

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The current project aimed at both sharing the existing broad and diverse experience of the 5 partners involved – Autonomia, FSG, Caritas, TSA and Arete - and exploring new methods and approaches in supporting the equal access to quality education and employment of disadvantaged youth in 4 European countries - Spain, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The transnational knowledge exchange and the joint development of new methodologies, guides and policy recommendations on a European level has therefore been a strong aspect of our work together.

The target group of the project was 15-29 year-old economically disadvantaged youth, among them numerous Roma, as their presence among disadvantaged youth is very high in these countries. Disadvantaged youth face multiple problems in accessing education and quality employment, due to low skills, low level of vocational education in the partnering countries, lack of access to marketable professions, high drop-out, low geographical mobility, low motivation and self-esteem, among others.

The aim of the project was to increase the educational level and employability of participants through career orientation, motivation, soft and hard skills training, personality development, channeling early drop-outs back into education, mentoring, mobility support, facilitating placement at employers and extended work with employers.

The current document reflects recommendations for directions relevant policies in the 4 countries can take, as we drew conclusions from the work we did in the course of the project. It is divided into separate chapters for the respective countries.

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BULGARIA

The two organizations that worked here made recommendations in accordance with the major split of their activities – Arete focused on the educational perspective, and TSA – on the employment one.

With regard to education, Arete YF makes the following recommendations:

1. CURRENT EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM NEEDS TO BE ALIGNED WITH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN ORDER TO BOOST PERFORMANCE AND PREVENT DROP-OUT.

There is a broader recognition of the educational needs and rights of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and youth, and hence also of the (potential) benefits of non-formal education that help such children/youth attend schools regularly and improve school performance. As formal education is a government-controlled system of teaching instruction, it is standardized and has a more general approach, whereas non-formal education is considered more flexible and oriented towards the needs, opportunities and interests of the students. It is better suited to help children/youth build up their potential and prepare them to cope with social changes. Improvements in education are one of the key factors for success. Therefore, in today's dynamically changing reality, the importance of aligning/balancing formal and non-formal education in order to increase student engagement in education, improve school performance and prevent/reduce school dropout should no longer be underestimated. The main directions of this connectivity should be:

- Knowledge, skills development and educational success;
- Socialization and personal development;
- Socio-emotional development and adaptability;
- Educational choices, career orientation and professional development.

2. TEACHERS NEED TO BE CAPACITATED AND BRIDGES BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND NON-FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO BE CREATED.

The academic environment in which students obtain knowledge during the formal school day can be enhanced and expanded in informal settings and/or with informal activities. Most educational experts share the view that one of the key factors that influences students' motivation and engagement in the educational process, is the effective pedagogical approach. The potential of teachers, pedagogical advisors and school psychologists, aside from their formally assigned roles at schools is still not fully exploited. A large part of the teaching staff does not feel well prepared to work in multicultural environment and with students from vulnerable groups. Teachers need to improve their

skills to work with children from vulnerable groups and be able to respond to their specific needs. Apart from growing intercultural sensitivity, most teachers are willing to experiment with innovative and informal methods in their work and are open to take over new roles as mentors, career counselors, soft skills trainers, but at the same time many of them do not feel confident to do so due to limited knowledge and competences.

We suggest that schools look for dialog and cooperation with non-formal organizations and allies to develop the capacity of pedagogical staff and support inclusive environment at schools. Mutual communication and collaboration, pedagogical staff trainings and exchange of good practices regarding non-formal practices at school opens up opportunities to find innovative pedagogical approaches influencing students' motivation and engagement in the educational process.

3. THE MENTORING APPROACH NEEDS TO BE INTRODUCED IN SCHOOLS – INTERNAL FROM TEACHERS, AS WELL AS EXTERNAL.

One of the main characteristics of the mentor-mentee relationship is giving practical advice, encouragement and support. Considering the fact that most of the young people have no real self-evaluation, and quite often it is even underestimated by them, the mentor helps the mentee get a real perspective/ understanding of themselves that corresponds to the knowledge and skills of the young person and teaches self-respect, which will give them self-confidence and motivation for future professional and personal development.

In the eyes of the trained youth, the mentor is a leader, a trainer, a friend, an experienced person who guides them. Mentors get to know the strengths and weaknesses of young people and seek to open up opportunities for development and fulfillment that match both their desires and their abilities. In general, the mentor has an extremely important and responsible role in the future development of a young person, this applies even more to disadvantaged youth.

In order to multiply the benefits and the sustainable positive effects of mentoring we suggest that schools, especially those with prevailing number of disadvantaged students recognize this approach. Teachers, pedagogical advisors and school psychologists interested in mentoring students could (and should) undergo specialized trainings and instruction.

4. PEER MENTORING, ROLE-MODELS, MOTIVATIONAL MEETINGS NEED TO BE INTRODUCED AS REGULAR PRACTICES.

Youth from vulnerable groups are less competitive in terms of qualification, education, social image, and social capital. They are more often among the young people identified as NEETs - not in employment, not in education and

not in training and thus become particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, and poverty. They lack self-esteem and rarely pursue any opportunities to improve their social status.

We suggest a number of approaches that could meet and support the diverse needs of young people who face such problems:

- Provide access to role models who have struggled with the same challenges and belong to the same marginalized or ethnic group and who can help to inspire faith and confidence in youth so that they achieve their goals despite the obstacles in their lives;
- Motivational meetings with role models, professionals, influential persons who can advise the youth on the steps and actions they should take to achieve success; familiarize youth with different professions and studies; establish a strong support network;
- Peer to peer mentoring – it provides additional support and encouragement helps build confidence and self-esteem and encourages more positive participation in school life.

With regard to employment, TSA makes the following recommendations:

1. A BRIDGE BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES NEEDS TO BE BUILT.

Special attention and concrete efforts are needed in relation to employment among economically disadvantaged communities and mechanisms are also needed which will lead to their sustainable integration in the labor market. Close cooperation with businesses and NGOs is also necessary regarding the formulation of the activities, their implementation and monitoring. Specific problems identified in the young age group in particular, are the lack of hard and soft skills, professional networks for professional realization and mentorship, as well as an absence of a sustainable relationship with businesses. Our recommendation is to create a service which operates simultaneously as a bridge between and a mentor of both sides. Our experience shows that such a service ought to have the following functions:

- career orientation for community members;
- motivational meetings;
- hard and soft skills trainings (according to the needs of the participants);
- mentoring support for both businesses and youth.

2. ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (EDUCATIONAL/PROFESSIONAL COURSES) NEED TO BE PROVIDED.

Based on our experience in the project, we should stress the necessity for

programs for improving knowledge and skills. The recommendation is for extended access to members of underprivileged groups to educational courses, as research shows Roma people who have participated in such courses have higher chances of being employed and are more often employed at positions which require higher qualifications.

Professional education is also of critical importance for the members of underprivileged groups. Our experience in the project indicates that professional trainings connect economically disadvantaged communities with employers, increase economic independence and help to overcome social exclusion. To make the measure even more efficient, the course for acquiring a professional qualification can be supplemented by participation in internship programs in partner firms where the participants can practice their skills and be employed full-time at a later point. Regarding the evaluation of these activities, it is advisable that the employers themselves (whether those be businesses or public institutions) participate in the monitoring and quality control model of the professional training.

3. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION TRAININGS FOR EMPLOYERS NEED TO BE IN PLACE.

An additional recommendation we have, is for specific actions dedicated to the development of policies for diversity in the workplace. Discriminatory attitudes continue to have a leading role and are a main obstacle which members of the communities are face with as candidates for and participants in the labor market. The acute need of purposeful efforts in this direction can be addressed using appropriate tools – diversity and inclusion trainings. Our experience with such a model within the project makes us confident that through such trainings the following goals are achieved: awareness is increased in participants regarding the issues of (often involuntary) discriminatory practices in the workplace and their effects on organizational culture, the participants become motivated to create positive change in their own workplaces and the culture of the institutions and services they work for, more tolerant and flexible corporate cultures and more efficient businesses are created.



ROMANIA

A major problem that has been identified in the course of the work Caritas did, was the early drop-out from schools. Early dropout rate is very high in Romania, especially in small villages, rural areas, where the poverty is also very high. The early dropout is very much linked to the factor of poverty. According to the Edupedu.ro, the early school leaving rate is defined as the percentage of young people aged 18-24 who have completed grade 8 or less and who have left school at that point, have not gone on to further education or training. It is also called early school leaving. Nearly 16% of 18-24 year-old youth have completed grade 8 or less and have not continued their compulsory education. In other words, out of a class of 25 children, 4 drop out of school by grade 8 or after finishing it. In 2020, Romania had the third highest percentage of early school leavers among the population aged 18-24 in the European Union, followed by Malta with 16.7% and Spain with 16%.

The respective policy recommendations therefore are as follows:

1. CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS RELATED TO THE PREVENTION OF THE EARLY DROP-OUTS AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING NEED TO BE CREATED.

Agreements and protocols should be developed and signed between stakeholder institutions: schools and inspectorates, Territorial Administrative Unit through the Mayor, General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection, Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance, Social Assistance from Local Governments, NGO etc.

2. CONDITIONS FOR SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, ACTIVE LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS NEED TO BE IN PLACE.

Prevention activities need capacity building for employees at school. This could include different types of activities like trainings and mentoring for the developing of the teachers focusing on the educational work with disadvantaged youth, anti-discrimination trainings, improving cooperation with parents. Another component, as described above, should be a mentoring system for the young people in the challenges they face on a daily basis.

3. CONDITIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT IN COMPENSATORY ACTIVITIES - IDENTIFICATION AND REGISTRATION OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, SCHOOL REINTEGRATION ACTIVITIES, ETC. NEED TO BE INTRODUCED.

The schools must develop an instrument for identification of the students at

dropout risk, and to provide support for those who are absent for extended periods. Extra-curricular and extra-school activities organized in cooperation with other local institutions should be organized (after-school programs, second chance programs, etc.) Sensitizing teachers to work with parents from vulnerable groups is also important in order to understand their agenda. Last but not least, it is important to develop an additional support service for the young girls in case of early marriage and for prevention of teen pregnancy.



Based on their project experience, Autonomia has prepared the following recommendations:

1. CAREER ORIENTATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS TO HELP THE CHOICE OF SECONDARY/VOCATIONAL SCHOOL NEEDS TO BE PROVIDED.

Many marginalized youth face serious difficulties when facing career and secondary school choice towards the end of their primary education. They have limited knowledge on the potentially diverse professions they might choose and their self-awareness regarding talents, strengths and interests is also not yet fully developed. Career orientation towards the end of the primary education should facilitate this process. It needs on the one hand strengthening the career orienting skills of teachers and on the other formal activities that develop the skills of students. The current project experimented with various tools in this field, such as developing students' awareness of their competences and interests, meeting students and young professionals of various professions, visiting secondary schools and potential employers. Non-formal educational methods have been introduced for teachers that can be effectively used with primary school students to build skills and knowledge related to the labor market.

2. CAREER ORIENTATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS TO INTRODUCE POTENTIAL CAREER PATHS AND BOOST MOTIVATION FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION AND LATER FOR JOB SEARCH NEED TO BE PROVIDED.

Despite the fact that educational systems have introduced dual education in their vocational education, many schools still offer rather limited access to up-to-date technology and motivating future employers. Often employers engaged with the practical part of education, do not have the capacity to create motivating and effective learning environment. Therefore the broadening of industrial partners of the vocational schools is recommended, coupled with a scheme that motivates market-leading companies to accept students and provide high quality learning opportunities.

Another aspect to be developed here is the quality assurance of employers providing practice placement for the students. It is important that all employers give high quality practice tasks and ensure access to proper equipment in order to provide an effective learning environment.

3. SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR BETTER EMPLOYABILITY AND FOR BETTER INTEGRATION IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT NEEDS TO BE IN PLACE.

Non-formal education, experience-based learning and project work are very efficient ways to develop the soft skills of young people and also to make them aware of their own competences. Soft skills become more and more important for the employers, therefore the suggestion is to involve such modules in the school curricula and/or initiate cooperation between the schools and NGO experts in the above mentioned fields.

4. COMMUNITY BUILDING/MENTORING TO LOWER EARLY DROPOUT NEEDS TO BE INTRODUCED.

The number of mentoring programs within the framework of schools increases. Mentoring programs not only develop knowledge and skills but also create a long-lasting, supporting peer community. However, even those programs that focus on marginalized youth, mainly aim at supporting talented students. Marginalized young people who would need support so as not to drop out of education and have good school development are usually left out of mentoring schemes. Since schools alone often cannot provide help for their challenges, marginalized students face the risk of early school leaving and poor school results – this is a problem targeted mentoring programs could effectively prevent.

5. MENTORING AND A NETWORK OF SUPPORT SERVICES TO COUNTER MULTIPLE FACTORS THAT MIGHT CAUSE EARLY DROPOUT NEED TO BE AVAILABLE.

Despite having various coordinating forums and early signal systems in Hungary - e.g. child protection signal system – marginalized youth facing various challenges rarely receive adequate, effective and timely help. Coordinating schemes should be strengthened and stakeholders need to be better motivated to operate systems that are capable of detecting problems in their early setup and providing cross-sectoral services between education, social services, youth work, etc.



SPAIN

Based on their project experience, FSG has prepared the following recommendations:

1. A PERSONALIZED YET HOLISTIC APPROACH NEEDS TO BE PURSUED.

Given the diversity of Roma youngsters and their different situations, a major factor of success is the use of a personalized and holistic approach that involves an integrated vision of all parts of a person's life, taking into account all the variables and actors which may be involved in the process of fostering their equal access and success in the education and employment field. This approach brings along the need to take into account the person's environment, both in terms of actors (including the family environment, the community and the wider context in which they may find themselves), as well as in terms of areas (going beyond education and employment...).

This approach should translate into a personalized pathway, which, taking the person's unique circumstances as a starting point, includes an integral/holistic intervention involving different types of actions adapted to each person's needs (including provision of information, support, individual and group guidance, skills development, occupational and vocational training, job intermediation and the matching of workers to vacancies, support in self-employment processes and participation in other areas of social and labor market inclusion). Actions related to personal and emotional support have proven to be really needed.

This holistic approach also implies the consideration and, whenever relevant, involvement of all relevant agents in the fields addressed e.g. in education: education centres (including the school direction but also teachers and other professionals involved), families; in employment: companies. Cooperation with these actors has proven essential for success and may involve actions related to awareness-raising, support and assessment, training, development of joint initiatives in relation to vocational training/employment, etc.

It may also be relevant to develop transversal and complementary actions related to awareness-raising, political advocacy, mapping and diagnosis, publications. Finally, this holistic perspective also includes considering the discrimination suffered by the Roma population, which has proven to be a structural component.

2. ADAPTATION PROCESS TO THE ONGOING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION NEEDS TO TAKE PLACE.

The swift digital transformation that has taken place over the last years has

opened up new opportunities but also presents many risks and uncertainties for the most vulnerable groups such as Roma, who may find themselves left behind, perpetuating or even making deeper the existing digital divide in terms of access and use of digital tools and digital skills. This has become even more relevant with COVID-19, which transferred a significant part of the activities to the digital sphere.

As regards the employment field, technology is significantly transforming the labor market: there are new emerging jobs with a strong digital component and many of the occupations that offer the greatest employment prospects for people from vulnerable groups (even the more traditional positions), require now more technological profiles. In addition, companies are increasingly using digital channels and tools to find and attract talent and the increasing use of teleworking requires to have the relevant digital skills and tools (such as computer or internet connection). In the field of education and training, the pandemic and the energizingly digitalized world and the increasingly present online education have an impact on the equal access to education and the continuation in the education system, academic success and skill development (e.g. due to the absence of computer equipment and difficulties in terms of digital skills).

Therefore, we consider crucial to take into account this reality and undertake the necessary adaptations, which may relate to different levels:

- Awareness-raising and training of the professionals working with the target groups so that they understand the impact of digital transformation (including its opportunities and challenges) and have the necessary skills to adapt to it;
- Adaptation of the methodologies, processes and tools used to this digital transformation;
- Enhancement of the digital knowledge and skills of the target group in relation to the training and employment fields through initiatives such as training and mentoring (e.g. on relevant digital tools and skills; on digital skills related to specific occupations (whether new ones or traditional ones). This could be complemented with improvement of basic digital competences, beyond the abovementioned areas, in order to empower target groups to be fully independent in a digitalised world (e.g. on access to basic public services);
- Identification and promotion of access to occupations related to the technological field;
- Promotion of access to digital devices and tools (such as network connection), notably to those persons in situations of greater vulnerability.

3. A GENDER PERSPECTIVE NEEDS TO BE INCORPORATED IN INTERVENTIONS.

Despite the advances made, Roma women (and in particular young girls) still face a situation marked by great inequality and vulnerability, both in relation to their male peers and to non-Roma women, and have to face additional barriers (particularly those with certain profiles) in all areas, including the equal access to education and employment (because of their condition of being Roma and female). Addressing this is of key importance, not only because it is a question of equal rights but because experience shows that Roma women access to the education and labor market is not only beneficial for them but also has transformative effects on their community, being one of the factors with the greatest impact in terms of gender equality and the capacity to transform the structural conditions of poverty and discrimination affecting the Roma community.

It is therefore crucial that a gender perspective is incorporated in all actions, for example by:

- Promoting and ensuring the participation of Roma women in the initiatives undertaken (e.g. developing awareness-raising activities aimed at Roma women but also at the community as a whole, introducing a certain degree of flexibility in order to facilitate participation).
- Ensuring that the initiatives developed to promote equal access and success in the education and employment fields pay particular attention to the specific situation of Roma women and, when needed, include the necessary adaptations. In some cases, it may be relevant to develop initiatives/interventions targeting specifically Roma women (notably those in the most vulnerable situations).
- Develop specific strategies and positive actions to correct the inequalities and to break down the existing gender stereotypes (e.g. identify and promote those trainings and/or occupations which break with traditional gender roles and offer education/employment beyond traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' sectors).

Female role models, who may serve as inspiration for other women, as well as spaces for women's participation and the inclusion of an intersectional perspective have proven to be really effective.

4. EDUCATION NEEDS TO BE CONNECTED TO EMPLOYMENT.

Experience shows the importance of connecting education to employment. There is a decisive role of the initial level of qualification and education in access to employment, and especially to higher-quality employment. Secondly, it is important to adapt the training actions to the real needs of the market and the prospects for employment.

Therefore, it is key to develop pathways that are integrated from education to employment to interventions which act as bridges into training and employment. In addition, the prospection of the market and the detection of opportunities is a crucial factor. In this sense the importance of collaborating and intermediation with companies should be emphasized, which contributes to facilitating the access to the labor market.

Other options that have proven successful are the dual training programs as well as the more intensive specialized trainings, which include companies as active participants in the process.

Lastly, a recommendation that applies to all four countries has to do with the funds required for high-quality and long-term impact in the field of interest: funding sources that allow for the optimal conditions and the stability of interventions need to be planned and provided for. Addressing complex situations and achieving structural changes require a lasting and integrated approach. Therefore, in order to ensure that the interventions can achieve the intended success and impact, it is crucial to ensure that they can be developed in optimal conditions and maintained over time (which in addition allows for the necessary flexibility to introduce changes and innovations building upon experience). In this sense, the availability of funding which allows for this type of interventions with a long-term, large-scale and integrated approach (e.g. using long-term integrated personalized pathways) is fundamental.