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Key Learnings from the PEER Project*

A Combined Research Paper

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Introduction

The inclusion of participation rights in the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN CRC) promotes the right, independent of age, for all citizens to actively express their opinion and take part in decisions regarding all aspects of their lives. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNComRC), the European Commission's EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe's strategy for Building a Europe for and with Children, as well as the 2012 Recommendation on the Participation of Children and Young People Under the Age of 18 underline the importance of the right and have developed guidance on how to encourage and empower children to participate. For many children in European societies there is a growing pool of opportunities not only to take part in education, health care, entertainment, sports and culture, but also to become actors who influence such settings (Davey, Burke, and Shaw 2010).

The level of participation of children and youth varies between countries and according to social and minority status, not all having equal chances to participate (Lundy and Stalford 2013; Lansdown 2011). According to the Youth Report 2012 (European Union 2012) data, youth who are most likely not to participate in any organizational form come from Cyprus (67%), Lithuania and Hungary (both 63%), followed by Romania (60%) (EC- DG Education and Culture 2013, 10; ECORYS 2015). Children coming from low social economic status families and ethnic minorities, especially Roma, have a much lower level of participation. Although progress has been made in some countries, Roma and Traveller children and youth are mostly overlooked, due not only to their age, but also to their social economic status and ethnic prejudices (Schuurman 2012; Sykora 2012). In countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania, Roma children cumulate social disadvantages, such as growing up in poverty, in social and spatial marginalized areas, with limited access to good quality education, barriers to adequate health care, etc., which largely reduce their chances to influence processes, decisions and activities that affect them.

Although widely recognised as fundamental, participation rights are hardly addressed through National Roma Strategies or youth policies (Schuurman 2012). Roma minority ethnics, including children are seen as passive beneficiaries of social policies and benefits, often not tailored according to their needs or worse, built on existing stereotypes. For marginalised children and young people in particular, their right to participate and act as citizens and equal stakeholders needs to be fostered through both research and action (Larkins 2016).

In this context, with funding from an EU Fundamental Rights and Citizenship grant (JUST/2013/FRAC/AG/6230), a consortium of universities, research institutions and NGOs working with Roma children and young people established a participatory action project called PEER¹ (Participation and Empowerment Experiences for Roma youth). Following the Youth Participation in Development Guide (DFID-CSO Youth Working Group 2010) one of our key operating concepts was the *three lens approach* to youth participation: in order for services to work with children as beneficiaries, workers have to engage with them as partners and support youth to become leaders.

In this research paper we describe the aims, general approach and activities of the PEER project. We outline the diverse contexts in which we worked. We then provide an overview of the key learning from the project. Finally, we conclude that Roma children and young people, in order to exercise their right to participate as citizens, will readily engage in participation opportunities whenever they can take an informal and flexible approach to engage with them on issues that they choose and that have direct relevance to their own lives, and whenever structural, institutional and expert support is available to them.

¹ The consortium was coordinated by Dr Prof Maria Roth (Babes-Bolyai University) and the lead researcher was Dr Cath Larkins, University of Central Lancashire. The content of this paper does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the manual lies entirely with the authors. Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged. ©European Union, 2016

Approach of the PEER project

Aims

The general aim of PEER was to create a space for Roma teenagers (age 12-18) and to provide them with networks and resources that would enable them to take action in order to achieve greater respect for their rights. Taking into account the importance of participation for social inclusion and the gap in formal participation levels of Roma/traveller and non/Roma children and youth, our objective was to foster and empower children to gain experiences of meaningful participation in matters that concern them. We saw this process as evolving work that includes the following steps: gathering information on Roma children participation, by involving them in data collection; creating an adequate setting for their participation; building up their participative competencies; facilitating the development of their projects; involving Roma children in evaluating their own progress; feed-back the progress to professionals, communities and social settings. One of our key activities was to develop a favourable context for youth participation by training our primary target group, workers in NGOs and youth or children's services, to build up their readiness to partner with Roma teenagers. Our second line of activities involved working directly with Roma children and young people, to collect their experiences of participation opportunities they had and those they wished for. We aimed to work with at least 2 groups of young Roma from each of the 9 countries involved (approximately 250 adolescents) who were to be further empowered and accompanied through sessions of youth participative action to lead and develop their own projects that would subsequently be put into action. Another line of interest for our projects was that of youth policies.

The PEER project aimed to foster the participation of Roma children by involving them as co-researchers in exploring ways in which they can be more empowered to shape their lives and bring about positive change at local, regional or national levels. Emphasis was placed on participation of Roma children in the context of immediate life issues such as poverty, wellbeing, schooling, and life chances. The participatory research-action process was set to involve Roma children as co-researchers in reflection, learning and action. This approach in itself questions the power relations and can

develop as a constructive critique towards practices that perpetuate inferior positions for young Roma. Unlike many participation initiatives that simply seek the views of the child, this project scrutinized systems and processes that both impede and enable participation. This involved focusing on practices, values, attitudes and professional roles, as well as structures for enabling participation. The project aimed to respond to Roma children's own formulations of meaningful participation rather than driven by professional priorities. It built capacity amongst Roma children in communities and local organisations and at a national level.

Approach

This project is not a continuation of any specific project however it built on existing work with Roma communities in partner countries. The project concept was influenced by previous experience in working with Roma youth, who have expressed their need to participate in shaping the processes that concerns them (Roth, Pop, and Raiu 2013). As researchers or youth/child workers we were previously in the position to “represent the Roma” or “speak for the Roma children” whereas this project intended to empower Roma youth to become equal stakeholders. The project was innovative in its conception as it is informed by a more sophisticated interpretation of participation rooted in critical theories of participatory practice and action research (Larkins 2016; Percy-Smith 2006; Percy-Smith 2010), combined with principles of collaborative-inquiry rather than simplistic formulations of participation as listening. The action research opportunities empowered Roma children to play a central role in the project and develop capacity for change, through the iterative cycles of reflection, learning and action. Play back of learning to adult community members in turn provided opportunities for learning and change, in many contexts.

Taking into account the importance of **participation for social inclusion** and the gap between the participation level of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller and non-Roma children and youth, our **objective** was to foster and empower children to gain experiences of **meaningful participation** in matters that concern them. We valued the great heterogeneity that exists within and among families, and communities generally grouped under the umbrella term of Roma, but recognised the distinctions between

young people who had different characteristics, and may find themselves in completely different socioeconomic, political and legal situations.

Activities

Our aim was to train fifteen workers per country as participatory facilitators and to engage about 15 decision makers per country in awareness-raising activities about Roma children's needs and concerns. Furthermore, in each country, at least 5 young Roma were to gain experience as facilitators, contributing to training materials, training delivery, evaluation, international information sharing and potentially leading group sessions. In practice, these numbers varied greatly, as PEER was operating in such diverse contexts such that in situations where participatory practices were already well established, many more young people were involved in these leadership roles.

After the initial recruitment of PEER groups of young Roma, six sessions were conducted, following the initial training manual. These sessions usually involved groups adapting the 'Magic 6' model to their research contexts. The Magic 6 is a framework for participatory action and learning developed by Cath Larkins (2016) with groups of children and young people in Wales and France² drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire and based on a classic action research cycle originally conceived of by Kurt Lewin (1948) and subsequently developed by Carr and Kemmis (2003)³. It provides a framework of six steps for running participatory action inquiry.

² Do you want to know who? – Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children and young people more than any other group, but also migrant children and children in contact with social welfare services.

³ The action research cycle is also similar to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle

Figure 1: The Magic 6 Framework

The six steps are:

1. Learn participatory methods and identify issues and things they want to make happen
2. Use these methods to choose how to find out more about their issue(s) and making things happen
3. Investigate to find out other people’s ideas (own group, other peers, community)
4. Analyse ideas and plan action for making something happen
5. Act for change using the plan
6. Share understanding further (evaluate, revise, continue)



In adapting this process to fit the particular circumstances in which the group was run, in some cases, the six steps fitted into six sessions of group work – but some steps were faster or slower, or two things happened at the same time, depending on what we were trying to achieve and our starting points.

Through different variations of this process, the groups identified the central issues that concerned them and would like to work on throughout the project and also, to define the steps they needed to make in order to achieve change. In the second phase, through 6 to 12 sessions of continued action, groups initiated a deeper process of learning from action.

Consolidating the learning from these activities three outputs have been created. A [training manual](#) based on successful examples of participatory action research processes that have involved Roma children (and children in other marginalised groups) was produced, piloted and finalised by Roma children and researchers. Learning was deepened through action in the embedded projects in phase 2 and the PAI (participatory action initiatives) in each country provided Roma children and their advocates with opportunities to share information and reflect on challenges and strategies for achieving social change. From these reflections a multi-media guide for young people and a practice guide for professionals were also produced.

Initial analysis of learning from the project suggests that empowerment arose from changes in the systematic inequalities that Roma experience. The nature of these changes was not predicted, but significant levels of empowerment experiences were reported. Embedding these projects in local organisations working with Roma children helped generate a culture of understanding, respect and support for Roma children’s concerns.

In summary, PEER involved three elements:

- 1) Roma young people and researchers who had worked with them shared their past experiences of effective participation and delivered training based on these ideas to workers in NGOs and social services, as well as Roma facilitators ([Training Manual](#)).
- 2) We worked directly with more than 500 Roma children and young people, in 2 to 6 groups in each country, to train, empower and accompany them in at least 6 sessions of youth participative action groups, to take lead and to develop their own projects that they then put into action ([What We Achieved](#)).
- 3) Children and young people, and the workers supporting them, reflected on their experiences of participation opportunities they had through PEER. They shared their advice and experience through face to face and digital networking, creating a multimedia guide to action <http://PEERaction.eu> supported by a [Practice Guide for Professionals](#).

Research context

In all sites we have worked with children and young people who share “Roma” identity (though in a highly heterogeneous way in terms of language, cultural heritage, family structure or interethnic relations, among others), but at the same time all partners focused on children coming from fairly different socioeconomic conditions with sometimes very different experiences with respect to schooling, extra-school activities, community participation, social and cultural rights, etc. Table 1 in Appendix aims to illustrate the degree of diversity in which the partners have developed PEER project.

The PEER project included 478 children and young people in phase one pilot/capacity building sessions and 390 children and young people in phase two embedded

participatory action groups in 31 sites. Some of the children and young people in these embedded groups attended the pilot sessions and some joined PEER at this second stage. This document draws on the data available as of 30 November 2016, drawn from 32 groups in 28 sites, carried out in 9 countries by 10 partner organisations.

Due to the model of intervention and the high dependence on local dynamics, not all the initially planned groups could be fully developed: some lost motivation or different circumstances did not allow for them to carry on. For example, in one site, it was the unsupportive attitude of local administration that made the project fail. Also, timing of the local projects has been uneven within and among partners. This reinforces the need for any organisations who facilitate this work to have strong facilitation skills, awareness of the communities they are working in and to develop collaborative links with the decision makers in relevant institutions. In some instances the PEER approach may need to be supplemented with conflict resolution, mediation or restorative techniques. Some groups could keep to schedule, while others needed more time to elaborate some initial or intermediate steps, or simply they started months later when the social and administrative environment made it feasible. Some partners with existing strong links to Roma communities managed to run four different sites in a parallel way, while others who were making the first steps towards research engagement with Roma communities focussed on one single group. Table 1 also highlights the composition of groups in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. Within the 32 PEER groups included in this report, 27 (82%) were Roma-only groups, although Roma-only does mean homogeneity. For example, in one UK site, Welsh Gypsies and Travellers worked together with immigrant East European Roma, to mention but one example. In 5 PEER sites, young Roma worked together with non-Roma ethnically diverse young people. In terms of gender, 25 groups were mixed gender groups, while 5 were female-only and 3 male-only groups. In terms of age, local realities have widened the limits of our original target-group. Whilst, for example, in Romania, Lithuania and Ireland there were groups with children of primary school age (approx. 8-12), in Spain, the UK and Italy groups young people were mostly selected from lower and upper secondary school age-groups (14-20). Finally, as it was foreseen, groups suffered significant changes in terms of number of young people participating in each session. As participation in most sites was voluntary, participation was often floating. Average group-size varies from 6 to 25. In

12 groups, the average number was lower than 10, while in 20 groups it was equal or higher than 10.

Finally, it should be highlighted that social, economic, housing and school conditions of the Roma communities where PEER interventions have been conducted are highly different. Nevertheless, most of the situations can be described as less favourable than the average, and in many cases, though not in all, Roma families live in harsh situations of social and spatial marginalisation.

Making sense of participation and empowerment experiences

Research partners based their analysis on different evaluation tools shared throughout the project. Namely, they prepared an initial diagnostic guide in order that they can more widely understand the social reality in which they were going to intervene. After the initial training session for professionals and facilitators, a group discussion and an individual questionnaire were conducted in order to identify the participatory context and also to identify expectations about the project. Throughout the phase one six pilot/capacity building sessions with Roma children and young people and NGO workers, participants, facilitators and other professionals conducted a continuous written follow-up and a final session evaluation. In all these tools participation of the children and youth was a principle. Phase two involved on-going creation of multi-media reports (mostly videos) and an “empowerment evaluation”, elaborated by partners involving young Roma, Roma facilitators and NGO workers.

The main aspects of these findings that we highlight in this research paper are: A) What participation and empowerment mean for young Roma; B) What the most meaningful forms of participation and empowerment are for young Roma; C) What makes a difference in enhancing the participation and empowerment; D) Main difficulties and risks young Roma face in participatory projects. E) Roles adults may play to support young people’s participation; F) Structures and practices that are beneficial for supporting youth participation.

In summary, children, young people and their workers took part in a range of activities through which they shared their reflections on learning from PEER. These included:

- Video and audio interviews (with peers or researchers)
- Group draw-write activities
- A telephone based app that enabled audio, photo and video capture with text tagging.
- Evaluation forms

Because intergenerational dialogue was an integral part of this process of data generation it is difficult to disentangle who voiced which observation or piece of advice. The iterative process of sharing advice between the network of young people has complicated this further, as ideas were passed from one group to another, sometimes across national boundaries. In this paper we therefore take the approach of naming the country or participant voicing comments, where origins of this data are clear.

Key learning of the research partners

In spite of the diversity of contexts and groups described above we found important common points of connection between groups and sites which suggest that the PEER project can be seen as a coherent approach or intervention framework, transferable among European countries. This provides key learning in relation to how participation and empowerment are understood; the challenges faced; the most effective and meaningful forms of participation and empowerment for young Roma; the contribution of participation and empowerment to the lives of young Roma involved in PEER; the role of adults and the structures and practices that support Roma youth participation.

What do participation and empowerment mean for young Roma?

Both **key concepts** of our research - participation and empowerment - sounded far too abstract for the young people and children with whom we worked. During the “Magic 6” initial participatory sessions and further embedded activities, children and young people gradually developed an understanding of what these concepts could mean in

practice. Participation and empowerment meant an emphasis on doing rather than just talking; relating to tangible actions and issues in their lives; working in a group towards a shared goal; ethnic pride in capacity to achieve goals and positively contribute; a space for reflection; partnership in decision-making; and development of skills and confidence over time. These themes are illustrated below.

In most of the intervention sites previous work on citizenship or community participation had not occurred. The idea, from a critical perspective, that young people should play an active role in the change they identify as desirable was mostly absent. Young people were generally accustomed to following adults' instructions, in a scholastic way, according to the assumption that they as pupils cannot make sense make meaningful contributions to the resolution of a problem, with the (sometimes young) adult leader expected to take the lead.

An NGO worker from the Lithuania team claims:

“Some Roma have a bright vision for their future but no plans for how to achieve it.”

A key issue of the PEER project was therefore to challenge views about young people's agency and ability as competent change agents. In some sites young people offered excellent ideas on what to change and how, but did not believe they had the capacity to do so.

“Actually I had no idea what we were doing here. It was only much later that I got to understand it. We had an initial idea, to set up something, but we didn't know it was possible at all...” (Spain 1, Roma young person)

Through taking part in participatory action research in PEER children and young people came to understand that their experience and knowledge about their life and context are crucial elements in order to develop ideas for change. This fact helped increase their commitment and motivation to participate in the project in order to achieve a change. Critical reflection or analysis of the situation and the possibilities constituted a key element of the project. Nevertheless, young people easily lost interest and motivation

with abstract analysis, discussion and reflection. In all sites where young people tested their limits, experienced possibilities and generated new ideas **“doing rather than just talking”** was key. As stated in Bulgaria “having a cause and responding to it” could be identified as a crucial element of the activities.

The idea of empowerment to participate as ‘having a cause and responding to it’ could operate both at a personal or collective level, as further developed in the next subsection. At the same time, working together to promote the rights of other Roma or to respond to the needs of homeless people were collective goals that groups worked on together in the UK enabling them to feel that:

“This is different. In other groups we just talk. Here we are actually doing something.” (UK, Roma young person)

We gathered repeated evidence that “Roma [young people’s] participation is closely linked to the degree of investment in the topic they feel they have a claim to and... unites them as a cohesive group” (Italy). **Working in group for a goal that was identified together** was emphasized as a positive experience by young people in the PEER project. Group work, including conflict and their resolution, create strong feelings of solidarity and belonging. For young Roma in England, this was key to their understanding of what participation means:

“I don’t think anyone knows what participation means as it means different things to different people, but I think they are realising it means encouragement...giving people tasks... developing confidence... I think if you ask them they would probably say ‘it means include’.” (UK, Roma Facilitator)

Inclusion in PEER groups had different meanings in different contexts. In most of the sites selection process was made on a voluntary basis and group-members were recruited based on young people’s own networks. In other sites, PEER was organised in institutional settings, such as in school from different groups. Some young people made use of the project to achieve a group association to achieve a change in their life, in some cases including a focus on the possibility of leisure.

Beyond a shared pride of the achieved goals, in many PEER groups, an **ethnic pride** has developed - as opposed to the stereotypical views by the mainstream society - emphasizing a positive (self) image of the Roma youngster **who can achieve goals and contribute positive benefits** to the local community. It was especially interesting to observe how ethnically mixed PEER groups gave a chance for young Roma people to enjoy working together with non-Roma on equal terms.

“And the most important, that I think that the most important was that we were together, Roma and non-Roma together. We have overcome many barriers. Thanks to this opportunity, we had the chance to overcome them. Together.” (Spain 1, Roma young person)

Most evident meaning of participation, for many young people, includes organising a group, working together and involving new members, mainly young peers, but also adults. For Roma youth, most of whom have experienced discriminative treatments in some field of their life, engaging with other non-Roma peers and adults outside of their ethnic community may have a great relevance through participatory projects, such as it was the case in France, Spain or Bulgaria. It is relevant in as much as they take young people beyond participation as purely leisure activity and **provides space for reflection and critical thinking about their lives.**

In PEER sites young people developed an understanding of participation directly related to **partnership and inclusion in decision making, and enhancing the responsibility for this.** In this sense, empowerment becomes evident when these young people recognise their own agency and capacity to change elements of their context. While the experience of agency is far too often absent in the life of those youth who participated in PEER, through the project process they could develop it, in highly different forms, and in very diverse extent. Even in the very same sites, individual empowerment may reach very different levels.

Following Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) **agency** can be understood as related to endowment of a wide range of assets such as psychological, informational, organisational, material, social, financial or human assets. On the other hand,

opportunity structure is may be crucial in order for one to be able to develop and exercise ones agency. Paradoxically, people can develop a sense of their own agency and empowerment irrespective of opportunity structures, indeed often in opposition to these. The structure for empowerment can be understood in terms of formal institutions (law, acts, etc.) and informal institutions such as norms, community culture, family, customs or fashion. In this sense, children and young people may develop a **sense of empowerment** when they have access to opportunities and resources such as:

- Awareness through skill building: understanding how decisions are made
- Engagement with non-Roma: ethnically mixed groups help overcome stereotyped prejudices
- Focusing on and enhancing personal abilities – e.g. through communication skill building or learning how to articulate and negotiate one’s perspective in a group with others.
- Taking up responsibilities, and being provided trust by (non-Roma) adults to take on roles and carry on tasks.
- Becoming connected to and partly engaged with formal minority representative structures (Romani organisations)
- Understanding how institutional expressions of minority recognition are achieved and supported by public administrations and private organisations (such as International Roma Day, Roma Genocide Remembrance Day, etc.)

In the PEER project young people did not always readily engage in autonomous action but instead benefited from the opportunities provided by the project to start to develop and gradually exercise a sense of agency through engagement. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, developing knowledge, skills, aptitudes and confidence to participate, especially, together with people outside their ethnic community is a long process that takes time and requires patience in order not to overwhelm young people with responsibilities.

“I didn’t believe we were going to get so far. You know? Because the thing is that we got in touch with important people from the City Hall. We assisted very important events. We have set up the Leisure Club during the Easter holiday. I mean, we’ve done quite a lot of important things.” (Spain 2, Roma young person)

Therefore, we can conclude that engaging with **participation develops meaning over considerable time** for groups with little or no experience and achieved results may significantly vary depending on structural, community-related or individual factors.

Schooling is generally seen in public discourses as the central mechanism for young Roma empowerment – through education they can change their life and enhance their capacity for social participation. Nevertheless, for young people we worked with who had limited cultural capital school is not necessarily the most important scene where they can experience meaningful ways of participation. For example, in France “young Roma found it difficult to see the link between the project and their own lives”.

Difficulties that young Roma face when seeking to participate

The socio-economic conditions in which the Roma involved in PEER project live have a significant impact on their social and political participation. In this sense, together with young Roma we have identified the most significant and locally different forms of difficulties that hinder them from successful participation and to achieve change. In sum, the main common internal difficulties include low expectations, little knowledge about the system, poor social capital, and community norms, while most often mentioned external difficulties include lack of access to public services, labour market, experience of spatial and social segregation and racism. Nevertheless, internal and external difficulties are closely connected and mutually feed themselves.

Due to their experience of (spatial, social or both) marginalisation, Roma young people often have shared low expectations of participation opportunities. As emerged from initial conversations, they very often do not believe that dominant social norms can be changed or challenged. Strong structural barriers to participation and empowerment are often internalised by individuals and even reproduced through “folk discourses” (or cultural models) of an ethnic community on how to succeed in society. The difficulties arising from individuals’ lack of confidence in speaking out are reinforced by material conditions and institutional attitudes. These barriers could be overcome with time, support and persistence from facilitators. The internal difficulties also include resistance

or lack of motivation to speak out (in public), doubting their own abilities (spoken and written skills), and negative social mirroring of their ethnic and local community which responds to the logics of self-fulfilling prophecy.

As mentioned before, the scope and type of structural disadvantage greatly varies from site to site, from country to country. Nevertheless, most frequently this included lack of equal access to quality schooling, other public services or to the labour market. Also other everyday realities stemming from poor living conditions, stereotyping, prejudices, institutional and social segregation, anti-Gypsyism, etc. mean that the Roma young people see little help from institutions (school, social services, etc.) and institutional agents (teachers, social workers, etc.). For example, in sites where PEER project was carried out in a school, some Roma children were prohibited from PEER activities as a form of punishment for bad behaviour. In another site, in a school setting, even if in PEER activities children showed very positive attitudes towards studies, the school remained very inflexible with them in terms of repeating their year. These two examples show that while school has a great potential to act as a principal agent of social inclusion and community participation, opportunities for participation are strictly constrained by school schedule (time), space and school rules, remaining a paradoxical space for the Roma (see cases of Ireland and Cyprus).

Most Roma young people involved in PEER had little previous experience of participation in horizontal (or less vertical) structures. This is why at the beginning of the project the concept of ‘participation’ and ‘change’ had very different meaning for the young people than at the second part of the process.

“The truth is that it [the PEER project] was rather new for me, something horizontal. Everything used to be vertical, you know? Scale-like, hierarchical, you know, never about listening to us.” (Spain 3, Young Roma person)

The role of adults in providing continuous support was highlighted in each PEER site as essential to overcome difficulties. As an Irish project worker argues, patience and persistence:

“ability to enjoy working with children toward meaningful participation is key to success... The children need to be respected and valued and need to understand we are there to support and help them, to become more empowered” (Ireland, project worker).

Going against community norms is not an easy task for young Roma, and fear of failure is an important impediment for young Roma. It varies from site to site, but in many PEER sites crossing even the physical borders of the neighbourhood was a challenge for the group, not to mention activities challenging or questioning some well-established community rules. In this sense, negotiation with family and community members was of great importance. For example, in Spain the evangelical church was a key agent in supporting as well as undermining PEER project’s goals. Evidently, this posed a significant amount of tension for young Roma having to polarize between loyalty to community rules and ethnic culture on the one hand and wider social inclusion on the other hand. These dichotomies are hard to work in circumstances (e.g. Cyprus, France PEER sites) where viewing social life and social relations from a critical perspective is not an everyday practice. But we could also see positive examples of that. If families consider that a participatory activity has labour-market inclusion potential, that may improve youth’s employability, it may emerge as a reasonable argument even if it implies challenging some more traditional family roles and gender status.

“I also have to get in touch with boys, because for example, if tomorrow I have a job, I’ll work together with boys and girls. I’ll have to be in touch with everybody. So I have to get accustomed to be in touch with boys and girls, from different... Get the point? So, my parents didn’t say anything about that, they are not against it, but rather in favour.” (Spain 1, young Roma woman)

Furthermore, an ethnically, gender- and age- inclusive way of participation lets us challenge the stereotypes and stigma associated with the Roma. For this reason, the case of Cyprus suggests that **participation may be easier outside of the local community**, despite the fact that family relations and ethnic community may strongly affect young people’s life and opportunities. These multiple and sometimes contrary pressures

manifested in several sites. For example, in Bulgaria, young people's search for education to foster labour market integration and community's expectation created strong tensions. In one Spanish site community was divided with respect to the project. While some families were absolutely supporting, others retreated help in a passive way.

Forms of participation and empowerment that are most effective and meaningful for young Roma

Empowering young Roma to participate is a long and non-linear process. In each PEER sites group dynamics resulted in different short-term result. It succeeded or required new approach depending on the individuals, social relations, institutional and structural, contextual factors. Nevertheless, there were some forms of participation that seemed supportive in most groups that we sum up here, and detail below.

- Issues identified by them that relate to their lives;
- Non written forms
- Concrete action for change rather than requests for recognition
- Engagement with achievable goals
- Engagement with complex issues sustained over time supported by capacity building
- Connection with others

The PEER project aimed to follow the rhythm of young people, rather than keeping to a previously established agenda of participation. Although it cannot be guaranteed that this flexible approach will lead to successful results, as young people do not always find it necessary to initiate a participation process; nevertheless, there are clear signs that when motivation for participation stems from within the group it produces more sustainable and meaningful results for them. **It is crucial that the focus is put on issues identified by the young people**, rather than by adult professionals. As a Bulgarian NGO worker stated, the central goal of participation must be “close to the everyday lives of young Roma, not something extraordinary but **something they can relate to and comprehend as part of normal life**” (Bulgaria). Although, young Roma people tended to not have an elaborate or natural orientation towards participation, they do exhibit preferences for horizontal decision-making processes. Building skills to help young people search for jobs, or supporting girls in education initiatives in order that they can develop awareness and resilience in responding to violence were tangible

forms of participation with a well-defined goal and means. As the Romanian team argued “participation is meaningful **when it relates to tangible actions and specific issues in the lives of the young people**”. Enhancing their employability, negotiating to have a community space they can use, obtaining a say in messages the school sends out are all very tangible goals that are easy to break down into steps of action.

”It was very motivating for them, that we sold something that was in line with their motivation of that moment: i.e. having job, having money to live their life. Through this process, we were able to motivate them, insert them into the world of participation in order that they understood that in the neighbourhood, there’s a lot to do.” (Spain, Roma facilitator)

One of the crucial points that affected young Roma’s possibilities to succeed in participation was whether they **believed that they could achieve significant changes**. On the other hand, their degree of autonomy to choose the central topic of the project was also important to be able to identify themselves with it. This of course had a lot to do with previous participatory experiences (for example in school, or in their neighbourhoods) and the opportunity structure that supported or hindered their efforts.

“Children need to believe that their activity brought about meaningful results and change because of their work not the work of the adult.”(Ireland, NGO worker)

“By our own decision, we decided to do it.” (Spain 2, Roma facilitator)

Also in different sites, young Roma chose active modes of self-expression such as using music or dance to articulate their perspectives and narrative. While the horizontal decision-making is often linked to community norms, the artistic self-expression may respond to the scarce, unknown or unexplored legitimate spaces mainstream society tends to provide minority groups to participate. While, in general terms it may be thought that children express themselves more easily and honestly through active, creative participatory approaches; in PEER these approaches were not restricted just to the youngest age-group rather are relevant to young people of all ages. **Non-written forms of participation** were crucial in clearly separating community participation from school-related (more scholastic and academic) forms of participation. Creative activities

such as role play, movement, music, dance and visualisation are more attractive to young people than written or simply spoken activities. In some sites young people were enthusiastic about video work, while in other sites it was the edited video that motivated young people to learn how to create further visual materials, just another form of getting involved into experimental group activities, that is, to practice community participation.

Rather than abstract goals (such as the recognition of the Roma on a local level), tangible concrete effects were necessary to motivate young people to act. A good example for that is the project in one Bulgarian site: here, young Roma decided to conduct peer-to-peer HIV prevention work. Where their efforts did not result in change, young people often lost interest. This example calls the attention to the necessary balance between leaving sufficient time for the learning and change process, but aiming to produce quick wins for young people (with certain institutional support). For example, in one Spanish site, setting up a formal youth organisation was a long and tedious process for the PEER group, but it turned to produce a quick result when the organisation (still not officially registered) won a public tender to organise youth activities.

Some PEER experiences show that it is recommended to start with easier to achieve issues. Nevertheless this strategy can potentially leave issues that most affect young Roma's life untouched. We argue that any participatory process should engage with the complexities at play. This, however, may take time and should necessarily engage individuals outside of the ethnic community. These aspects are crucial in order that the process have durable impact on young people's lives.

“This project is not only for us but we can participate and that the people see our work that it is not just for us. We do it with the [non-Roma] people so that they see what we are doing. It is not work in vain, as we say”. (Spain 2, young Roma person)

Beyond acting and designing further steps, **capacity building** is a crucial element for young Roma in order that they can formulate and publicly share their experience. Rather than communication tools and strategies it was team building and cooperation that was positively seen by young Roma in their process.

“They explained us many things: how to set up a leisure club. They gave us a lot of ideas and stuff. And well, little by little. And also, how to do a teamwork.” (Spain 1, young Roma person)

In this line of argument, in-group diversity has grown to be recognised and positively valued by young Roma. PEER groups were mostly Roma only, in some sites both ethnic and gender mix was achieved in the process of recruitment. While homogeneity helps create a feeling of safety and trust, heterogeneity resulted very usefully in developing capacities of negotiation, dialogue, intermediation and decision making process. **Ethnic heterogeneity provided opportunity for the young Roma to recognise their status as young citizens, rather than focusing on their minority condition.**

“On the first day I felt uncomfortable. Because I had never worked with people like... Roma and I felt a bit like at unease. But after assisting the sessions I felt more self-confident. And I got to know them better.” (Spain 1, young Roma person)

Why participation and empowerment for young Roma?

Taking part in activities focused on achieving change and empowerment for young Roma benefited them and their communities in a number of ways, but there were also specific ways in which the PEER participation process offered distinct advantages. At a personal level, young people felt heard and developed confidence in the meaningfulness and usefulness of formal participation. Building their communication, cooperation and reflection skills equips them with personal assets that they can choose to use in future participation activities.

As a group, participation (in PEER) enabled them to develop networks, attract funding to support their goals and to challenge age- or gender- based limits. Thanks to the supportive networks PEER groups created, new opportunities were opened up to them. Overall this enabled the groups to bring about concrete changes in their circumstances. When they did not achieve external changes, however, the participation activities were still valuable in building solidarity.

Feeling respected helps children develop confidence in their own contribution, and also to become more engaged into different forms of community participation. Cypriot partners claim that among the Cypriot Roma:

“there is a lack of a culture of participation and having their voice heard, therefore awareness raising is an important first step before moving to actions and change” (Cyprus).

In contrast, one UK Roma facilitator commented:

“people have got it all wrong. In our communities we talk to each other, we ask younger generations. We listen to each other and young people are involved.”

However, at the end of PEER young people in the UK described being “more confident”, “proud” and “motivated to make change”. They were “able to get our point across in a safe comfortable environment” and they felt able to use videos to “spread our message very far rather than just telling people around us”.

So whilst some partners have also emphasized that many young Roma are not “ready to participate”, it is important to clarify that this is about participating in formal invited participation space and that this willingness can develop in a relatively short time. For that reason, it is important not to begin interventions with the high expectations of quick results. Rather it is crucial to provide young Roma with time and opportunity to **build skills and confidence in the meaningfulness and usefulness of formal participation.**

The Lithuanian partner recognises that:

*“It takes time and effort to achieve real changes in their lives and mind-set”
(Lithuania, project worker)*

In this sense, team building, cooperation and experimental learning process are crucial reasons to engage in participation and empowerment activities.

*“Discussions about changes are not common, but when people start talking,
others want to be involved.” (Lithuania, project worker)*

*“Using an action research process repeatedly, models are reproduced an
the process of participation becomes internalized” (France, project worker)*

Essential skills of communication, presentation, hearing other perspectives, cooperation and reflecting on experience are developed through activities that involve sharing stories from experience. These sharing exercises were often used to engage young people in cycles of action and reflection, as crucial phases of critical learning and conscientization (Freire 1970). As the French team highlighted “emancipation is triggered by active participation, but needs the continual support from advocates”. It is important not to understand emancipation or empowerment as a sort of instant of enlightenment, but rather a continuous process of learning in relation to both on structure and agency. Taking on more and more demanding and complex roles and responsibilities is crucial in endowing one’s agency and increasing empowerment. Critical reflection is important in order to acknowledge one’s own process of empowerment both on an individual and group level, in terms of how things are and how things might be. Building these communication, cooperation and reflection skills

equips young people with personal assets that they can choose to use in future participation activities.

Beyond recognising the development of skills and capacities, young people engaged in concrete actions successfully result in processes of change, **developed networks and attracted funding**: for example, meeting with important local stakeholders, carrying out short pilot-projects, or obtaining financial support for the planned activity. Meeting with “important people” let Roma people see beyond the everyday framework of their life, it expands their world view and widens their perceived opportunity structure.

“Becoming aware of how decisions are made provides learning for participation.”(Spain, Roma NGO worker)

“When they felt considered by outsiders to the project they have gained self-confidence and awareness both on their capacity and on the situation about the context in which they live.” (Italy, Project worker)

Beyond local contacts; ethnic associations, university workers and other professionals with high-level contacts proved useful for young people in their capacity as bridging agents to foster the connection of young people’s project to a wider and more influential audience. This benefited the young people in terms of recognition of their work and opening new opportunities for them.

Because the thing is that we got in touch with important people from the City Hall. We assisted very important events. We have set up the Leisure Club during the Easter holiday. I mean, we’ve done quite a lot of important things. (Spain, Roma young person)

Participation action groups are also beneficial to Roma children and young people because they can bring relatively rapid change in circumstances on issues that concern them. Many of these changes achieved were in relation to leisure activities available to Roma children and young people and crucially young people were active in organising these for themselves by, for example, organising a graduation ball, a local community-

level football game. These leisure activities were of vital importance to many young people as they enabled their communities to become more visible to the wider public, and also many of them had been previously excluded from regular use of formal leisure activities. In some instances, organising leisure activities created other long term legacies in terms of Roma young people becoming qualified leisure instructors or physical resources being created. In two instances PEER groups succeeded in challenging reluctance to allow young Roma or Travellers to access existing municipal leisure services and became included in these spaces. At a practice level, PEER groups enabled some children in schools to feel more included and some schools took measures for their safety, educational enhancement and wellbeing, often through young people's direct involvement in awareness raising work, the creation of social inclusion guidance and conflict resolution workshops. Activities in non-profit organizations were changed to fit the needs of the young people in a better way. In a young offender institution, young people were successful in getting computers donated and gaining access to the internet.

At a more public or policy level PEER group members took part in conferences, media events, meetings with politicians and each other in national and international events and political lobbying. In some instances, these were the first meetings with municipal or institutional officials that had ever occurred and have acted to raise understanding of their conditions and to lobby for young people's inclusion in the resolution of these problems. Through lobbying activities they were at times able to bring about policy change, for example challenging the divide between Gypsy/Traveller and Roma services and contributing to the development of municipal Education outcome indicators that are more sensitive to Roma cultures. They were also able to gain more resources in community spaces, such as a new swing in a playground and a cycle path to their accommodation site. In some places, these meetings with local organisations have become regular, so that ongoing forums for dialogue have been created with a neighbourhood association, youth centre or library. Whilst it is hard to measure changes in public attitudes, significant aspects of the PEER groups work was also focussed on raising public awareness of and value for Roma cultures, history, customs and tradition through formal presentations, books, cultural displays and exhibitions which may have a long term impact. Further policy change may arise over the longer term as PEER group

recommendations have been fed into national policy making fora including ministries and responses to consultation documents.

It is true though, that in some PEER sites, due to the lack of practice young Roma did not always come up with very original proposals in defining what to change. Rather their original contribution can be highlighted in **how**, through what process, they proposed to change present reality. Listening to young Roma, youth workers reported to have learnt a lot in understanding how the solution of a problem was meaningful for young Roma. Even if the central problems (such as discrimination, lack of community spaces, health issues, etc.) were evident both for professionals and Roma youth, the learning derived from sharing experiences and stories related to the problem, and looking for solutions in creative and negotiated ways “*create new forms of solidarity, belonging and commitment to a common goal*” not only within the Roma community but also among a range of stakeholders in the local community (Spain).

“The most important in a group, if you want to set up a leisure club is to remain united. Remain united, share ideas. Both good and bad ideas”
(Spain 1, young Roma woman)

The above quotation of a young Roma woman highlights two main issues. First, that it is not the common solution, but the process of sharing and negotiating standpoints that is crucial. Second, as that particular group included both Roma and non-Roma youth, group members highlighted that they actively participated not in relation to the condition of Roma youth, but rather that understanding the situation of “local youth” was especially important for them: united not in ethnic terms, but in terms of shared interests and goals. Not being treated as a ‘Roma group’ highlighted the value of mixed Roma and non-Roma groups to promote learning and connections between communities and challenge stereotypes. This was echoed in the mixed Roma/non-Roma group in the UK. Following this line of argument, some partners underlined that participation and empowerment of young Roma is about “inter-cultural work”.

“Several non-Roma friends came to help us during the neighbourhood festival (festa major). And they saw us, with sort of envy, doing it very well”
[Spain3, Roma young person]

The role of adults in supporting the participation of young Roma

Adults, undoubtedly, play a key role as supporting agents in the participation of young Roma. PEER projects showed that adults should provide unconditional, non-judgemental, positive support on a sustained basis. In some sites supporting agents have clear impact on young people: once a group is established and goals are defined the more support, through facilitating and enabling, is provided by adults the more motivated young people become. Nevertheless, it is not always like that. Facilitators had a clear role in modulating the moral support and guidance they provided to suit their understanding of the groups' and individuals' needs. Guidance on how to access information and communicate their ideas was particularly valued. Facilitators who shared the ethnic origin of their participants enabled young people's trust in a collaborative process. Municipal officials provided support by listening. Parents' role was seen by PEER partners as very important in supporting as well as limiting young Roma's participation, self-determination and agency. Adults also had a vital role in providing and sustaining a safe space for reflection.

Young people's own rhythm should always be respected. **Overwhelming support may harm their autonomy or may impose adults' agenda**, instead of letting young people's own plans develop unhindered. For example, in one site in Spain, young people failed to call a training centre to enrol in a leisure instructors' course. Coordinators and facilitators did not intervene and the impact of this failure turned out to be a very positive learning experience for young people's motivation. They felt shame and frustration because they could not start working on their own project as they had no accredited diploma as instructors. As a consequence they actively sought an alternative opportunity to train themselves. In this latter case, adults' main role was limited to moral support and as a resource, attending some of their meetings to help them find other means of search (internet, influential acquaintances, well-known training agencies, etc.). As one UK Roma facilitator explained:

“I know it looks like I am not doing anything. But my role is to just be there. And they will come and ask if they want something. They need the space to take on the responsibilities themselves”.

The French partner expressed it in the following way: it is important that adults listen to young people’s ideas “from their views, [we have to] know how to ‘bounce’ onto topics that seem innocuous but that can express genuine needs or questions” and support them as their ideas develop.

It is crucial that adults trust young people and their potential to do things that their parents had not done. Parents and other adults also play a role as potential resource and a guide in access to information, as we could see in the above example. Adults’ **advice, mediation, or guidance** may be especially useful in communicating their ideas through public acts, manifests, activism, letters, or personal meetings with stakeholders or peers.

Another significant role of adults, mentioned by PEER partners, is being a **role model** or a trusted confidante. Adults coming from similar sociocultural realities may become an authentic and tangible model, a pioneer for young people, one whose steps can be reproduced or followed with reasonable efforts. Role models are not only helpful for the young people, but also for their families. Many parents limit their expectations towards their children as they are not aware of trajectories of successful Roma people and role models can make cultural models more flexible for example with respect to schooling, leisure activities, access to labour market, interethnic friendships or other social roles and relations. On the other hand adults serving as role models may also become a trusted confidante who can better understand young people’s struggle for participation and change and the corresponding challenges.

Among all these adult stakeholders one of the most important functions mentioned by PEER partners was their capacity to create and **maintain a safe and productive environment** for the young people so that they can reflect critically on their life, social and physical environment and they can develop skills to respond to them.

Roma facilitators had a central role in PEER, as further explained below. Facilitators', advocates' and other professionals' role is fundamental in the empowering process, especially if they have previous experience of informal education or participatory projects. The distinct advantage here was the **shared ethnic origin** of many facilitators as they could more easily serve for young Roma as role models and credible/tangible examples to follow, or leaders to trust in collaborative processes.

One Roma facilitator claims:

“I am very proud of achieving to gather girls in their different ages that they create a routine that it isn't new for us to start a course anymore. That it is nothing new for them anymore...” (Roma facilitator in Spain 2)

Another young Roma woman from one site in Spain explains the role of the local Roma coordinator and the Roma facilitators in delivering them ideas, methods and suggestions how to start and carry on. A local Roma coordinator reflects on Roma facilitators' learning process in this way:

“She [Roma facilitator] recognizes by herself that she didn't understand well her role as a facilitator. But step by step, after some sessions, she took the lead but in a very horizontal sense” (Local Roma coordinator, Spain 2)

Support from adults outside of the participation group can provide an enabling environment. An important structural condition for empowerment is having key professionals in the municipality who listen to the voices of young Roma, both at the administrative and intervention levels. The caring attention of these professionals provides them with a message that their initiatives are highly valued and respected.

“Being listened to and having one's opinion respected (and taken into account) is an important experience for the young Roma women.” (Spain)

Beyond experts' support, obtaining wider backing of local community, including families and institutions enabled the achievement of successful outcomes. The Spanish team emphasized that “Children gain more power and confidence in promoting change

when parents are involved” (Spain). Part of the Spanish PEER groups’ effort was addressed to the communication towards their own ethnic community (families, evangelic church, Roma leaders, etc.) in order to obtain approval and to avoid internal conflicts, especially for young Roma women who may exceed some gendered limits generally established in local Roma communities.

Structures and practices beneficial for supporting youth participation

PEER project has provided evidence that young people, and in our case young Roma, show a preference for informal, rather than formal structures of participation. They tended to choose informal activities that focus on issues related to their everyday experiences, rather than abstract topics, even if concrete issues may hit wider domains such as negative stereotypes, prejudices, racism or segregation. The advantage of this approach is that it does not establish hierarchies between young people but networks and links to formal institutions of decision-making remain vital (Kiili and Larkins 2016). In PEER this balance was achieved by having time for youngsters to build skills and move into leadership roles and facilitators having flexible informal models of working which enable them to take a back seat. Similarly, PEER groups in several sites were gender-mixed. Participatory practices created situations that helped overcome inequalities related to gender roles often present in marginalised, poor communities. The fact that groups permitted age flexibility, and the presence of older Roma facilitators fostered intergenerational learning. Despite the informal flexible methods, links to opportunities beyond their immediate environments were maintained through intercultural encounters.

Having a sufficiently long time frame is crucial in order that young people can develop understanding of their social environment and build skills and confidence to act on it. In this sense, in order to support initial engagement of young Roma, cultural events can be a good opportunity for them to “demonstrate their competence, enhance self-esteem and ethnical pride”, remarks the Lithuanian partner. Nevertheless, it is important to be clear whether such activities have been initiated by young people themselves, if not it could be that children are not being invited to participate, but rather they are being invited to labour in the achievement of someone else’s goal (Kiili and Larkins 2016). One should

also be cautious with the risk of reproducing ethnic or cultural stereotypes and focusing on Roma culture when problems are fundamentally structural. Activities do not necessarily have to be linked with Roma culture. In Spain, for example, it was not the “understanding” of Roma culture that generated improving social image about the Roma youth, but the very fact that they started to actively participate in local community issues, such as setting up a children’s leisure club, organising neighbourhood festivity events.

“we’ve done a lot of work. And we achieved very much. People count on us, people are really satisfied with us. The neighbourhood is very satisfied with us.” (young Roma woman, Spain 1)

“This project is not only for us but we can participate and that the people see our work that it is not just for us. We do it with the people so that they see what we are doing. It is not work in vain, as we say.” (young Roma woman, Spain 2)

As we previously mentioned, semi-formal **group work** is a good way for young people to develop other forms of relationship among themselves, neither that of school mates, nor that of family members. Several young people experienced that through group work some community-based relations are reorganised (for example generation or gender gaps are bridged), and new types of solidarity become relevant. Building confidence in both older and newly built relations is basic in order that through participation some level of empowerment is achieved. However, individual differences must all the time be taken into consideration. Not all young people need the same support to maintain their interest and commitment. Therefore, guidance and toolkits should be adapted to the each context, process and individual or group need. The French PEER team mentioned:

“What is important is not tools but mental and intellectual availability of people facilitating, public infrastructures that can work in ways that facilitate youth engagement and work with young people’s rhythm”

Flexibility and adaptability are basic principles that facilitators must bear in mind. Many PEER partners emphasized the **need for flexibility** as a major point to bear in mind working with young people. Working in the young people's rhythms instead of keeping to a previously established agenda was fundamental in all sites. In this sense, the participation guide shared by PEER partners was used as a resource tool, rather than a strictly controlled step-by-step process to follow. As our original planning suggested, adults cannot pretend to know what the major issues are for local young Roma or what is meaningful or appropriate in the way they respond to these issues. So, through following a flexible process, group processes provided space and time for **sharing experience** that triggered discussions, dialogue on what to change and how. This motivated group members to **commit to involvement**. They have to be prepared to improvise and not to insist on their own agenda against young people's lead. In some cases facilitators' development was clearly tangible throughout the project process:

“I have learned how to do workshops or to not get the girls bored. Having this responsibility for me means a lot” (Spain 2, young Roma facilitator)

“There were three forms, three bases. (1) We should activate them. And then in the second phase, we activate them, and (2) they participate actively. And then comes the third phase in which (3) the children get activated on their own and they define and think and push things forward on their own. So this third phase, I had never targeted it in any of the previous intervention projects I participated in.” (Spain 1, young Roma facilitator)

Participation needs a structure of opportunities that facilitate skills and abilities through experimentation in active involvement, being them social skills (team work, delegation, decision making, group dynamics, etc.) and practical abilities (writing letters, legal steps, communication, etc.).

“I've learnt to have more initiatives. We have to... if we begin something, to push it forward.” (Spain 1, young non-Roma man)

“I’ve learnt how to keep in touch with others. With the group I belong to currently. And I’ve learnt how to do team work. How to ask for help if needed. And if I have an idea, share my idea, even if sometimes I remain mute, but anyway.” (Young non-Roma woman, Spain 1)

Finally, we found that actions that go beyond young people’s usual living context are important elements of change in as much as these experiences widen young people’s world view and the perception of the scope of their opportunities. **Intercultural encounters** are of key importance in this process, through which young Roma gain new experiences towards the change.

“It is undoubtable that it matured them [young Roma], they had to face challenges every time. Every time we demanded a bit more from them, a bit more. And they responded well all the time.” (Local Roma coordinator, Spain 1)

Some conclusions of the PEER project: how to enable Roma children and youth participation

The participation rights in the UN CRC (1989) and guidance on interpretation of these rights (UNComRC 2009) underline that independent of age, all citizens have the right to actively express their opinion and take part in decisions that affect their lives. However, the level of participation of children and youth varies between countries and according to social and minority status, not all having equal chances to participate (Lansdown 2011).

PEER was initiated based on three main concerns:

- 1) Youth and children from low social economic status families and ethnic minorities, especially Roma, have a much lower level of participation, than those from other social groups.
- 2) Youth strategies or policies do not tend to focus on youth from low social economic status families and ethnic minorities.
- 3) There is a “marked **absence of Roma youth issues and concerns in policies and programmes** addressing the Roma communities” (Council of Europe 2013). Particularly, participation rights are hardly addressed through National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) or national youth policies.

For Roma youth in particular, their right to participate and act as citizens and equal stakeholders needs to be fostered developmentally through both research and action.

In many countries where PEER operated (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, France) participatory approaches to engage young people in decision making on their own life are scarce and they tend to focus on institutionalised structures (school-based, local, regional, state-level youth councils, etc.), rather than grassroots initiatives. Roma youth are rarely present in the institutionalised forms of participation on a voluntary basis. In other countries (e.g. UK, Ireland) youth participatory processes are more wide-spread, but Roma youth have very limited experience in taking part of them. Even if they participate, they are rarely in the arena where main decisions are taken, or in external relations with other organisations or institutions. The findings from the evaluation of the PEER project indicate that there is potential for change in these structural inequalities in Roma children and young people’s access to participation opportunities.

Learning from this process demonstrates that Roma children and young people will readily engage in participation opportunities that take an informal and flexible approach to engaging with them on issues that they choose and that have direct relevance to their own lives. Through engagement in these informal participation activities confidence and skills can grow and young people are enabled to take on increasing leadership of their own groups and initiatives as their experience develops. Through approaches such as PEER young people can also bring about change in leisure opportunities, institutional practice, community resources, policy, and potentially structural patterns of discrimination.

There are benefits to gender segregated and Roma-only groups in some circumstances, but if these boundaries are used in the early stages of a group, the group should be able choose to transgress them over time. Further, it is vital that these informal groups have a network of links with relevant decision-makers (municipal official, local national and European politicians etc.) and with advocates and civil society (Roma NGOs, youth councils, children’s rights organisations, universities and community leaders).

PEER project showed us that family and ethnic community members’ role is very important both in supporting and limiting Roma young people’s participation. We could observe that ethnic belonging may have varying levels of implications on action research. We learnt that different forms of cultural capital linked to Roma identities (and Roma communities’ sociohistorical experiences) (following Yosso 2005 ’s ‘forms of capital’) may become an added value in participatory projects, as they can create *cultures of possibility* between different generations within the family and ethnic community. In this sense, where conditions are favourable, Roma young people through participation can experience the role of “cultural broker” negotiating meanings between community members and stakeholders of the mainstream society **and exercising agency in the creation and transformation of modes of participation**. However, community forces can also act adversely, resistant to perceived threats to ethnic identity and cultural practices, which highlights the complexity of external and internal factors that may impede Roma young people from participation in public issues that concern them.

From the PEER evaluation, and from our review of [existing policy](#), it is evident that political recognition of Roma is an essential precursor to meaningful participation by Roma youngsters. Provision of (formal and non-formal) education that responds to children's interests and that do not discriminate against them also facilitate their engagement in participation activities. Without such changes, participation initiatives focussed on education environments will continue to disproportionately exclude young Roma. Where participation activities can also provide young people with opportunities to transition into work they are more valued by the wider community.

Challenging discrimination in every setting would help remove material barriers, build children and young people's trust to engage in processes focused on influencing change. A first step in this process would be to recognise and value the ways in which Roma youngsters already contribute to their families, peers and communities. Supporting children and families through welfare payments and improved health services would liberate some children and young people from their family obligations giving them more time to engage in participation opportunities. Their confidence that something may actually change for the better in their communities would also be reinforced by social provision of community resources (housing, leisure and public services). The PEER approach demonstrates the value of children and young people themselves initiating and directing development of these services.

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Appendix

Table 1. PEER Partners Intervention and Activity types, aims, group size, gender and ethnic mix

Country	Site	Context, Roma population involved in the PEER project	Type of activity, aim, group size, gender and ethnic mix
Bulgaria	Site 1	Poverty, <i>ramshackle</i> houses, or illegally built houses. Neighbourhood well-provided by public services. Local Roma-women's NGO.	14 girls (aged 12-13). Work on age-sensitive, gender-sensitive issues. Aim: to overcome multiple discrimination of Roma girls; After 10 sessions (6 +4) girls took part in Youth club organized by the local NGO with a group of non-Roma boys and girls working on violence prevention, peer-to-peer activities and informal education
	Site 2	Marginalised neighbourhood, poor overcrowded housing. Local Roma NGO working on HIV/TB/Hepatitis prevention programme.	25 ethnically mixed young people, both boys & girls (aged 12-18), organized campaigned with the help of 5 community support centres from other towns in the district. Aim: to raise awareness on the importance of education as a strategy to overcome poverty and early marriages.
	Site 3	Residential institution with a boarding school for young offenders, but many children are placed there for their families' extreme poverty.	15 boys (14-16). Aim: to gain access to information; After 8 sessions boys took part in 3 types of activities organized by the local NGO supporting the institution – community service, communication skills, and sports. They organized a presentation before the directors of the institution on the benefits and risks of having internet access in the institution and wrote a letter to GSM company (Telenor). As a result the company donated computers but the director is still not convinced that children in the institution are not at risk if they are provided with internet access.
	Site 4	School-based group of children, mixed Bulgarian, Roma and Turkish in a small town (9000 people), less than 3% of population Roma, living in poor neighbourhood with illegally built houses or with no property.	Mixed group of 12 people – Bulgarian non-Roma, Roma and ethnic Turkish (aged 13-15). Aim: to make their school more attractive and their communication with teachers in class more friendly and equal. Activity: 10 sessions and a concert at the end of the year organized by the children. They talked to their English teacher who is now working in class with the children using more participative methods. One child from the group in school took part in Eurochild Forum in Sept 2016
Romania	Site 1	Diverse Roma population. Both local-born and internal migrants Roma families. PEER was conducted with children living in very poor housing situation.	18 Roma children. M 8/F10. Aged 10-14. Aim: organising a football match that mobilize the whole local Roma community in order to enhance cooperation. Cleaning up local football pitch, preparing flyers, etc
	Site 2	Poor families, evicted from the city centre, now living in poorly equipped houses close to rubbish dump, for some years.	2 groups. 1) 14 kids (11 Roma), M7/F7, aged 16-18. Group AIM: 8 th grade organising a graduation ball for their class, mixed, but large majority composed of Roma children 2) 15 Roma children, M6/F9, aged 12-18. A group of children living and working on the rubbish dump, organizing visits outside the landfill, to shops, cinema, parks, school and interacting with other children and adults in the city.
	Site 3	Roma children of families living in integrated outskirts. Better than average living conditions.	7 Roma children M1/F6. Aged 14-18. Aim: promoting education by a drawing contest and interviews with children from the community.

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Country	Site	Context, Roma population involved in the PEER project	Type of activity, aim, group size, gender and ethnic mix
Lithuania	Site 1	Larger Roma community lives in “Tabor”, segregated districts. Few Roma finished secondary education.	GR 1: 15 Roma youth (aged 8-12), gender mixed group. Aim: 'Live library' to share information about their culture, traditions, religion, etc., with the general public. GR 2: 12 Roma young people from 13 to 18 years of age, gender mixed. Aim- to collect information and old photos together with Roma young people about Roma holocaust in Lithuania, Panevezys area and to organise a small exhibition.
	Site 2	Relatively small Roma community lives in integrated neighbourhoods,	10 Roma youth (aged 8 -12), gender mixed group. Aim: prepare/train themselves to participate in music festivals.
Cyprus	Site 1	Roma population with poor fluency in Greek, mostly speaking Gurbetche a Turkish dialect. Low socioeconomic status, difficult access to the job market and adequate housing: living in social housing: overcrowded dwellings or prefabricated sheds	8 Roma children, (aged 13-15), activities on school premises. Group's priority theme was Safety, which included two sub-themes: a) safety in the household; b) safety in the community park
Italy	Site 1	Working class district of a large regional capital city. Project with Roma of different Yugoslavian (Macedonian, Kosovan) origin, migrated in the late 90s. Roma families both live in the big “campo nomadi” (Roma camp) of Florence: Poderaccio. In the Poderaccio live almost 500 persons and about 200-250 children (under 18 years old). During the past years, the condition of Roma people in Poderaccio is little bit improve (by work of district and cooperative/association) but persist many problems: conflict among families in the camp, conflicts with gage, low levels of schooling , environmental degradation of the camp.	Approx. 18-20 Roma children (aged 14-20), gender-mixed group. Aim: 1) to promote discussion/debate among Roma youngsters (also between youngsters of different nationality) 2) to promote/establish dialogue with policy makers about living conditions of the Roma camp: (light, garbage, public transport, etc.); 3) to promote/establish dialogue with policy makers aimed to move/live out of the camp.
	Site 2	Working class district of a large regional capital city. Project with Roma of different Yugoslavian origin, migrated in the late 90s. Roma Families moved recently, in house.	Approx. 10 Roma children (aged 11-13), mixed-gender group. No specific objective was able to be defined. They were interested to know their territory/district and discuss about problems they face. Children were interested also to contact and interview people of the district about these problems.
France	Site 1	Small municipality on the Mediterranean see. French citizen Roma living in caravans, in the municipal "reception area of Travellers" next to a waste disposal.	8 young people (4 M/4W). Aim: to lobby for a design that would allow them to travel safely from the trailer park to the city centre: achieved a cycle lane.
	Site 2	A small town in the South of France, travellers live permanently on this family ground.	9 young people (6M/3W): The young people worked on two themes: - access to leisure: they participated in the sports associations of the municipality, - violence in schools: they engaged in a dialogue with the other children and the principal of the school, in order to resolve conflicts between children other than by violence.
	Site 3	A large city in South-West France. Roma population of Romanian and Bulgarian origin, previously evicted from two districts live in squat houses or sheds	8 Young people (3M/5W) have done work on access to municipal services (access to rooms, recreation).

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Country	Site	Context, Roma population involved in the PEER project	Type of activity, aim, group size, gender and ethnic mix
Spain – UAB	Site 1	Large touristic city on the Mediterranean coast. Spanish Roma in a poor working class neighbourhood, relatively good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	12 young people (7M/5W), (aged 15-19) Spanish Roma + non-Roma. Aim: train themselves as leisure instructors and set up a leisure club and offer leisure activities in the neighbourhood.
	Site 2	Large touristic city on the Mediterranean coast. Spanish Roma in a poor working class neighbourhood, relatively good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	9 young Spanish Roma females (aged 14-17). Aim: train themselves in nail-painting and children face-painting and provide services in neighbourhood festivals and private parties.
	Site 3	Large touristic city on the Mediterranean coast. Catalan Roma in a very centric gentrified neighbourhood, good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	7 young Catalan Roma males (aged 15-19) Aim: organise the “Roma square” in the large neighbourhood festival (Festa major).
Spain - FPC	Site 1	Large city next to regional capital, on the Mediterranean coast. Spanish Roma in a poor working class neighbourhood, relatively good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	10 Spanish Roma girls. Age: 09-14. 2 facilitators. Aim: make visible Roma culture to neighbours by recording a video, organising a large celebration on the International Roma Day and sewing a big Roma flag that is showed in the civic centre.
	Site 2	Large city next to regional capital, on the Mediterranean coast. Spanish Roma in a poor working class neighbourhood, relatively good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	9 Spanish Roma girls. Age: 12-15. 2 facilitators. Aim: disseminate Roma culture by telling tales and stories to children. They drew and painted the scenarios to invite children performing a Roma theatre play in the neighbourhood.
	Site 3	Large city next to regional capital, on the Mediterranean coast. Spanish Roma in a poor working class neighbourhood, relatively good quality housing. Partly completed secondary education.	12 young Spanish Roma 5 Boys and 7 girls 2 facilitators and 1 trainer. Aim: to promote peace and to break stigmas and prejudices about Roma community by asking young people and children to participate in the “wishes tree” where children hanged up their feelings and desires to build a better place all together.
UK	Site 1	Small post-industrial town in the South Wales Valleys, one of the poorest municipalities in the Wales. Long established community of Gypsies and Travellers living in permanent well served sites and housing. Children attending secondary school. Extensive experience of participation.	Group 1: (September 2015 to June 2016), 8 GT young people (3M; 5F) aged 12-16 Aims: 1. To learn more about Roma of other EU nationalities living in the UK and Europe. 2. To stand up for the rights of Roma (of other EU nationalities) and to promote their inclusion, particularly in participation opportunities. Group 2: (November-December 2016) 10 GT young people (including younger members of groups above); (6M; 4F). Aim: to meet important people (especially politicians) to build up our network of influential contacts
	Site 2	Large city in North East England, where measures of prosperity match the UK average. Gypsies and Travellers mostly living on a permanent site in an isolated area with poor local facilities. Young people not in education. No experience in participatory groups.	9 Gypsy or Traveller (female) aged 14-19 (x18 sessions). Aims: 1) To raise awareness about the issues GT young people face with professionals workers, so they can understand better ways of working with us, particularly in relation to education and hate crime. 2) To raise awareness of rights with younger children from our community. 3) To learn about participation and education opportunities. 4) To run a party for children in our community and raising money for a cancer charity
	Site 3	Large town in North West England, with higher than average levels of deprivation. Newly arrived migrants including Roma who gradually identified themselves, attending English language classes at a further education college. No experience in	21 minority ethnic participants (17 sessions). At least 7 Roma. (13m; 10F). Aged 16-19 Aim: 1) To improve college food, vending machines, computers and access to bus passes. 2) To raise money and resources for homeless people

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		participatory groups.	
	Site 4	Rural locations in South West Wales. Established Gypsy and Traveller communities. Children attending education. Some awareness of participation forum.	8 GT (2M; 6F) aged 12-16. 11 sessions. Aim: To design and deliver training about Gypsy Traveller culture in mainstream schools.
Ireland	Site 1	Capital city. Settled Travellers, living in social housing provided on the local housing estate. Also a small number of Traveller children living in a permanent halting site located a short distance away from the school.	Two groups, 15 Roma children altogether, in primary school setting. <u>GROUP 1</u> . Mixed group of boys and girls, 8-12 yrs. It worked on becoming involved in the local community and to raise awareness of opportunities that are available for Traveller children within the community. Worked on engaging with local representatives and making tangible, visible changes within their community. Worked on getting the local playground improved, through communication and dialogue with local council representatives. <u>GROUP 2</u> : Male only, 8-12 yrs. work on promotion of Traveller culture within the school setting; creating a storyboard which displayed stories from Traveller culture for school assembly and display. Attempted to engage with local shopping centre to meet with security personnel regarding issues surrounding Traveller exclusion from the shopping centre.
	Site 2	Large town close to the capital city. Families live in different halting sites	Different groups: altogether 15 students, of 11-13 years. Aim: identification of different topics of importance to the Traveller students, through photo montages and display, all of which represent traveller culture. Topics were presented at the end of school graduation, in order to create a sense of empowerment and understanding within the community
	Site 3	Large town, outside of Dublin city. Families live in a mix of settled accommodation and permanent halting sites.	Secondary School (female group), attending a single sex secondary school, participants came from different class levels, aged between 12 – 15 years. Aim: To raise the profile of Traveller girls within the school and the importance of diversity and understanding of the different cultures that exist within the school. To create a Diversity committee within the school, on which members of the many different cultures that exist within that school would participate. This diversity committee would engage with school personnel and would have representatives from school staff on board. The diversity committee would give voice and provide a sense of empowerment to all students in the school