**PEER – Bulgaria**

**Intermediate Report**

Reported period: January, 1st, 2015 – December, 15th, 2015

National coordinator: Know-How Centre for Alternative Child Care, New Bulgarian University

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**Main achievements in the reported period:**

The team of the Know-How Center for Alternative Child Care at the New Bulgarian University has the following achievements within the PEER project, so far:

**Improve network.** We expanded our network of organizations working in the field of minority rights and such working on Roma issues in particular – a various range of organizations supporting, from homeless children, children in HIV prevention, through access to education in rural areas, to support for Roma young people – high achievers, etc.. Besides our 3 associate partner organizations, we managed to involve 6 more NGO’s in Bulgaria. We did that through contacting the leaders of these organizations and then organize a 2-day national coordination event (national project kick-off meeting).

**Build capacity.** The national event had a project introduction part, a discussion part, a seminar part, and sharing good practices part. In the project introdution part the main objectives, partners, activities and methodology of the PEER project were presented by our team. The second part, disussion was devoted to developing common understanding on child participation and Roma child/youth participation in the Bulgarian context – how we define it, what are the supporting factors, what are the main barriers. The participants exchaned ideas, knowledge and reflections on the issues, they shared also difficulties and solutions. The third part, seminar part, was led by our team. It presented the theories of participation, data from reports on the level of child participation in Europe and explained the methodology of action research, the PEER project cycle and methods and techniques to stimulate child participation. The part “sharing good practices” gave back the flaw to the participants – 25 representatives of 9 organizations shared good practices, including education projects, carrier development projects, outreach activities, health education activities, etc.

**Improve understanding**. We emphasized on the need to develop common understanding on participation concept together with our national partners before we start any project activities. Moreover, the concept is new and badly known in Bulgaria along with others concerning the democratic development of the society, reforming the education and child protection system and enabling collaborative practices in different sectors. One of our first steps in the project was to imrove our understanding taking on board the practical knowledge of our partner NGO’s working with Roma young people. It happened in the discussion and the “good practices” parts at the national coordination event in May, 2015. The knowledge we gathered is summurized below:

PARTICIPATION – in the understanding of the practitioners: activity; aim; cause; belonging to community; responsibility; shared responsibility; partnership; self-expression; inclusion in decision-making of young people; talking about youth participation, not specify Roma youth participation; taking initiatives and being supported in that; constant process of learning and sharing; initiating change; awareness; engagement; sharing responsibility; add value to different aspects of your life.

FACTORS ENABLING participation:

access to information for the young Roma; accessible language;

regular work on their motivation as with all young people;

individual approach to each particular group, non-stereotyping the group;

long-term investment and persistence;

continuity in working with young people, not only one-off initiatives or time-limited project activities;

work with the media, important to challenge stereotypes;

employ information technologies;

constantly explore alternatives, for example how Roma can be trained specifically to work in their own community;

being together with young people from other ethnicity and culture;

exploring and knowing each other;

being together with people from different generations - children adn parents;

having in place policies that overcome segregation;

working to change prejudices;

good examples and role models - educated and successful Roma people;

mentorship;

suitable programs;

persistence in terms of time and process;

realizing the need of change;

willingness for sharing experience;

having motivation;

attitude for constant learning;

information on their rights;

peer-to-peer activities and learning;

inclusion in initiatives at an early age, possibilities for inclusion, having an aim;

shared responsibility with other participants;

social entrepreneurship;

having a cause, having an aim in their activities;

explain to the young people what is the meaning of participation, what are the consequences, what benefits might have in long-term perspective;

forms of participation adequate and close to the target groups.

BARRIERS to participation:

"When ideas are just a cliche";

People concerned about basic needs of their families, socio-economic status, poverty;

Lack of education, proper bringing-up, poor supportive environment in childhood;

Discrimination, isolation from society, marginalization, segregation

Self-discrimination - when the family does not allow even the thought for change and development and, as a consequence, young people develop a subjective sence and expectation that they will be discriminated whatever activity they undertake (like in the mechanism of a self-fulfilling profecy);

Lack of access to information;

Previous negative experiences associate dwith attemps for participation;

Political abuse of the vote of the Roma people in elections;

Incoherent, contradicting, conflicting ideas;

Lack of understanding on participation, not only in Roma community but in general;

Substituted values for commercial purposes;

Established leaders in the community who do not want to share power for a long time;

Intentional work against empowerment, keeping people in dependency;

Stereotyping and putting too much accent on differences between people and communities;

Prejudices;

Both sides do not allow differences;

Lack of standards for working with young people - how we create trust, how we address the specifics of their age and gender, how we motivate them;

Are we able to create culture where Roma young people are not put into the position of victims;

Generational barriers;

Organizational culture of the tems working with young Roma;

Lack of confidence in young people, faith and motivation for success;

Lack of engagement in the relevant adults with the problems of the young people;

Fear to show yourself - fear that you will be criticized, that the Roma community will start perceiving you as not "one of them", that the larger community will not fully accept you - fear of uncertainty if you would continue to be part of your community, if you will be able to handle the role of a "bridge" between your and the larger community;

Fear of failure;

Lack of facilities, physical environment and conditions, room, where participation activities can take place in the Roma communities in Bulgaria;

Language barrier for many Roma young people;

Lack of supportive family or community environment, lack of respect to the personal choice, culture promoting conformity;

Peronal issues such as lack of motivation, apathy, constant consideration of the opinion of the other members of the community (the other side of conformity), perceiving participation as a too big challenge, not realizing a need of development and change, not enough desire to participate, not enough persistence;

Not enough good examples, there are some, but we need much more, and sometimes they hide their Roma origin;

**Establish our team**. We had the possibility to participate in 2 international events and not only learn from international partners and experts, but also contribute to our common research objectives. After the kick-off meeting in Cluj-Napoca we organized several coordination sessions in Bulgaria to define the participants in the team and their roles and responsibilities. We transferred the knowledge learnt at the international meeting and continued with the project development. Presently, we have 3 people working on regular basis – one coordinator, one evaluation coordinator and one information coordinator – 4 young people from partner NGO’s being facilitators, partners and voluteers contributing with translation of materials – parts of the training manual, evaluation forms, theoretical materials. We benefit from the advice from prof. Barry Percy-Smith who trained our teams of facilitators in 2 separate training events.

**Train facilitators.** Two series of facilitator trainings were carried out in Bulgaria. The first one on 8-9th June included 24 young people from the organizations that were presented at our national coordination event in May. The second one was not initially planned in the project but the need for it appeared after the start of the “Magic 6”. We were able to flexibly reallocate budget to assure a second 2-day training for the facilitators thanks to a budget ammendment approved by the Commission. It took place on the 9-10th November.

At the first training the young people reflected on the situation of Roma across different contexts. The training focused on how different approaches could be used to promote participation and empowerment of young roma rather than assessing the mechanics of participation initiatives. On the second training rather specific difficulties in the group process were discussed and the action research methodology was further discussed among the participants. The first training included 24 people, the second – 8 people who became actual facilitators of 4 groups of young Roma.

The initial training had the following aims:

Introduction to Action Research

Opportunity for experiential learning

Learn a range of different activities and techniques for engaging young Roma

Learn how to organise and manage groups

Think about how we can use these approaches with young Roma

- Which worked well?

The young people all seemed to work well and to plan, except because of the short time available for training participants wanted to follow through some of the activities to see how they could be developed further. This was discussed later. Participants talked about and used some of the different approaches later on in the session for example in their planning. Common approaches that participants thought they might in particular use were: River of experience, Newspaper front page visioning exercise, solutions tree, diamond ranking, and evaluation techniques. Many of these are group activities and participants remarked after the Onion discussion how good it was to be able to talk one to one and that there was a need to get a balance between group and individual activities. They remarked how they found this the most interesting activity. Participants realised the value of communication and dialogue and exchanging ideas. They valued and remarked on the group interaction in each activity and the opportunity to exchange experiences.

- Which presented difficulties?

It didn’t appear that the activities caused difficulties for these participants. But some participants did refer to the difficulty using word based activities with illiterate people. We discussed way of getting round this by using images rather than words. Participants also discussed the importance of adapting techniques for different situations.

- Main issues that emerged?

Particular issues that were prominent included:

Keeping young roma in school, need for new models of education (eg more interactive approaches to learning)

The importance of family life but also how this can be restrictive and limiting on young people and the role of ngos in providing an alternative set or possibilities/socialisation

Emancipation of Roma women, women having control over their lives

Health care for Roma – increasing access to quality health care for roma, training young women as health workers, raising awareness about health, corruption in health care – roma not being vaccinated (“We are not an exception”).

Problem of early marriage and not having a choice

Career opportunities for young roma

**Establish youth groups for the “Magic 6” – 4 groups, instead of 3**.

We carried out a large number of organizational meetings with local authorities, school principles and NGO's and finally arranged to have 4 groups instead of the planned 3, but each group with a smaller number of children than the initially planned 20 in group. We have 4 quite different contexts for our groups - 2 very small towns, one of them with a large Roma population quite marginalized, one with small Roma population, well integrated, one group in a middle-size town and one in the third biggest city in Bulgaria but with the most impoverish Roma neighborhood.

First group in Varna, the third biggest city in Bulgaria with a small Roma community (about 1% of the population according to official data), with a strong economic inequality, where the Roma community lives in the most impoverished suburb in the city. Our partner NGO there, "Co-Participation" does a lot of mobile work on HIV/TB and drug prevention and health education.

Second group in Dupnica - at the facilitator training in June we trained 4 representatives of 2 women organizations, one of them working exclusively with Roma women and girls. Both orhanizations expressed their willingness to work with a group for Roma teenage girls, so now the team of facilitators in Dupnitsa consists of one representative of each of the 2 organizations - Ethnointegration Foundation and Knowledge Success Change Foundation. Dupnica is a town characterized with good social services and relatively good level of industry and employment, but still lots of emigration of young people. The Roma community is about 10% of the population, with not such a drastic inequality like in Varna but still with many social problems, including low level of participation.

Third group in Sopot - it is a mixed group in the context of the local high-school where half of the children are Roma. Sopot is a small town in a poor region of Bulgaria. The total number of population is about 9000 people. The group is led by a facilitator, representative of the New Bulgarian University and a representative of the Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED).

Fourth group in Rakitovo, again with small population, less than 9000 but with a large Roma community. We have a group of young Roma people there, some of them living in the community with their families, and some of them living in a closed institution, isolated from the society due to poverty, legal offenses or other reason. These institutions for young offenders are a legacy from the totalitarian times and are usually isolated from the society, with lack of services and programs for the young people, almost 100% of the young people living there are Roma and large percent of them are illiterate. The team of facilitators is from the youth organization "Re-Act".

**Develop initial version of training manual** – activity led by prof. Andrew Bilson associated to the Bulgarian team, using the ideas developed by the international group of more than 30 people with experience in the Roma issues, researchers and practitioners, presented at the initial inter-country meeting in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

**Ethical Issues**

The ethical issues are common for all the groups that we work with. They are:

**Informed consent.** It is a document elaborated by the leading partner and adapted to our context, which we explain to the children and young people at the start of the activities, we ask them to discuss at home with their parents, whenever this is possible and then return a signed forms. The document explains the right to decide not to participate at any stage of the activities.

**Do no harm.** We ensure that the facilitators/researchers/practitioners who are mostly in contact with the children are well trained and prepared, have experience in working with children, their organizations have experience and know the specifics of working in the Roma community. We ensure that they are in constant communication with our team, that they receive an on-going appropriate support and consultation both in their NGO’s and by our team. We emphasize again on the right of the children not to participate if they feel this is a risk for them, never push children into activities they perceive as a certain risk (for example, will not be approved by parents, will be criticized by peers…).

**Privacy and confidentiality**. This is ensured at two levels:

The group: setting rules for the group (for example “do not share personal information outside the group”), build trust with the children/young people.

The researchers: We have started a discussion on ethical standards for publishing on-line materials and photos, containing children. We agree that photos of children must be further discussed but products of children not containing names without permission (reports, projects, etc.) represent a valuable learning material, not only for researchers, and can be shared to create pride.

**Timeline**

All the activities are going according to the planned timeline except the recording of the last of the 6 sessions with children, which was supposed to be completed at the time of this report. It was decided to collect the children’s experiences through a short interview on an audio recording. This was very well accepted by the children and the facilitators who would prefer to have less writing activities, but needed additional arrangements. It is planned for January, 2016.

The summarizing and the translation into English of the evaluation forms also takes more than the planned time but it is usually compensated among partners though a good coordination of the partner leading the respective workstream.

**Visibility**

All the listed deliverables in WS 0 and WS 1 contain the logo of the European Union and the PEER Project logo. These include theoretical material, illustrative material, participants lists. All the presentations made so far within the project events contain the 2 logos. Information on the PEER project regularly is uploaded on the Know-How Centre web-site in the sections “News” and “Our work in projects”. The last one contains also materials produced in the PEER Project. (http://knowhowcentre.nbu.bg/Деца+и+семейства+%2B+Нашата+работа/1/MNKrI1OPYRejcxKPcVOXMFincxe3cReXYpODYJKTMdKPI9ebIFOfMNeHMZKTcheD)

We also have disseminated the PEER results among a network of organizations, listed in the file “Dissemination list”, uploaded to the PEER website, Bulgaria country page.

**Main difficulties**

All the difficulties found their solutions, they concerned technical activities and procedures rather than any essential or methodological issues.

**Organizational difficulties**: In the preliminary phase before the “6 sessions” we needed to carry out unplanned number of organizational meetings with leaders in the community, religious leaders, school principles, authorities and to explain to them the purposes of the groups to be able to recruit children for the groups.

**Logistics**: travel to the distant towns to carry out sessions with children turned out to be difficult in terms of synchronizing the timing of the sessions with the other activities of the children. It was only easy in the closed institution in Rakitovo where children are there all the time anyway and do not have any meaningful activities besides the ones organized by the partner NGO.

**Facilitators difficulties** - connected with a lot of writing of evaluation forms. Having a varied range of activities are important especially which allow for one to one as well as group participation. Having more time to follow the activities through is also important. More breaks and less writing.

**Cooperation**

Additional NGO partners in Bulgaria, very committed to the project are, especially in the WS2 activities:

Ethnointegration Foundation

Youth organization “Re-Act”

Knowledge Success Change Foundation

Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED)

Associated partners collaborate and contribute also:

Co-Participation Foundation

Youth organization “Hope for Us”

Youth organization “ARETE”