed around three interconnected dimensions of learning:

1. **Experiential Learning – Activities are based on experience and participation. Youth engage in dynamic, sport-based exercises that simulate real-life social situations.**
2. **Reflection and Dialogue – Facilitators guide participants to reflect on what they experienced and discuss how it relates to broader issues such as gender equality, inclusion, or leadership.**
3. **Action and Empowerment – Youth are supported to turn learning into action, whether by initiating community projects, leading peer sessions, or advocating for change.**

For instance, in our SCORE program in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, participants led community-based sport sessions to tackle social challenges which lead to radicalisation through sport. Similarly, the Shared Horizons project brought together youth

from all Western Balkans countries to build bridges between young people of different ethnicities and to create a shared foundation towards peacebuilding and cooperation. This was achieved through week-long youth camps across the region where participants played, led, and learned from different shared cultural experiences through sport.

Pedagogical Principles

PLAY International's non-formal education approach is grounded in several key pedagogical principles that ensure learning is both inclusive and impactful:

- **Inclusion and Equity – Activities are designed to include participants from diverse backgrounds, ensuring equal voice and participation.**
- **Empowerment Through Responsibility – By facilitating rather than instructing, we allow youth to take ownership and leadership roles.**
- **Transferability – Every learning experience connects to real-world challenges and encourages youth to apply insights in their daily lives.**
- **Safe Learning Spaces – Sessions are structured to foster trust, openness, and mutual respect, enabling honest dialogue and growth.**

Building Youth Capacities

A central pillar of PLAY International's work is training youth facilitators, educators, and community leaders to implement non-formal education activities effectively.

Our training programs focus on:

- **Understanding non-formal education principles and facilitation techniques;**
- **Integrating sport and play as educational tools;**
- **Encouraging peer-to-peer learning and youth leadership;**
- **Monitoring changes in attitudes, behaviours, and skills among participants.**

At Play International, our NFE Training Programs combine elaborate physical activities designed to convey important social messages to youth in their communities with emphasis on the role of a youth leader and embracing a youth-centred approach.

Impact and Outcomes

Over the years, PLAY International's NFE programs have demonstrated strong results in empowering youth to become proactive, empathetic, and socially responsible citizens.

Key outcomes observed include:

- **Improved collaboration, empathy, and communication skills;**
- **Increased confidence to speak up and take initiative;**
- **Greater awareness of social issues and motivation to contribute to solutions;**
- **Stronger sense of belonging and connection within their communities.**

Conclusion: Shaping the Leaders of Tomorrow

Non-formal education is not only an alternative to traditional schooling but it's a catalyst for youth empowerment and social change. By combining experiential learning with reflection and action, PLAY International equips young people with the mindset and skills to build inclusive, resilient communities.

Through every session, training, and project, PLAY International reaffirms its belief that youth are not just beneficiaries of change – they are the drivers of it.



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