

PEER: Policy Paper on supporting Roma children's participation

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Engaging Roma Youth for Citizenship Participation

The aim of this policy paper is to raise awareness of the issue of Roma¹ children's and youth's participation and to share learning about effective practice. It draws on findings from the PEER (Participation and Empowerment Experiences for Roma youth) action research process that involved partners in nine countries² working with Roma children and young people. It was funded through an EU Fundamental Rights and Citizenship grant JUST/2013/FRAC/AG/6230.

Based on these experiences, and evaluation activities with the children, young people and adults involved, we propose recommendations to enhance future participatory practice.

While policies and recommendations targeting the European Roma populations have proliferated in the last decades both at transnational and national level³, the role of the Roma youth and children in acting upon a significant change is still little explored. Roma children and youth are often represented as victims of discrimination and structural inequalities. Contrary to this representation, through this policy paper we aim to positively highlight their agency and capacity to act upon their own life and possibilities.

Target audience for this policy paper

We consider that the learning from PEER project can be significant for a wide variety of stakeholders at the international, nation state, regional and municipality level.

- 1) At European and international level:** EU Roma Platform, DG Justice (EC), FRA (EU); OSCE, ECRI (CoE); Ad-Hoc Committee on Roma (CAHRM, CoE); CoE Youth Department; Romed (CoE & EU); European Parliament; United Nations (OHCHR, UNDP, UNICEF); TernYpe, FERYP, Roma Education Fund; Roma Initiatives Office (OSF); ERIO; The World Bank; among others.
- 2) Nation states:** National Contact Points for the Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS); Ministry in charge of the NRIS; National Roma assemblies, Nation level Roma and pro-Roma NGOs, Federations, Commissions.
- 3) Municipalities:** local administration youth department; local commission for equality, cohabitation, among others; local pro-Roma and Roma NGOs.

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

² Romania, Spain, UK, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Italy, France, Cyprus, Ireland.

³ E.g. "Action Plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area" MC.Dec.03/3, 2008; "Strasbourg Declaration on Roma" CoE (CM(2010)133); "EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" (COM2011)173; "Roma Youth Action Plan" CoE (DDCP-YD/RomaYAP (2013) 1).

Why is Roma Children's and Young People's Participation an Issue?

The participation rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and guidance on interpretation of these rights (UNComRC 2009) underlines 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 because of our 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” (CoE, 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 through both research and action.

Approach of the PEER project

PEER fostered the participation of Roma children by involving them as co-researchers exploring ways in which more Roma children and young people can be 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 discrimination, schooling, limited access to labour market, wellbeing, and life chances.

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.

PEER involved three elements:

- 1) Roma young people and researchers who had worked with them shared their past experiences of effective participation (Larkins 2016) 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](#).

Enabling Roma Child and Youth Participation

Our findings on Roma child and youth participation are grouped into eight themes that emerged from nine PEER countries: formal participation opportunities; political recognition; formal and non-formal education; transition into work; collaboration with (pro)Roma civil society; using community resources to improve community participation; challenging discrimination; ending poverty, poor health and exclusion. They reflect the diverse though intertwined factors that facilitate or present barriers to meaningful participation experiences.

We highlight examples and learning from PEER that show how Roma children and young people's participation can be enabled and link to examples from <http://PEERaction.eu> videos.

1. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Policies and practices focused on youth and children participation

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. Spain, 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.

In the few instances where long term relationships have been established between policy makers and Roma/Traveller youth forums, young people have been able to influence national policy. For example, in [Wales](#), young people were able to lobby a national government civil servant who they knew in person, due to his involvement in their national participation structure.

2. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Political recognition of Roma

While on a European level acknowledgement of Roma people as a "true European minority"⁴ and there tends to be some recognition of their minority rights, there are very distinct models of recognition in different European states and regions. In some countries scarce institutional recognition of Roma may create a common goal for young Roma, motivating them to call for higher levels of participation in decision making processes. However, lack of recognition makes it more challenging for them to link their local initiatives to wider supporting institutional and/or official positions. Local work for recognition is more difficult in situations where Roma/Traveller communities practice mobility, thus is only temporarily linked to neighbours and services.

In some countries (e.g. Spain) and particular municipalities (e.g. Barcelona) legal and symbolic recognition of the Roma people and related institutional celebrations (International Roma Day, Roma Holocaust Memorial day) had a positive impact on Roma youth: here Roma young people can link their local struggles for participation with wider structural dimensions of social inclusion of Roma. In some PEER projects (e.g. [Lithuania](#)) young people created resources and events that promoted cultural recognition.

⁴ CoE, Parliamentary Assembly, Recommendation 1203 (1993)

3. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Education (formal and non-formal)

Compulsory education is the domain where policies, programmes or strategies tend to locate children and youth participation. Participation in extracurricular leisure schemes has been found to be important for young Roma in order to be able to access and make the most of other types of (training, job-related, civic participation related, etc.) initiatives that may prove useful also later on in their life. In school, formal structures of participation (students' council, commissions) do not tend to encourage Roma children/youth (or even discourage them) to take part of decision making processes. Roma children/youth tended to feel that their views are not or rarely asked for and taken into consideration in school. Many children who participated in PEER came from segregated schools or from schools with high proportion of Roma students. PEER therefore put an emphasis also on out-of-school and/or non-academic activities.

Some positive practices have been identified where schools actively engaged with Roma children and support their participation. For example (e.g. one district in Italy) workers experienced in school support and mediation between schools and families seek to lower the threshold of the obstacles that prevent full school integration. Where there is a dialogue between school and family there are good results in school attendance. In some places and times (e.g. in some schools/ years in Ireland) Traveller and Roma children are part of 'Active Schools Committees', which enables them to engage in school based participation activities. In PEER, young people developed participatory approaches encouraging community sensitive educational engagement, by making a video (UK), running a school promotion campaign for other young people ([Romania](#)) and highlighting the challenges faced in accessing education through community art opportunities (Bulgaria).

School absenteeism and drop-out is more frequent among poor and mobile families: so focusing child and youth participation initiatives mainly into school environments can exclude those school aged youth who are the most marginalised.

4. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Transition into work

Lower than average education attainment and insufficient formal training of the Roma young people coupled with labour market discrimination resulted in many young people involved in PEER having serious difficulties in accessing mainstream jobs, throughout the EU countries. Young people (though not children) involved in PEER project shared major concerns with respect to their possibilities to access to labour market. One of their main motivations to participate in community affairs has been to get access to information about labour market and opportunities to improve their employability (UK, Spain).

In some PEER sites (UK, Spain, Italy) the project channelled a number of young Roma to (short- or mid-term) employment opportunities in the field of participation and youth work. Their employment either by the municipality, third sector organisations or by PEER has been experienced as a validation of the skills they have developed through participating in group work. It also enables future Roma youth participation initiatives to be Roma led and they act as a role model for younger generations.

5. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Roma and pro-Roma civil society

Our experience shows that a well-developed, strong Roma and pro-Roma civil society can establish and improve the culture of democratic participation in public affairs at different levels. Both Roma and pro-Roma civil society can help widen the scope of their supporting networks and references. Engaging children and youth in state-level or European projects, through civil society actors, may help them situate their struggles from a wider perspective and encourage them to incorporate new concepts, methods and interpretations of their situation and their possibilities. It may provide support to smaller groups of citizens to deliver their demands to higher levels, or can guide them directly to decision making contexts. Youth participation often occurs under the frame of these organisations.

In PEER interventions, for example in Italy, where projects were supported (or even locally coordinated) by (Roma, pro-Roma) civil society partners, it helped create a strong link to the local ethnic community. It accelerated the processes and also served to negotiate difficulties with the families.

Civil society partners also help leverage young people's and children's efforts to upper level stakeholders: they managed to channel their demand to higher administrative or political levels, or connect them with their professional networks. They can share their achievements in a broader circle of stakeholders. For example, in [England](#), one community led civil society organisation enabled young people in their PEER group to take part in activities that the adult led organisation had already organised, but this gave them access to a consultation about objectives for inclusive educational.

6. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Community resources: housing, leisure, public services

Community resources proved to be fundamental to children's and youth participation. For instance, better housing conditions and local public and private services undoubtedly helped some groups focus on wider community objectives. Housing and the urban environment have been identified by PEER partners to be the most fundamental community resource that influence youth participation. Poor, unhealthy, insecure accommodation, unregulated legal conditions of dwelling, unsafe neighbourhood with limited basic services are unsupportive for youth participation. It may increase families' resistance to their or their children's participation in local activities. Also these aspects may withdraw children from public spaces. High residential mobility or the risk of it (evictions, search for affordable housing, frequent change of job, etc.) tends to disengage residents from different forms of civic participation, and makes intervention more difficult. But, the lack of basic services can also create a common ground for participation.

Community resources played a variety of roles. In one PEER site (e.g. Spain), well-equipped venues help the group develop a common project (space, IT support, wide opening hours, expert support). In another site (e.g. [France](#)) the lack of safe pedestrian sidewalk or bike-path or poor community housing may create a shared objective, based on which project could be set up. With support from one municipality and local youth council, a bike path was created. When the use of municipal resources is co-directed by Roma children and young people this motivates sustained involvement in participation activities.

7. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Challenging Discrimination

In Europe, discrimination against Roma is overall stronger than in the case of any other religious or ethnic minority groups^{5,6} and is prevalent in labour markets, education, health care, media and housing. Antidiscrimination legislation and measures are not equally implemented in all EU countries. The majority of young Roma people in PEER described experiences of subtle forms of discrimination in their everyday life (mistrust in the community; limited academic and labour market expectations of teachers and educators; higher-than-average vigilance in shops or on public transport, etc.) and some described violent attacks. This experience leads young people to be cautious about attending or participating in unknown institutional spaces.

Prejudices and ethnocentric ways of understanding citizenship and participation often make Roma youth's community-participation invisible or illegitimate. While Roma young people may be actively involved in ethnic community related, or leisure issues, local experts, or non-Roma residents claim that these young people "do not participate". Although experts working with Roma youth are committed and well-intentioned, they may share and reproduce ethnocentric, prejudiced and biased opinion about Roma families and their cultural practices.

PEER groups have developed varied strategies for challenging discrimination including: delivering peer-to-peer cultural awareness education (Wales), gaining strength and ideas on how to change their own actions in the face of discrimination (Romania, France), public celebrations (Spain, Lithuania) and creating an anti-hate crime video (England).

Calling for greater Roma youth citizenship participation may essentialize, be culturally insensitive or disrespectful, and fail to recognise the diversity and plurality of Roma cultures. Creating conditions that facilitate marginalised Roma children and young people's participation remains a vital goal.

8. Enabling Roma children and young people's participation through Ending child poverty, poor health and social exclusion

Poverty, and particularly child poverty is a fundamental factor that influence participation of the Roma children and young people. As Roma communities often, though not always, live in poor socioeconomic conditions their inclusion into mainstream networks of participation is hindered not only by ethnic/racial discrimination but also by poverty and its consequences. In several PEER sites Roma communities have worse health status and limited access to basic health services. Families' bad health conditions put an extra burden, productive and reproductive responsibilities on children and young people. This issue has been highlighted with special emphasis by several PEER partner countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Cyprus and Ireland) and is recognised as important in others (Italy, France and UK).

Improving health services to Roma communities could reduce the need for some children and young people to act as informal carers. In turn, this could enable them to choose to participate outside of their families.

Children can (e.g. in Cyprus where unhealthy housing was highlighted), provide guidance on the social and health inequalities these services should address.

⁵ Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2015:5 http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/factsheet_eurobarometer_fundamental_rights_2015.pdf

⁶ Special Eurobarometer 393 2012:10 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf

Policy Recommendations

Europe-wide

1. Effective implementation of the Roma Integration Strategy would be enhanced by accompanying implementation plans that enable marginalised Roma children and young people to develop participatory initiatives in all areas (not just education and health) that, in turn, would promote conditions that facilitate their participation.
2. Future Roma Youth Action plans would be enhanced by including participatory initiative whereby young people and children can help create the eight facilitating conditions that enable their participation. While aspects such as formal participation opportunities; political recognition; formal and non-formal education; collaboration with (pro)Roma civil society; challenging discrimination; and ending poverty, poor health and exclusion have already been incorporated into the Roma youth action plans, findings from the PEER project also highlight (1) active use of community resources to improve community-participation and (2) transition into work as crucial elements.
3. In line with the UNCRC, the European Children's Rights Agenda and the Council of Europe recommendation on child participation, all policies explicitly targeting Roma and policies that affect Roma, should have a closer focus on enabling child and youth participation, recognising the diversity of children's agency and social contributions
4. Roma or pro-Roma NGOs should be encouraged to work with children and youth to implement actions with a stronger intergenerational participatory approach.

National

5. Ensuring that Roma are recognised by states as a distinct (national, ethnic, etc.) minority or ethnic groups by the state governments is a necessity. It has significant practical implications in the promotion of equality and the elimination of discrimination in participatory structures and practices.
6. School level policies need to be developed to specifically focus on minority groups rather than assuming that inclusive practices at whole school and classroom level are sufficient to address specific voices and needs. Roma children's participation should not be restricted to the formal education domain: it should be targeted as a cross-cutting priority.
7. Specific training and skill-building among public servants/technicians would enhance their capacity to listen to Roma children/youth and be able to collaborate with them. A systematic focus on Roma children's / young people's diverse experiences is crucial.
8. Strengthen Roma-led NGOs, especially those led by Roma youth. Training, capacity-enhancement and skill-building of the NGO personnel are crucial for them so that they become capable of competing in lobbying, advocacy, fund-raising, service providing for the Roma youth and engage them to participate. Their embeddedness in the local Roma community should be a criterion, in order to have positive local effect.
9. Continuous monitoring and evaluation – especially incorporating participatory evaluation methods - is crucial in the process. In generalist (not ethnically targeted) policies outreach and impact on Roma youth and children should be assessed.

Practice

10. Supporting young people's participation should build on real-life motivation rather than idealized conceptions on volunteerism: improvement of housing, betterment of physical living environment, development of interethnic relations, access to the labour market, etc.
11. Recognise and support children and young people's formal or informal participation in activities focused on leisure, education or work; this provides a context in which to then engage youth in legitimised ways of participation in decision-making.
12. Make available and encourage the use of open-to-public, inclusive, safe, comfortable, well-equipped and up-to-date community spaces for the local Roma youth: they are necessary elements for them to link leisure with community participation.
13. Recognise and act upon existing structural inequalities (particularly gender) within the Roma communities, especially among children and youth, and incorporate this knowledge from the beginning in the participatory project.
14. Aim to move Roma-only and gender-separated participatory structures to an intercultural and gender-mixed approach. While separation at the beginning may contribute to feel safe to speak out sensitive issues, it should aim to overcome fixed social categories of participation.

Conclusions

PEER project has managed to launch local initiatives that support Roma children's and youth's active participation in local issues that affect their life. The project highlighted their interest and capabilities of gaining empowerment through meaningful participation processes. The pilot participatory action interventions demonstrated to the stakeholders that Roma children and young people are active agents who can take responsibility for the improvement of many aspects of their life and they can bring about significant change, once social and physical environment is supportive.

This implies that childhood and youth strategies and policies should have a more focused attention to those populations coming from low social economic status families and ethnic minorities. Also, Roma childhood and youth issues in ethnically targeting policies and programmes, particularly in national Roma strategies, need to be furthered developed.

Useful Resources

Council of Europe (2013) *Roma Youth Action Plan*. Strassbourg: Council of Europe

Larkins C. (2011) Can the EU live up to the expectations of its child citizens? *International Journal of Children's Rights* 19 (3) 451–476

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

Larkins, C. and Bilson, A. (2016) *The Magic 6: Participatory Action and Learning Experiences with Roma Youth Training Manual*, Cluj-Napocca, Romania: Babes-Boylai University

Messing, V. and Bereményi, B.Á. (2017). 'Is Ethnicity a Meaningful Category of Employment Policies for Roma? A Comparative Case Study of Hungary and Spain'. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, no. (Online first)

UNComRC (2009) General Comment No. 12. The right of the child to be heard CRC/C/GC/12, 1 July 2009.

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fGC%2f12&Lang=en [accessed November 6 2016]

SALTO. *Youth in Action and the Roma Community. Inclusion of Diversity*. EACEA, European Commission. www.SALTO-YOUTH.net/toolbox

Percy-Smith, B., Larkins, C. and Bereményi, B. Á. (2016) *Supporting the Participation and Empowerment of Young Roma: A Participatory Practice guide for professionals*. Cluj-Napocca, Romania: Babes-Bolyai University