



HIDDEN DIMENSIONS

Hidden Dimensions of
Inclusion in Youth Sector

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS Romania

Nevo Parudimos ASSOCIATION

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union





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This document was created within the frameworks of the 'Hidden Dimensions' project implemented by Együttható Egyesület, Association Nevo Parudimos and United Societies of Balkans. The project was supported by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. Project number: 2020-1-HU01-KA205-078586. This document does not necessarily reflect the official views of the European Commission, the European Union or the organisations co-operating with them.

This document was published by:
Nevo Parudimos Association
office@nevoparudimos.ro
+40355429351

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INTRODUCTION

Nevo Parudimos, in collaboration with Co-Efficient Hungary and the United Society of Balkans in Greece, launched the Hidden Dimensions of Inclusion in the Youth Sector project through the European Union's Erasmus + program. This project resulted from the international collaboration of three Eastern European civil society organizations involved in educational, social, and advocacy activities within disadvantaged communities. The primary objective was to enhance the accessibility of youth services and encourage the involvement of young people with disabilities in European-level projects.

The collaborating civil society organizations brought substantial experience to the project, having previously engaged young people with disabilities in local and international learning and personal development activities. The project placed a strong emphasis on including young people with disabilities in the three communities involved, with a specific focus on promoting independence and boosting their confidence to become self-sustaining and active citizens.

The context revealed that European youth services lacked emphasis on the participation of individuals with disabilities, with only 1.9% of participants in Erasmus + funded youth projects in 2019 being people with special needs, as reported by the Hungarian Erasmus + National Agency. Young people with disabilities faced barriers to community activities, impacting their social status and long-term lifestyle. Despite efforts by educational institutions to integrate them, challenges persisted due to inflexible pedagogical frameworks, a shortage of qualified experts, and inadequate barrier-free environments.

The Hidden Dimensions project aimed to:

- - Conduct research and formulate policy recommendations for involving young people with disabilities in European projects.
- - Assess barriers within existing youth work infrastructure, defining barriers broadly.
- - Gather data and insights from professionals working in the field.

The results of these interviews contributed to a research report, and new policies were proposed to enhance the accessibility of young people with disabilities to European projects and youth services. After the empirical research, some conclusions were underlined by the researcher. The interviewed organizations share a common vision to increase productivity, secure funding, and implement impactful projects that create a positive impact within their communities. Their positive attitude towards inclusivity and their willingness to involve young people with disabilities in their initiatives exemplify their commitment to social responsibility. By fostering inclusivity, supporting marginalized groups, and actively engaging with the community, these organizations set an inspiring example for the broader society. Moving forward, their focus on productivity, project implementation, and community engagement will pave the way for a more inclusive and empowered future for all. The study sheds light on concerning attitudes among some respondents from youth organizations regarding disability-related training. The factors influencing these attitudes underscore the need for targeted awareness campaigns, increased exposure to people with disabilities, and integration efforts within youth organizations. By fostering a more inclusive and accepting environment, society can work towards breaking down barriers and promoting understanding and empathy for individuals with disabilities. This shift in attitudes is crucial in creating a society where diversity is celebrated, and all individuals are treated with dignity and respect.

In conclusion, the analyzed Romanian NGOs stand as pillars of support, fostering social inclusion, personal development, and sustainable solutions within their communities. Their diverse purposes and objectives reflect a holistic commitment to addressing a wide range of social challenges and promoting the well-being of society as a whole. By actively supporting and integrating people with disabilities, they embody the essence of inclusivity and humanitarianism. Their visibility on social media and active engagement within the community further fuel their success in engaging volunteers, stakeholders, and beneficiaries. These NGOs play pivotal roles in creating an inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities in Romania and exemplify the power of collective action in bringing about positive change.

In Erasmus+ projects there are no mandatory quotas for the involvement of young people with disabilities. One of the main areas of these youth projects is the social inclusion of people with fewer opportunities (Erasmus+ Program Guide, version 3 (2021): 12-05-2021, 2021).

"Persons with reduced opportunities are persons who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, are migrants, or for reasons such as disabilities and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that may give rise to discrimination according to Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to the opportunities within the program. (Erasmus+ Program Guide, Version 3 (2021): 12-05-2021, 2021, p. 321)"

The experts involved in the National Panel mentioned some recommendations that must improve access of young people with specific disabilities (not just with fewer opportunities) in cultural, social and educational activities, especially those within the Erasmus+ Programme. The recommendations came after analysing the existing law regarding people living with disabilities in Romania, Law No. 448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: This law establishes the general rights of persons with disabilities, including children and youth, ensuring equal opportunities and non-discrimination in various spheres such as education, employment, and social services. It mandates accessible education and vocational training, social inclusion programs, and health services tailored to the needs of disabled individuals (<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/77815>). Although the main concern was related to accessibility in general in Romania (because there are still many cities where no accessibility measures were taken by local authorities), together with the experts from all over Romania we detailed the following recommendations:

Accessibility:

To make Erasmus+ programs accessible to everyone, including young people with disabilities, we need to develop clear and comprehensive accessibility standards and guidelines. These standards should respect the recommendations from the Inclusions and Diversity Strategy of the European Commission which describe the programmes' mechanisms to support inclusion and diversity and cover three main areas:

1. Physical accessibility: Ensure all locations and facilities used in the programs are accessible for a wide range of disabilities. This means having ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms so that individuals with mobility issues can easily participate.

2. Digital accessibility: Make sure all online content, such as websites and digital tools, is accessible and understandable for all people. This includes making websites easy to navigate with screen readers, adding text and sound descriptions for images, and following accessibility guidelines for digital content.

3. Communication accessibility: Provide information in various formats to accommodate different types of disabilities. For example, offer materials in braille and large print for it easier for young people with disabilities to benefit from the financial support offered by Erasmus+.

Training and awareness:

To help participants with disabilities in Erasmus+ programs, we need to give regular training to the people running the programs. This training should teach them how to support individuals with disabilities. In order to make sure the right group is targeted, the National Agency should define exactly what “disabilities” mean in the national context. Trainings should cover a range of topics, such as:

- understanding different disabilities,
- providing appropriate emotional and logistical support,
- identify any specific methods to foster inclusion of these disadvantaged groups.
- offer trainings which aim to help the people implementing the program to deal with young people with multiple disabilities.

In this specific field, experts pointed out the importance of constant collaboration with grassroots organisations. These organizations have valuable knowledge and practices to share, helping to improve our programs and make them more inclusive for everyone involved.

Peer support and mentoring:

Encourage the establishment of peer support and mentoring programs, where experienced participants with disabilities mentor newcomers. These programs can pair experienced participants with disabilities as mentors to provide guidance, share their personal experiences, and offer assistance to newcomers in understanding the program. Mentors serve as sources of support, advice, and encouragement.

Flexible application process:

Implement a flexible application process that allows applicants to specify their unique needs and request accommodations, ensuring the program can adapt to individual requirements. The application process should include the option for participants to disclose their disability, specify their particular needs, and provide relevant documentation. This ensures that applicants with disabilities are considered on an individual basis, enabling the program to prepare accordingly.

Reasonable accommodations:

Guarantee the availability of reasonable accommodations, such as sign language interpreters, accessible transportation, or adapted learning materials, to meet the specific needs of participants. This policy ensures that accommodations are readily accessible. Examples include providing sign language interpreters for the deaf, offering accessible transportation options for participants with mobility impairments, and making educational materials available in various formats, including Braille or large print. The reasonable accommodation is reglemented by the United Nation through the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. On 13 December 2006, the CRPD and its Optional Protocol, were adopted by resolution 61/106 of the General Assembly. The adoption of the CRPD was hailed as a historic achievement that would bring a hope to billions of persons with disabilities in the 21st century. The CRPD is a comprehensive international treaty of legally bidding nature.

<https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>)

Inclusive methodology:

Encourage program providers to create a methodology that take into account the diverse learning styles and abilities of participants with disabilities. Inclusive methodologies are designed to accommodate various learning styles. For instance, methods should offer adaptable resources that are adapted to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners and consider participants with different cognitive abilities. The goal is to create a learning environment where everyone can actively engage and learn. Non formal education methods are versatile and offer the space to adapt whenever the situation impose it. As a concrete example and situation NGOs face in projects, when participants with disabilities are involved, even the energizers need to be thought to be inclusive. Therefore it is mandatory to develop and implement an inclusive methodology for long term. At the same time promote more and increase the acces to existing materials.

Mandatory inclusion targets:

Set mandatory inclusion targets specifying the minimum number or percentage of participants with disabilities in Erasmus+ programs. Establish clear targets, such as aiming for at least 10% of program participants to be individuals with disabilities. This requirement promotes a commitment to diverse representation and ensures that the program actively engages and includes people with disabilities. Now the term used is „participants with fewer opportunities” and disability or health problem are just a part of the target group. Therefore, by imposing a specific number of participants with disabilities per projects and asking for adapted methods to ensure their full integration will offer more participation opportunities for them.

Peer evaluations:

Implement a peer evaluation system, allowing program participants to assess the accessibility and inclusivity of the program. After each program, participants are encouraged to provide feedback. This feedback system allows participants to offer insights into what worked well, what could be improved, and any barriers or challenges they encountered during the program.

Encourage and financially support research on disability-related topics to enhance program understanding and improve accessibility. The policy should involve allocating resources to fund research projects that dive into the experiences, needs, and challenges faced by participants with disabilities in Erasmus+ programs. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of disability inclusion and informs program improvements. Projects like Hidden Dimensions offer the opportunity to discover specific problems people with disabilities face when it comes to specific topics: in this case, accessibility to Erasmus+ projects. Therefore we highly recommend supporting future similar initiatives, as the obstacles faced by disabled people are numerous and need to be discovered and discussed with relevant authorities that are able to offer solutions.

Accessible information:

Ensure that all program information, including websites, brochures, and application forms, is accessible to all participants. Accessibility measures involve providing information in multiple formats. This includes making websites user-friendly for screen readers, creating accessible PDF documents, offering materials in plain language, and ensuring that all communication materials are easily understandable and navigable for everyone.

Crisis and emergency plans:

Develop and communicate clear crisis and emergency plans that consider the needs of participants with disabilities. These plans should address how participants with disabilities will be safely evacuated or supported during emergency situations. Considerations should encompass accessible routes, communication strategies, and providing necessary aids or support.

- ● **Community engagement:**
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Encourage participants to interact with local communities, fostering awareness and positive interactions with people with disabilities. Program activities should include community engagement initiatives, enabling participants to interact with local organizations and individuals with disabilities. This engagement promotes understanding, collaboration, and a broader sense of inclusion.

Feedback mechanisms:

Establish accessible channels for participants with disabilities to report any issues or concerns they may encounter during the program. This policy involves creating user-friendly feedback mechanisms such as online forms or dedicated hotlines, allowing participants to voice their experiences, raise concerns, and report any instances of discrimination or barriers they face.

Legal framework:

Review and update legal frameworks to protect the rights and dignity of participants with disabilities involved in Erasmus+ programs. Legal protections should be extended to participants with disabilities, safeguarding them against discrimination, harassment, or any violations of their rights during their participation in international programs. This policy aims to ensure that individuals with disabilities are legally empowered to seek recourse in case of such violations.

Continuous evaluation:

Regularly evaluate and update policies based on participant feedback and emerging best practices in disability inclusion. A periodic assessment of program policies is essential to ensure their effectiveness. Participant feedback, as well as changes in best practices, should inform the review and adjustment of policies to continually improve disability inclusion within the program.

Collaboration with disability organizations:

Collaborate with disability advocacy organizations to gain insights, share resources, and promote inclusion initiatives.

Collaboration with disability advocacy organizations involves forming partnerships with local and international groups that specialize in disability support. These partnerships may include resource-sharing, awareness campaigns, and mutual support, creating a strong network for inclusion.

Promote inclusive design:

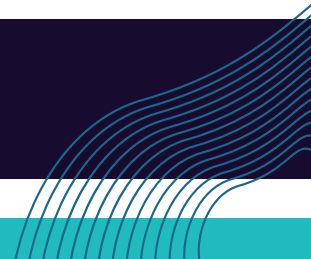
Encourage the planning of events, projects, and activities with universal accessibility in mind, reducing the need for individual accommodations. Inclusive design involves selecting venues and organizing activities that inherently cater to diverse abilities and needs. For instance, choosing venues that are wheelchair-accessible, incorporating inclusive activity options, and designing signage that is easy to understand for all participants.

Cultural sensitivity training:

Offer cultural sensitivity training to participants, focusing on understanding and respecting the diverse backgrounds of their peers, including those with disabilities. Cultural sensitivity training sessions should encompass disability awareness as a core component. These workshops aim to foster a culture of understanding and empathy among participants, promoting inclusivity and respectful interaction among participants of various backgrounds.

Public awareness campaigns:

Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes, educate the public about disability inclusion, and celebrate the contributions of people with disabilities in Erasmus+ programs. Public awareness campaigns are multimedia efforts aimed at changing public perceptions. These campaigns may include stories of participants with disabilities who have excelled in Erasmus+ programs, providing role models and reducing stigma surrounding disabilities. The goal is to promote the idea that people with disabilities are valuable and contributing members of society.



Conclusions:

For sure there could be more suggestions on how to improve the system in Romania but at this point the most important is to increase accessibility of disabled people in all domains. Moreover, it is at utmost importance to listen to the needs of these people instead of deciding what they need. Knowing them helps create a safer environment and listening to what they need will increase the chances of inclusion in any social, cultural, or educational activity.

At Nevo Parudimos, our NGO focuses on empowering young people with disabilities. We achieve this by collaborating closely with European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteers who possess specialized skills and a passion for working with this demographic. These volunteers play a vital role in our efforts to support disabled youth, bringing fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to our programs.

Working hand in hand with educators, staff from youth centers, and professionals from specialized institutions, our volunteers adapt existing methodologies to ensure inclusivity for individuals with disabilities. This collaborative effort involves tailoring activities and approaches originally designed for other disadvantaged groups to meet the unique needs and abilities of each person with a disability. For example, they may modify games and activities to accommodate mobility impairments or adjust communication methods to support individuals with hearing or speech impairments.

This process of adaptation and inclusivity isn't without its challenges. It requires creativity, empathy, and ongoing learning. However, Nevo Parudimos has gained this practice over many years of experience and collaboration. Through our partnerships with specialized institutions and continuous professional development, we have developed a deep understanding of the diverse needs of young people with disabilities.

Because the NGO prioritizes inclusivity and collaboration, we have significantly developed the quality of our work with disabled youth and children. Our commitment to continuous improvement and partnership underscores our dedication to creating a more inclusive society where everyone, regardless of ability, has equal opportunities to thrive.

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