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Supporting the participation and empowerment of young Roma : a participatory practice guide for professionals

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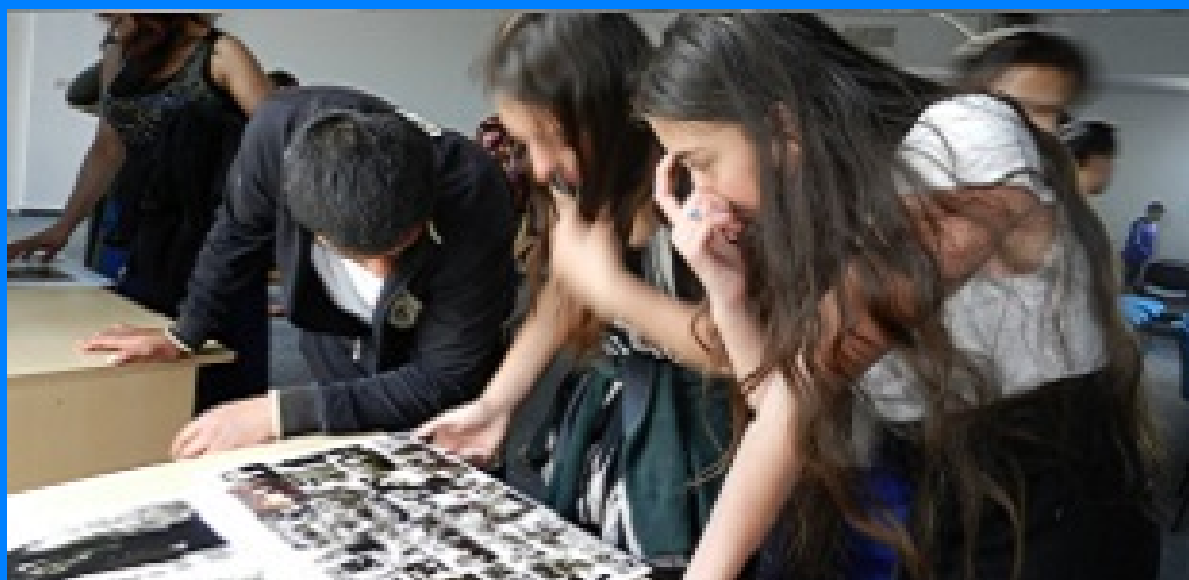
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Supporting the Participation and Empowerment of Young Roma



A Participatory Practice guide for professionals

A collaborative learning resource written with advice from Roma young people and professionals working with PEER Youth in Romania, Bulgaria, Catalonia (Spain), Cyprus, England, Scotland and Wales (UK), France, Lithuania, Ireland and Italy.

**Barry Percy-Smith, Cath Larkins and
Ábel Bereményi**

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Contributors and Acknowledgements



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About this guide

There is increasing attention directed to how young people can participate through active roles in bringing about change in their lives and communities. However, there has been little focus on the specific issues in supporting and learning from young Roma¹.

This guide is based on PEER (Participation Experiences and Empowerment for Roma youth), a two year EU funded project (Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Action grant Just/2013/FRAC/AG/6230) concerned with supporting the participation and empowerment of Roma children and young people.

The guide is targeted at professionals and others seeking to enable and empower children and young people who live in vulnerable situations to participate more fully in decisions and actions that affect their lives. It has been developed using advice from young people and professionals about how to overcome some of the key challenges faced when facilitating participation with Roma children and young people. Although Roma children and young people contribute all the time through their participation in aspects of family and community life, some Roma children and youth are excluded from effective public participation, due not only to their age, but to a major part because of their economic status, social exclusion and ethnic prejudices. In countries across the European Union, some Roma children are subject to many social disadvantages that reduce their chances to influence processes, decisions and activities that affect them.

Whilst this guide (and associated project materials listed below) have emerged from the PEER project with Roma children and young people (particularly those facing multiple social and economic disadvantages) these resources are equally relevant to work that seeks to promote the participation and empowerment of any young people or groups who face similar experiences of marginalisation. This guide should be read alongside other outputs from this project including:

PEER Multi media guide to participatory action www.PEERaction.eu

Video-based advice from young people to young people.

PEER Project Training Manual

[<http://www.peeryouth.eu/ctrl/Home/UK/PEER%20Training%20Manual-%20English%20Language%20Version.pdf>] The training model and activities created with Roma children and young people to take action for change in PEER.

¹ The authors acknowledge that the term 'Roma' covers very diverse communities across Europe and the world who may or may not share the same language, customs, etc. Work in this project has also involved groups who refer to themselves as Gypsies, Gitanos, Travellers and Gens de Voyage. Even within these categories it is important to acknowledge that different people may define themselves in other ways. The EU definition of the term Roma includes the ethnic groups Travellers, Gens du voyage, Kalé, Sinti and others. In this manual we use the EU term Roma. In each country and community we use the words that people choose to use to describe themselves, their ethnicity and their nationality.

PEER Policy Paper <http://www.peeryouth.eu/deliverables>

Key findings about the changes needed at policy level to support Roma children and young people's participatory action.

PEER Evaluation Tools <http://www.peeryouth.eu/deliverables>

About Participation and Empowerment

Participation can be defined as a process of active involvement in decisions about matters that affect individuals and the communities where they live. Commonly participation has been understood simply in terms of 'having a say' or voicing an opinion for example in a survey or other forms of consultation.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have: *"the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account"*. This is important. However, often children and young people do not get opportunities to participate in decisions about the issues they raise.

Participation therefore also means actively taking part in actions to try to bring about change. One action can be 'having a say' but in PEER young people also focused on 'doing not just saying'. Participation is therefore also about young people influencing decisions and being active in change processes - about exercising power and influence on decisions and other factors that affect their lives.

It is not always recognised that young people are able to bring about change themselves with respect to issues in their everyday life using their own creative ideas and energy. Adults often assume the responsibility for decision making and change. Supporting children and young people to more actively participate involves gradually changing the balance of power between young people and adults. However, whilst young people can participate on their own, in many cases there is a need for adults to play a role in supporting and working with young people. Indeed, it could be argued that adults have an obligation and a responsibility to support the participation of children and young people.

This guide uses the learning from the PEER project to provide guidance about how adults and professionals can help enable young people realise their potential and participate more actively. The guide is structured so as to provide a coherence according to how projects develop, beginning with a section on Getting Started. The guide then includes a series of short sections focusing on certain aspects of professional support for the participation of Roma young people that can be referred to as stand-alone resources. It is important not to following this guide as a blue print rather to use these resources flexibly in work with Roma young people.

The European context concerning Roma participation and inclusion

Children and young people from Roma families experience low levels of participation across social, economic and political domains throughout Europe (ECORYS 2015)². Social exclusion, discrimination and restricted life chance opportunities have a direct impact on Roma children's opportunities to participate more widely in society and in decision-making. This is manifest in difficulties for Roma children to realise their rights across a wide range of sectors and settings in practice.

One of the problems inhibiting the participation of some Roma children and young people as equal citizens is low levels of participation in school, as a result of non-enrolment, Early School Leaving (ESL), school segregation, and the absence of intercultural elements in the school curricula. For example, in Romania, 80% of Roma children aged between 3 and 6 years have not been to pre-school (ECORYS 2015). There are multiple reasons for this low participation including refusal in some municipalities to enrol Roma children in schools, clearance of traveller sites creating practical consequences for children's attendance and, within school, Roma children's experience of prejudice and difficulties for some in speaking the native language. In the UK, The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently commented on the right to education for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in the UK and in 2016 noted 'Substantial inequalities persist in educational attainment particularly for..... Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children' and that 'Among children subject to permanent or temporary school exclusions, there is a disproportionate number of boys, Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children...' ³ In England, at the end of secondary education, just 12% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils achieved the national benchmark for five qualifications, compared with 58.2% of all pupils⁴. More broadly where participatory mechanisms such as student councils and youth for a have been established they have struggled to secure the engagement of the Roma community, highlighting the limitations of more formalised structures for participation. Some education systems have made significant steps to assure inclusion but there is a complex mix of social, community based and institutional elements that continue to pose barriers (Bereményi, 2011).

At a European level some initiatives have been taken to promote Roma participation⁵. In 2011, an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 was published highlighting the need for a more targeted approach to foster Roma inclusion in the form of national Roma integration strategies in all EU states. The Framework called for measures to actively promote "the full participation of Roma people in public life, stimulation of their active citizenship and development of their human resources;" although children and young people are generally absent from the text of the Framework. Specific legislation, strategies

² ECORYS (2015) *Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice on children's participation*, Brussels: European Commission

³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016) *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* CRC/C/GBR/CO/5 para 71.

⁴ MWG on inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers 2012, p. 7

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6287/2124046.pdf

⁵ ECORYS (2015) *Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice on children's participation*, Brussels: European Commission;

and institutions have been created to support Roma children's participation in some countries, for example, Spain, Greece and Hungary⁶ however these remain exceptions.

In 2013 the Roma Youth Action Plan was developed within the framework of the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma and the youth policy of the Council of Europe. This was a response to the challenges faced by Roma young people in Europe, including discrimination⁷ and the marked lack of participation of Roma children and young people in policy and decision-making processes and structures at European level. One of the key objectives of the Action Plan is to:

“support the creation in Europe of an environment where Roma youth can grow up [...] appreciate their plural cultural backgrounds and affiliations as young people, as Roma, as citizens of their countries and as active Europeans and ... support and develop the participation and autonomy of Roma youth at European, national and local levels”

In spite of legislative initiatives, developments in national policy are generally limited and in practice, legislation has had limited impact in terms of materialising into effective and meaningful opportunities to support the participation of young Roma, beyond isolated project initiatives⁸.

It is within this context that this guide, and the Action project on which it is based, seeks to make a difference by promoting the role and responsibility of professionals for supporting the empowerment and participation of young Roma as active citizens in the context of their everyday lives.

⁶ Integrated Action Programme for the Social Integration of the Greek Roma (2012); Spanish Operational Strategic Plan; and 'National Social Inclusion Strategy – Extreme Poverty, Child Poverty, The Roma' (2011-2012);

⁷ Particularly Anti Gypsyism

⁸ See for example Travelling Ahead project (www.travellingahead.org.uk) and Romanicriss (www.romanicriss.org)

1. Getting going

Ideally you will be working with young people who have already expressed a desire for action. However, this may not always be the case. Frequently, participatory initiatives come from adult projects, as part of a community development or inclusion agenda, as a result of a policy driver or through academic research. The fact young people may not have initiated a participatory project does not matter if it creates an opportunity for young people. For work with marginalised young Roma it is most likely that any participation initiatives will already have a goal, although this does not mean young Roma are without motivation or cause.

Resources that become available through these invited participation opportunities can be used to enable Roma children and young people to raise concerns and may give access to influential networks and skills.

Get to know the people and resources that can support Roma child and youth participation.

- ➔ The first most important task is to identify the group of children or young people you will work with. Some Roma young people are already community leaders but others lack opportunities and face multiple disadvantages.
- ➔ Consider gender appropriateness of the facilitator.
- ➔ Find out as much as you can about the specific community you seek to work with.
- ➔ Identify local organisations or groups that already have established relationships with the families you are working with that you might be able to work through. Gain trust with the community.
- ➔ Spend time getting to know the groups, community and young people themselves in order to establish a rapport and build relationships of trust and mutual reciprocity. Respect Roma identity and culture – your role in facilitating participation is not to judge even if you hold different values.
- ➔ Be aware you may have to overcome mistrust.
- ➔ Establish contact with local community leaders to gain their support.
- ➔ Learn what resources you have available to work with inside your organisation and in the wider community such as:
 - Spaces to meet
 - People who can give their time and skills
 - Influential networks
 - Policy or practice development opportunities

This guide tells you more about how to use the resources you can gather together to help children and young people.



Having pizza together at the first session helped create a relaxed atmosphere.

Tips: Make sure you spend time developing relationships and established a rapport ...

- ➔ Identify a manageable sized group (of say 4-8 young people) to work with. Small groups are ideal so trusting relationships can be developed with all of the young people. They can reach out to other children later.
- ➔ Set up some initial informal meetings with young people so that they can get to know each other. Use games and activities. (see [Magic 6 Training Manual](#)).
- ➔ Make it fun, and ensure you provide a welcoming environment. Choose an appropriate venue and consider providing food and refreshments.
- ➔ Participation and empowerment are abstract concepts so it is best to use different words to explain your motivations such as 'working with you to make things happen' or 'influencing decisions that affect your lives'.
- ➔ The best way to learn about participation and empowerment is by engaging in participatory processes (sharing and listening, understanding and assessing, planning and action, evaluation and reflection); see [Magic 6 Training Manual](#).
- ➔ Don't expect young people to be ready to change the world, they may well not be used to working this way and may be nervous. Instead focus on team building and developing a positive group dynamic. (see [PEER Multi Media Guide](#))

Do: Make sure there is enough time to develop a sense of group cohesion and build confidence. Adults need to spend time getting to know the children before any attempts at action can be made.

For younger children or those who are not used to having their voices heard, hearing each other's views is an important first step of participation before progressing onto problem solving tasks and developing actions for change.

Ensure that anyone working with children and young people has a clear understanding of their responsibilities to promote children's rights (eg to be informed, participate and be protected from harm).

Adult facilitators should open up and share something about themselves and their life, both positive and negative, before asking children/youth to talk about themselves.

"Children need to learn to trust the adults. This can only occur after a positive, trusting environment for the children has been created. This happens after a few 'getting to know you' sessions. The children can be very guarded and slow to speak so activities to build confidence and to establish rapport with the children are very important".



Task:

Make a note of what aspects of your own life you could share with a group of Roma children and young people. Think about what they might want to know, what you will keep private and what personal information and interests you might share.

2. Developing Effective Participatory Professional Roles

The objective of ‘participatory initiatives’ is for young people to become more actively involved. This does not mean just leaving young people to do everything themselves, instead it involves **changing the nature of the relationships** between professionals and young people from ‘doing to’ young people to ‘doing with’ young people.

However, in order to achieve a situation where young people can participate more equally means young people having freedom to exercise their ideas and initiative and to access greater influence over the resources you have pulled together to support the participatory work.

This necessitates Professionals changing the way they work from ‘the expert’ who directs, to one who **facilitates, mentors, supports, mediates and enables**.

It is beneficial to **employ Roma community members** in these professional roles. In PEER, Roma young people have been employed as young leaders in many countries.

Workers are there to help young people help themselves, by **helping them develop their capacity, a sense of empowerment and opportunities to lead**.



“.. it is not a question of coming here and setting up activities for young people to participate ... The main aim is that they set up activities themselves ... if we as educators could disappear it would be fantastic.” (Educator)

Professionals should be patient, flexible and open, **working according to young people’s rhythms and agenda** rather than being driven by professional goals or a set plan. Go “one step at a time” and don’t expect immediate results.

It is important to **encourage young people to take the lead** but be aware that some young people might find it difficult to take the initiative and lead. In these situations it is worth having some ideas to help them get going.

Planning a group session in advance can help ensure the meeting is meaningful for young people. In contrast, a lack of structure and guidance can be quite off putting for young people. In reality the professional advocate needs to provide **well planned sessions to engage young people** until they have developed sufficient confidence and skills to run their own sessions.

The professional's role is to **provide opportunities, encouragement and support** for young people to take increasingly more responsibility as they feel able.

At the same time the professional advocate can play a valuable role as a critical friend, **challenging young people** and helping them think through their decisions.

It is hugely advantageous if the youth coordinator or facilitator is also from the Roma community, to make it easier for the young people to identify and connect and to act as a role model.

“When I have developed a relationship with young Roma I can achieve a good connection and we can make projects and things together ... but if I was also a Roma the connection would be stronger”



Professionals should seek to **develop trust, mutual respect, empathy and be non-judgemental**, reaching out to where young people are at, listening actively, seeking to understand their situation and helping them to see opportunities.

Tips: Be patient and attentive to young people, they have many things to say

Provide flexible support – be there when needed and back off when not needed

Don't rush, ensure time for young people to talk, share and develop responses

Keep it simple, be realistic and be clear about session objectives

Make it fun and playful

As young people begin to take more of a lead, the professional can gradually step back and allow the space for young people to take the initiative.

Regardless of how proactive young people are, the professional has an important role of **being a resource, providing information, guidance, mentorship and advice** when needed and helping provide connections and access to other resources, organisations and opportunities.

Create a supportive enabling, but also challenging, environment – whilst it is important for young people to take as active role as they can, it is essential that the professional is there to keep things going and to encourage young people to gradually take on more and more responsibility. In this way it is important to challenge young people about what they think they can do.

Task:

Make a note of the challenges you think marginalised Roma children and young people face when they are wanting to become involved in a participatory project. How might you provide them with support and advice to overcome these challenges?

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3. Activities and facilitating groups

For many young people (including Roma), sitting around and just talking can be boring and some Roma children and young people have low literacy skills. So with some groups attention needs to be directed to **communicating and interacting without writing** where possible, for example using visual media.

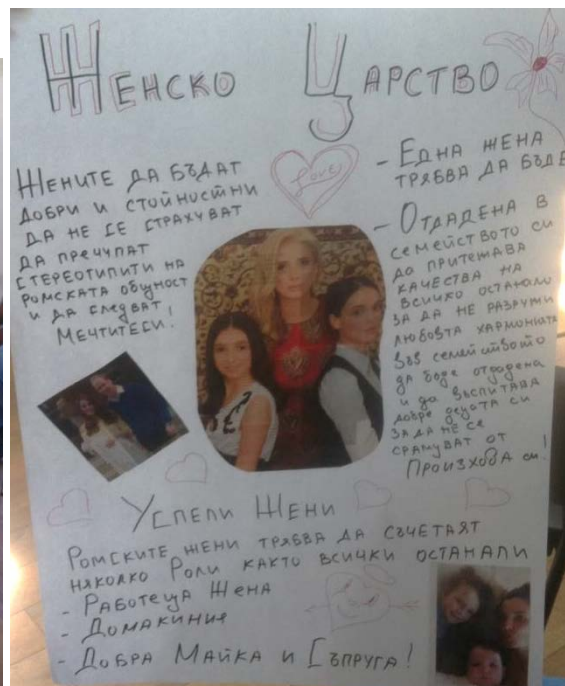
It is also important to work with strengths – some Roma children and young people are very accomplished in writing and creative in **expressive and interactive forms** such as visual and ‘hands on’ activities that puts the focus on doing rather than just talking.

Young people may find it difficult to get to know others at the beginning. Activities that help young people communicate something about themselves can be useful.

Example of activity: All about me ‘photo books’ (Ireland)

The facilitator brought in photographs which were used to illustrate her life and spoke freely with the children she worked with about things she considered important and appropriate for the children to know. The children followed this exercise with pictures / drawings of people, places and activities that they wished to share.

With children **be playful**, design activities that can feel like games, not formal and serious tasks, and have fun.



When thinking about meetings it is useful to have some kind of plan for the **structure and purpose** ... in time, these plans can be developed together with children and young people.

It can be useful to discuss and agree as a group a set of **ground rules** for example including respect for other's opinions.

However, when planning activities it is important to have Plan A and Plan B as young people are not always in the mood to participate in certain ways. It is therefore important to always **be flexible** & attentive to how young people are.

Be prepared to **adapt to circumstances**. The original goals of the group may change as they progress.

There should be a focus in group sessions on **creating opportunities** for children and young people to demonstrate and develop their skills and abilities, taking on roles and responsibilities, encouraging curiosity and generating ideas.

Children and young people who have experienced discrimination and marginalisation, as some young Roma have, can require patience and attention; **continual support**, interest and positive affirmation is essential.

If children or young people identify that they or someone else is being seriously hurt, professionals have a responsibility to ensure their safety. In some situations this may involve providing information, advice or practical support. In other situations it may be necessary to work with children and their families to ensure extra support services are provided.

Task:

Make a note of where you can make space in your work to really hear the voice of Roma children and young people. Think of techniques and creative activities you could use.

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4. Whose agenda? – Embedding in young people's lives

Attempts to engage young people in 'participation' projects need to be grounded in young people's realities for them to be meaningful. This means helping young people to identify **issues and actions that are important for them in their lives**.

This could be about making changes to improve their neighbourhoods but it may also be about being active in responding to **their own goals or the needs** of their community.

Case study example: Self advocacy and support in Spain

Young Roma women, who had already left school but were still not married, discovered that they hardly participate in the neighbourhood's (or the city's) public activities/events. Instead they spent their free time at home or with Roma peers mostly in private, Roma-only spaces. They decided to set up a group that could offer nail-painting, children's face-painting and make-up in public and private events, such as local festivities, or wedding ceremonies. In order to be able to do so, they decided to train themselves in this field.

It is important to try not to lock young people into existing arrangements, instead start with young people's ideas and draw on existing resources as may be appropriate.



"If young people feel adults have a real interest in young people then the young people will feel genuinely supported because they participate in a common project."

Tips: Start with positive stories from young Roma

For example, talk about how people in your group spend their free time, rather than about them as individuals (individual issues may well emerge in due course).

Using visual material is a good way of doing this (see [Magic 6 training manual](#)).

The conversation can then be developed to more sensitive issues such as where they feel included and excluded in their neighbourhood and their lives as a young Roma.

The facilitator's role is to encourage inquiry and questioning to develop a deeper level of understanding, through for example inviting young people to consider: "Why do you think that is?"

Be sensitive about focusing on 'problems', as this might actually contribute to the child's negativity towards his/her life circumstances and young people may not perceive specific circumstances as problematic.

It is important to balance discussion about difficulties with positivity for example by encouraging young people to celebrate pride in being a Roma and focusing on where they can make positive change.

Task:

Think about the things that the Roma children and young people you work with feel good about. Write an imagined conversation that starts with positive stories but enables young people to talk about difficulties.

5. Fostering group identity

Developing participation as a group rather than just individually is beneficial as groups can provide a strong sense of identity, **belonging and solidarity** and help to build momentum. The group provides opportunities for social interaction and new possibilities for participation. It provides a **safe and supportive space for 'practicing participation'**, developing confidence and ability to act.



Some young people may be more ready to engage than others. Some young people are open and some may need more encouragement because of the discrimination they have faced in the past. Be nurturing and supportive for all young people whatever stage they are at.

Be aware of the **diversity** that exists within the Roma community including big gender differences. Young Roma are not all alike. "Respect their individuality".

At the same time, it is **important to foster a sense of pride in their shared identity**. Encourage them to feel proud of what they and other Roma community members have achieved.

6. Empowering young people

Empowerment involves young people **developing the ability to act** for themselves in response to whatever context they are in. For many children and young people, developing ability to act involves developing the experience of, and mind-set for, self-determining action.

It also involves **adults giving up some power** and allowing young people to take on more responsibility by **changing the opportunities available** and removing structural barriers.

Developing the ability to act involves a range of skills. These include:

- Developing confidence to speak out and listen to others
- Group work skills
- Community organising
- Public speaking
- Self-regulation (Managing emotions and behaviours)

Workshops and group work are ways of providing young people with a **space for experimentation and learning** so as to become more empowered.

Ensure young people have an opportunity to **undertake different tasks and roles** within the group to develop skills & confidence, e.g. helping prepare the next session

Young people need constant **positive encouragement** to develop trust and abilities to speak out. But be aware, changing mind-sets and ways of working takes time.

Helping young people identify and **strive for realistic goals** and deal with difficulties encountered along the way contributes to a sense of empowerment.



“Acting upon very real issues in their everyday life (such as training, conflict-resolution, education, safety in the household and community, communication, etc.), fills participation with concrete meanings.”

Making resources available demonstrates commitment and is a good way for young people to become more empowered as they decide how to use the resources provided; finding resources also involves developing initiative.

Acknowledge the Importance of **role models**. Some young people may become empowered quicker than others and thus become role models for others.

It is crucial that young people become **protagonists of their own actions**. A reasonable balance needs to be found between the professional advocate providing support and encouragement whilst at the same time not being too directive but instead allowing the initiative to come from young people.

One of the big social barriers that some young Roma face is about discrimination in work opportunities. Providing opportunities to gain employment leading participatory activities enables Roma young people work with you to be valued, both by them and by members of their family and community.

Providing young Roma with opportunities to **gain accreditation** for their participatory activities and can also help them access alternative education pathways.

But, overcoming social barriers is not just the responsibility of young Roma. There also needs to be **changes in systems, structures and values** to open up equal opportunities for participation. As professionals wanting to support Roma children and young people's participation we too have a role to campaign and work with other Roma champions to bring about change in policy, practice and attitudes, so that Roma rights are more fully respected and adequate social support is provided for the whole community.

Task:

Identify something that you could do to help open up opportunities for marginalised young Roma to participate and challenge discrimination and inequality.

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7. New experiences and encounters

New experiences can be enjoyable but can also **widen young people's horizons** and knowledge and develop confidence in new situations.

Taking young people on visits and trips is one way of doing this but **opportunities to meet with other young people and adults** can also be beneficial. This may involve a visit to meet with city officials, to local facilities or local events.

Actively **link up young people's interests with upcoming policy /advocacy opportunities and events** for example International Roma day, Celebrating Diversity events or Neighbourhood forums. These occasions are useful for strengthening Roma identity and exchanging experiences concerning young Roma identity and discrimination as well as different forms of action that people have taken in response. These events are also useful for making connections and finding allies with older Roma leaders and community activists and joining up with wider agenda.

Roma children and young people often derive significant benefits from engaging in joint **activities with other non-Roma children and young people** outside of the community. This may involve engaging equally in dialogue alongside other groups around an issue of mutual concern or simply highlighting issues and challenges for Roma.

Such encounters not only provide new experiences and develop confidence, but also help foster a sense of inclusion, trust and open up perceptions of a wider range of possibilities and choices.



We went to the local library and asked them to stop excluding us. Now it is somewhere we can use.

Tips: Take advantage of opportunities for dialogue and joint activities where ever possible.

Pay attention to any preparatory work that may need to be done to help young people feel confident about such encounters with others. This may involve providing information, but also developing skills, for example, speaking with local officials. Role play is a good way of developing skills and confidence.

Task:

Keep a record here about possible new experiences and encounters that might be available to the Roma children and young people you are working with. How can you help them access these opportunities?

8. Building Networks and Connecting outside of the community

Young people can gain significant benefits from 'participation' activities, however, their lives are shaped by wider social forces beyond their group and community.

Participation involves young people being able to work with others to resolve issues and concerns. This involves dialogue and learning between groups.

Roma rarely have an opportunity to meet and talk with policy makers and officials. An important part of participation activities is to widen networks and spheres of influence outside of the community.

Setting up opportunities for marginalised young Roma to meet other non-Roma groups, national and European politicians, local city officials and leaders and talking about their lives and concerns as Roma can be hugely motivating. This not only helps challenge stereotypes but also strengthens identity and pride as Roma and raises esteem.

It is much more powerful when young people deliver messages themselves, then you know they are heard.

i) Local officials and agencies outside of the community

Organise **opportunities to meet with local policy makers.**

But ... "Roma children can experience immense risk if they are active outside of their community, they experience this as breaking the bonds with their origin", so facilitators can play a key role in helping Roma children and young people prepare for such meetings for example by thinking about what they want to get out of the meetings and preparing how they will present their issues.

Work with young people and support them in their ideas. If needed make initial contact for the children and co-sign documents / letters to show that the children are serious about their endeavour.

Help them prepare how to pitch or sell their ideas to people who can help make things happen.

Try and secure the support and buy-in of local elected representatives and invite them to visit your community.



Getting support from youth councils is really helpful, as they may have some of these direct links to policy makers and politicians.

Case study example: Coffee Morning to build networks, UK

The PEER group of seven young people in Wales wanted to meet with important people, so that they could build up their network of connections and have personal links with people who could help make things change. So they organised a fundraising event for a popular local charity and they invited people to attend this and show their support. The Mayor came along and so did some local service providers. The young people could then talk to them informally and show how they were contributing to their community. They think this will help when the time comes for them to ask for some support.

ii) *Raising awareness about Roma culture*

Raising public awareness about Roma culture and values can reinforce pride whilst also challenging stereotypes and prejudice.

Case study example: Celebration of Roma culture, Spain

Ten Spanish Roma girls of secondary school defined the goal of making Roma culture visible to all their neighbours. They decided to organise a large celebration to make Roma culture visible on the 8th of April, the International Roma Day. They shot a video representing the local people's knowledge and opinion about the Roma culture. The video was projected as part of the celebration, together with some old photos of the families who used to live in the same zone throughout the 20th century. The celebration included other shows, such as dancing, an afternoon snack bar open to all the local people, a performance of a Roma tale represented by two children and directed by the young Roma, as well as some pieces of music played by local Roma musicians.

Bringing groups of young people together

Bringing Roma and non-Roma young people together can help break down discrimination and exclusion. This might involve visiting other non Roma young people groups, having a dialogue in mixed ethnic groups or organising a football game.

“A chance to
know us again”

It is important for Roma children and young people to meet with other children and young people to **find common interests and concerns** to work together on.

Try and establish links with local youth councils and seek to work with them

Case study example: Football to bring groups together, Romania

Roma children focused on organizing a football match to which another community would attend. During these sessions, children took the initiative and got involved in preparing the game (e.g. personalizing the equipment, girls were preparing for the cheerleader dance). They also prepared the football field. All children participated in cleaning the field, followed then by assembling the football gates. Five parents were also involved.

Tips: Develop working relationships with key people

In the municipality, community and with organisations that already know the families, create and **identify opportunities** where young people can be heard and engage with local officials.

Use **local events** as an opportunity for marginalised young Roma to get involved.

Pursue **opportunities for dialogue** between young people and others; consider possible preparatory work with young people.

Establish relations with **local organisations** (municipal departments, schools, libraries, leisure facilities who might provide support in organising events).

Task:

Note down some possible organisations and groups to link to.

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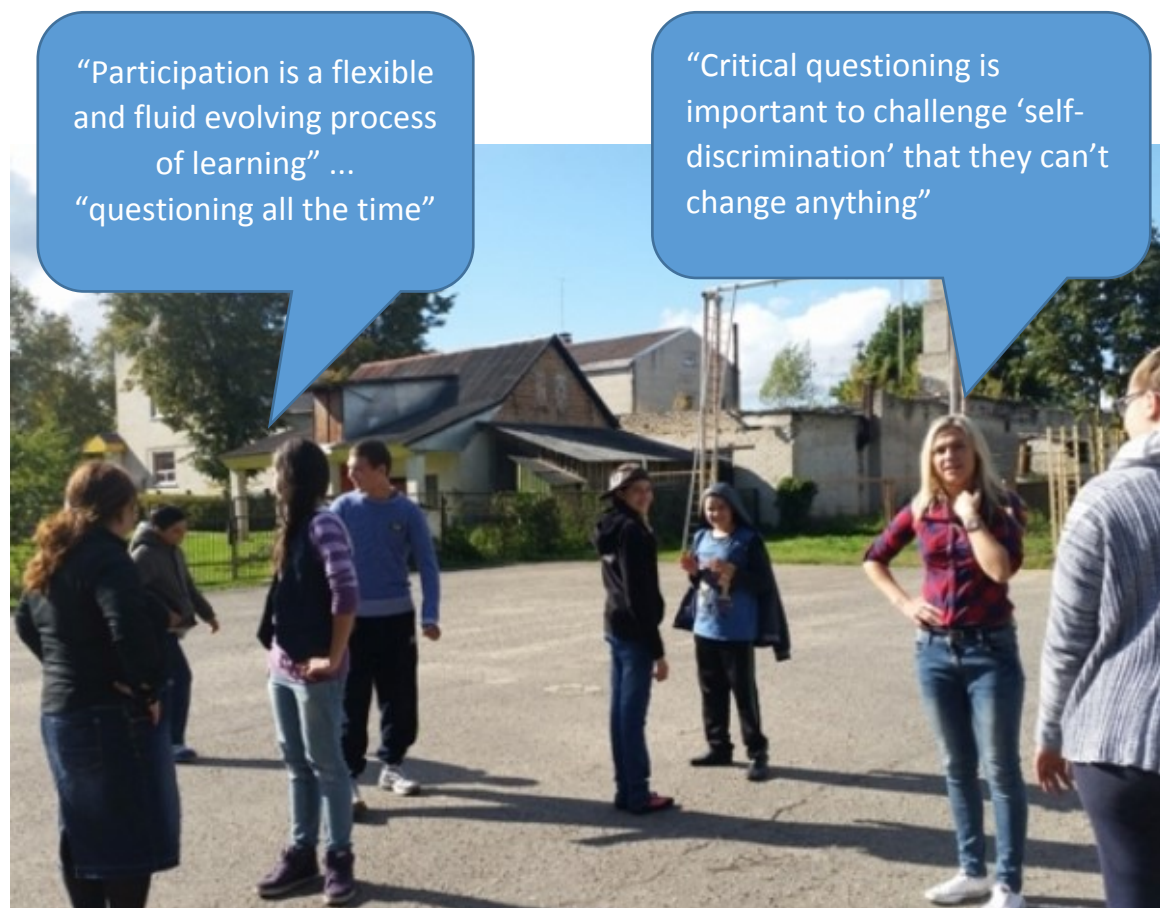
9. Creative exploration and learning

Because participation is about being actively involved in bringing about change, it necessarily also involves ‘learning’ as people find solutions to issues and situations in their lives.

Ensuring there are opportunities for learning and developing understanding is key to change. Sharing experiences, engaging in share actions and hearing about others’ situations is a powerful learning process.

Learning may involve:

- Developing understanding about a particular issue or problem
- Critically reflecting on values & practices (individual & group)
- Engaging in dialogue with others
- Working together to explore possible solutions to a problem
- Increasing awareness (e.g. about opportunities that exist)



The key task for adult professionals is to facilitate critical thinking without imposing their own views.

It is useful for adult facilitators to think about the nature of the space that is being provided and be open and reflexive to how young people respond.

Activities can be a good way of providing a learning opportunity



Case study example: Learning into action, using human rights to improve safety in Cyprus

Eight Roma children, aged 13 to 15 participated in this group. The aim was to provide information about Human Rights/Children's Rights. Having developed some understanding and awareness about their rights, they then developed a priority theme for the group focusing on Safety. This included two sub-themes: a) safety in the household; b) safety in the community park. The children decided that they would like to have access to people to help them address their priority theme - stakeholders to whom they could talk to about their problems and that could support the children by conveying their concerns and wishes to others in a decision-making position.

It is important to ensure young people have time to gradually develop their confidence and abilities to 'participate'. This is best achieved experientially by being active and doing something - **learning to participate by participating**. In particular taking on responsibilities for certain tasks.

Be aware that some young people may have difficulties reading and writing. **Active approaches that involve doing** rather than reflecting and writing should be prioritised.



“When young people feel respected at a young age, they learn to participate”

Tips: Developing skills and confidence can often be best accomplished through creative, interactive and fun group work activities [link to training manual]

Adopt an asset-based approach⁹ recognising and positively affirming abilities and preferences and praise progress and achievement.

If necessary provide help step-by-step if they need it until they are confident to take on more of a role themselves.

Developing opportunities for peer support are a good way for young people to take on active roles whilst also building skills and confidence.

Consider working with other creative professionals e.g. sports coaches, artists, musicians (singing and dancing are an important part of Roma culture in many communities).

Case study example: Girls peer support group, Bulgaria

One of the girls, Helena, in a group in Bulgaria has been found a boy to marry. Helena cannot oppose her father. She is still at school, experiences domestic violence at home and is developing mental health problems. The group have collectively developed ways of providing peer-to-peer support for Helena including working as a group to talk to the boy and his parents, helping her secure support in school and teaming up with the youth club to provide a safe space for awareness raising, education and advocacy.

Task:

⁹ **Assets based approaches** value the positive attributes (capacity, skills, knowledge and connections) that individuals and communities possess rather than focus solely on their needs, deficits and problems. For further information see for example <http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/assets-scotland/>

Think about what you can do to provide young people with information and learning opportunities that can help them develop understanding of their situation. Note down the skills that you and they develop from working together. Return to this list when you finish and see your shared learning journey.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for users to write down their thoughts and skills developed during the learning journey.

10. Supporting action

The attractiveness of ‘participation projects’ for many people is to bring about changes to improve their lives. Participation and empowerment is therefore about exercising increasing levels of influence over the factors that shape their lives. Action can happen at different levels:

Individual level

Groups (e.g. young people)

Within community

City/locality

Nationally/internationally

Finding ways forward is itself a learning experience. There is no one right way of supporting young people’s participation. There may be different ways of responding to an issue or problem and therefore different forms of action and change that are possible.



“If the chosen path by the young people does not lead to the desired goals, the adults should not blame them but help them find a solution and consider other ways”

Action may include:

- Providing activities for themselves and other young people
- Communicating their views & raising awareness about challenges they face
- Engaging in dialogue with local officials
- Going into schools to talk about being Roma and answering questions
- Evaluating and making improvements in their community
- Challenging prejudice and discrimination

It is important to discuss issues that marginalised children and young people raise in the context in which they are living, to make sure that any action does not put them in situations of increased danger. For example, this may involve them thinking about the possible consequences (negative as well as positive) of any actions for their families and communities. In order to avoid possible retaliation if they challenge

powerful people, they may choose to take action anonymously, get support from other allies first or to ask other advocates to act on their behalf.

As facilitators, especially if working with a group for a short amount of time, we also have to be aware that our brief intervention does not have a long term negative impact on community relationships.

Helping young people link with local opportunities structures can often be enough to encourage some kind of action. In this way adult facilitators can play a crucial role as a **bridge or connection to local stakeholders**, organisations and events.

Case study example: Linking with the local authority, France

In a PEER group, young people reflected on the difficulties cycling locally and planned a project to try and get a cycle path developed. Local officials from the Department of Youth and Culture were invited to the project sessions and helped the young people identify 'resource people' including the youth council as a space to talk about their project. The young people prepared for the meeting and presented their project to the other young people from the commune who wanted to support them in their project. A local official responsible for sustainable development was identified and came to explain how their project could happen. Links with this person were maintained whilst the work was being carried out to maintain the young people's motivation and interest. The opening of the bike path was celebrated with a party organised by the young people. The mayor and two councillors were present at the opening event as well as the municipal services and our partners, which was important for the young people to appreciate that their efforts mattered. The young people expressed the desire to continue being involved in projects to make improvements to their neighbourhood and two Roma young people were recruited onto the youth council and will be involved in future international exchange projects.



“Provide opportunities to develop understanding of how to take action in response to different issues.”

A key role of adult facilitators is to **support young people in finding a solution** that is relevant to them. It is important that young people have ownership of the solution or action. However, adults can play a key role by helping young people consider different options for action and challenge young people's views about what is or isn't possible. Young people need to see that change is possible and that their voices are being listened to.

Case study example: Setting up a community leisure club in Barcelona, Spain

A PEER Group decided to set up a Community Leisure Club. Their plan included for some of them to get the official leisure monitor training qualification and also to set up of a formal youth organisation. Roma young men and women together with non-Roma peers and the Roma facilitators, supported by a local youth worker applied for a public tender so that a pilot leisure activity could obtain funding. They obtained funding, and they successfully designed and implemented the activities for a group of 10-12 Roma and non-Roma children during the week of Easter Holiday. Through the pilot they gained not only acknowledgement from the local families, but also recognition from the public administration. The latter helped them organise further activities in the neighbourhood targeting local children. Two of them achieved a 6-month-long contract as community youth workers in the library and the community centre. While most of the group continue to work on the flea market as vendors, they are also actively involved in varied local projects.



When young people have **strong links with officials or politicians** and where the workers supporting them are well **aware of national and international lobbying opportunities**, action can contribute to change at a national level.

Case study example: Influencing national policy on Roma Inclusion, Wales

In Wales a group of eight Gypsy and Traveller young people aged 12-16 decided that they wanted to break down barriers between themselves and Roma from other EU countries. They started contacting people from Roma communities, through the PEER network, and they asked questions about lifestyle and education. They set up a meeting to visit Roma in another area.

While waiting for this meeting, the facilitators told the group that the Wales government were consulting about the Roma integration strategy in Wales. The group decided to write to the person collating the consultation responses, as they had met him at through the Wales National Travelling Ahead Forum for Gypsy and Traveller young people. That official replied, asking them to fill an official consultation response. After the responses were collated, the facilitators wrote to him to ask for detail of the impact the group's response had had. He replied that the views about the need for an advocacy and advice service and linguistic support, in particular, were noted and had some commonality with other respondents. An integrated advice and advocacy service for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma has now been commissioned.

Tips: It is really important not to set young people up to fail

Instead help them identify and plan for **realistic and achievable projects**. This may involve thinking through their actions before they undertake them.

It can be highly motivating to **help young people to see the opportunities, power and control they have**, to think about the effects of their decisions and the possibilities of change.

Help young people to identify both **short term and longer term goals**; starting with making a small difference locally can provide a quick win as well as send a positive message to the community.

Use the links that you have established with local groups and decision makers to help get support for your actions.

Make the most of extra or **unexpected opportunities** when they arise.

Ensure you work with young people **to evaluate and learn from actions** taken. This can reveal how well something worked but can also be a way of learning how to be more effective next time. In many cases it proves to young people that they can make a difference.

Task:

Work with the young people to keep a list of possible goals. What sort of actions could help them achieve these goals and which will take longer?

11. Working with tensions and supporters in the community

Supporting the participation and empowerment of young people may be threatening to some and therefore might bring young people into conflict with adults in the community. This is especially the case if actions are seen to threaten the status quo in the community. This shouldn't be a reason not to do things, but it is important to be respectful and work sensitively and constructively with barriers and conflicts that may arise. Indeed this is part of the learning process that occurs in participatory initiatives.

"Young Roma can feel restricted and bored at home and experience discrimination at school and on the street. It is important to help them to make sense of difficulties such as these and develop strategies to deal with these situations."

"Young Roma have a strong allegiance to their community and may define their priorities around the community and adult's priorities ... It is important to listen to their experience, show support, and validate when they question traditional Roma values"



Remind people that:

"Participation (through social learning) can impact positively on communities and lead to new forms of solidarity among generations beyond family ties".

Inter-generational dialogue is also a form of participation as young people seek to articulate their views and find resolution to issues with others within the wider social context they live.

Try and find spaces and **opportunities for dialogue in the community**. Schools can provide opportunities for bringing groups together but there are also constraints due to their relatively tight formalised regimes. However, look for opportunities to **link up with school and other community events**.

Involving parents in group sessions and projects can help develop understanding and appreciation across generations and can develop commitment of parents. Participation and inclusion is about *‘doing with’* not *‘being separate.’*

Professional advocates can play a crucial role in helping organise and mediate community dialogue and interaction.

Tips: Find allies

Include family members from the start and get their support where possible. Invite them to activities, celebration events and to get involved. Parents become more trustful towards the project and towards young people’s increased decision making capacity when they start to see tangible positive outcomes.

Try to **show how the activities are beneficial** for young people and make a positive difference to the community.

Holding **information sessions** can help community members see the benefit young people derive from their participation activities and can be a way of recruiting support from the community. But, there may be **rivalries** between different families so be careful when seeking wider community support

Collaborate **with workers who have well established relationships** with community members.

Where community members continue to be suspicious and sceptical of ‘youth participation’ activities it is important to **reinforce the resolve** and rationale for participation of the young people taking part.

Help young people develop resilience, patience and persistence to overcome difficulties.

Task:.

Note any tensions you are concerned about in the community where you will work. Who are the allies and supporters who can help you navigate these tensions?

12. Maintaining motivation and sustaining progress

Ensure young people develop a sense of **ownership**. If young people feel the work is theirs they are more likely to drive it.

Change can be motivating - **Seeing things happen** as a result of their efforts helps young people to realise that change is possible and they can help make that happen.

Securing 'buy-in' and **active support from organisations** can be motivating for young people as it sends the message that 'you matter to us.'

The prospect of changing something can sometimes seem large and overwhelming. Helping young people **break down progress into small steps** can make progress more achievable.

Adults should help young people to reflect on their projects and see new choices for themselves. **Playful evaluation methods to see their own progress** are useful for young people. (see Training manual) [Link]

"Make sure that initial outcomes are manageable and achievable so that children can see change being made. Start small."



Cycles of learning, action, evaluation and reflection develops understanding of issues and, through that process, improves the situation of Roma young people to respond through **greater understanding and awareness** of their situation and heightened sense of empowerment through development of skills and confidence.

Participation can open up new opportunities for career choices. It is therefore worthwhile to help participants identify some kind of **training and (paid) employment** for this type of work, for example as a community development worker or participation officer.

Explore how you can provide some kind of formal or informal **accreditation** for young people to acknowledge participation, skills and knowledge, either as stand-alone (e.g. certificates) or as part of any school/college/community work they are doing. It is useful to support young participants in keeping a record of their achievements.

Stimulating curiosity and encouraging inquiry through active exploration and accessing information to understand more about their situation and ways of responding can capture young people's commitment. However, be careful as too much information can be overwhelming.

Continually **reinforcing positive sense of self** as a Roma is important to encourage young people to act and **strive for higher goals** for themselves.

Provide active dedicated and **continuous support**.

Tips: Meeting regularly (at least once a week, or more if possible)

- Create small projects or goals within the bigger project
- Plan for some quick wins
- Use 'side' activities and social events to energize and keep interest
- Put effort into maintaining group identity and cohesion
- Recognise and celebrate achievements
- Reward those who are committed

Tasks:

Think about the individual young people that you are working with. What are they interested in and what will keep their motivation going? If you do not know, you could try asking them!

Useful resources

Carnegie Young People Initiative (2008) *Empowering young people*. London: Carnegie UK Trust

Children's rights alliance for England (2005) *Ready steady change, Participation training handbook for adults*. London: Children's Rights Alliance for England.

Dynamix (2002) *Participation: Spice it up*, Save the Children, Wales.

Dynamix , Travelling Ahead and Young Advisors (2016) *Travelling Ahead Rights Toolkit* Save the Children, Wales. <http://www.travellingahead.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Travelling-Ahead-Rights-Toolkit.pdf>

Kirby, P. 2004 *A guide to actively involving young people in research: for researchers, research commissioners and managers*. London: Involve support unit.

Kirby, P. C. Lanyon, K. Cronin & R. Sinclair (2003) *Building a culture of participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*, London: DES

Larkins, C. (2016) Making the Critical Links: Strategies for Connecting Marginalised Children's Action Research with European Citizenship *Revista de Asistență Socială*, anul XV, 2/2016, www.swreview.ro

Percy-Smith, B. and N. Thomas eds. (2010) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*, London: Routledge

Shaw, C., L-M. Brady and C. Davey (2011) *Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People* London: NCB Research centre

Street, C. and B. Herts (2005) *Putting participation into practice: A guide for practitioners working in services to promote the mental health and well-being of children and young people*. London: Young Minds