

# Local engagement for Roma inclusion

## Locality study Aghia Varvara (Greece), 2016

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## 1. Executive summary

Roma of Aghia Varvara are widely considered by other Roma communities and relevant stakeholders as one of the most integrated Roma communities in Greece. However, due to the effects of the economic crisis, following public funding cuts, job losses and increased workload of the local authority personnel, Roma social integration at the locality is at stake. In this context, the LERI project, with the aim of understanding what works and what does not work for Roma social inclusion at local level, implemented three research interventions. The interventions were based on the findings of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) needs assessment and co-designed with the local stakeholders – both Roma and non-Roma – and the continuous support of the municipality of Aghia Varvara. The first intervention focused on the right to work by developing entrepreneurship opportunities for Roma. The second aimed to support local authorities to promote the active engagement of all citizens by strengthening local consultation tools and methods. Finally, the third intervention focused on combating discrimination and the promotion of equal participation in education and awareness raising within the local community by applying the PAR technique of photovoice.

Through the implementation of those three interventions, the LERI local research team had the opportunity to create the conditions to examine, in a participatory way, the local dynamics which strengthen or put at risk the social integration at local level. At the same time, through those interventions, by utilising PAR techniques, the project created ways to actively support social interaction, empower local stakeholders and provide capacity-building opportunities. The methodology was built on PAR but in the end was only applied to a certain degree. The photovoice and community visioning techniques were applied, while a participatory monitoring and evaluation assessment was partially conducted. Among the main findings of the research was that social integration is a process that requires continuous empowerment and flexible support mechanisms to ensure its efficient implementation. The current socioeconomic conditions, the national administrative reform, and the workforce reductions in both public and private sectors have influenced the sustainability of Roma social integration, in a locality where Roma and non-Roma have lived together for years.

**Keywords/Tags:** photovoice, Roma youth, local consultation, developing Roma entrepreneurship, 'desegregation measures'

## 2. Description of the local context

Aghia Varvara is a suburb in the western part of Athens with a population of 26,550<sup>1</sup>, an estimated 20–22% of which are Roma<sup>2</sup>. The Roma of Aghia Varvara are considered by the non-Roma, as well as by other Roma communities, as the most integrated Roma in Greece and are known as the 'Athenian Roma'. Overall,

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<sup>1</sup> Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011) Census 2011, available at: [www.statistics.gr/el/interactive-map](http://www.statistics.gr/el/interactive-map) (access on 19/05/2016).

<sup>2</sup> Estimation provided by the Municipal Social Service and the local Roma Associations representatives.

the municipality of Aghia Varvara is a unique case, with particular characteristics that form a mixed, integrated neighbourhood. The high percentage of vulnerable groups such as Roma, economic immigrants and repatriated Greeks shape a multicultural background, while the history of the city is closely linked to the Roma community and the many different cultural and ethnic communities, which have peacefully coexisted over the years, such as Cretans, Peloponnesians and Pontic Greeks.

Roma live integrated in many parts of the city, many Roma children regularly attend school, while a lot of Roma run their own businesses, mainly in the 'grey economy' and informal labour market. However, the economic crisis has had a significant impact on the inhabitants of the locality, both Roma and non-Roma. The lack of employment opportunities and the limited development of entrepreneurship have resulted in a lower socioeconomic status. In turn, this situation threatens people's chances of enjoying their fundamental rights to human dignity and non-discrimination. Nowadays, Aghia Varvara could be characterised as a community with low socioeconomic status, which suffers from low-level educational, high unemployment rates and problems related to social integration<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, compared to other parts of the country, the Roma of Aghia Varvara are considered by other Roma communities and Roma-related stakeholders as a well-integrated community. The majority of them owning or renting a house, while some of them throughout the years have managed to run their own businesses or work as itinerant peddlers around the main streets of the city.

Aghia Varvara is a good example of the social integration of Roma people all over Greece, where the Roma are elected in the local council and play a fundamental role in the shaping of local and national policy regarding Roma.

The political approach of the municipality of Aghia Varvara plays an important role in that. The local authorities treat all citizens equally and they give priority to the provision of social and health services, especially for people in need, "no matter if there are Roma or not, they are all equal."<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, the municipality was the first locality in Greece to develop a local integration action plan, which was subsequently mainstreamed and used for the formation of the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS). This also played a key role in the establishment of the ROM Network (cities with Roma populations within their boundaries). One more characteristic of Aghia Varvara is the numerous Roma associations and unions that are established in the area and the many educated Roma who live in the locality. Moreover, many Roma leaders grew up in this particular community and shaped the politics of governance towards the social integration of the Roma people at national level. In the 1990s, the first Roma person was elected to the municipal council of Aghia Varvara. Since then, at least one councillor have constantly represented the Roma in the municipal council.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Programming, Development and ICT, Municipality of Aghia Varvara (2016) "*Draft Operational and Strategic Plan of Aghia Varvara 2015-2019*" (Προσχέδιο Κατάρτισης Στρατηγικού και Επιχειρησιακού Προγραμματισμού 2016-2019), Aghia Varvara, municipality of Aghia Varvara.

<sup>4</sup> Municipal representative, Head of the Department of Programming, Development and ICT of the Municipality of Aghia Varvara, informal meeting, 04/09/2015, female.

Regarding education, even if the percentage of Roma children who regularly attend school is higher than other parts of the country, it remains low compared to non-Roma. In the academic year 2014–2015, 740 out of 2,820 students in Aghia Varvara were Roma, that is, one out of four students was Roma (26.2 %)⁵. Roma students are enrolled in all educational levels from kindergartens to high schools. Besides those positive aspects, Roma remain vulnerable, especially during times of economic crisis.

Thus, even if Aghia Varvara is considered as a locality where Roma are well-integrated, the living conditions of both Roma and non-Roma have been worsening in recent years, particularly following the long-lasting economic crisis. As a working class suburb, the the depth of the financial and economic crisis in Greece have affected the residents of Aghia Varvara, and this has seriously limited their ability to sustain and improve their standard of living. The effects of the crisis are numerous and those have influenced many aspects of socioeconomic life.

In this context, the **core problems** identified by the LERI research were the high rates of dropouts compared with non-Roma, segregated behaviours within schools, limited employment/entrepreneurship opportunities, cultural differences between the Roma and the local community and, finally, the lack of a local monitoring and evaluation tool. Those particular problems had been identified from the beginning of the research project implementation and were confirmed and further examined through the participatory action research (PAR) needs assessment phase, which, as further described below, was one of the main stages of the research. Through that phase, a series of informal meetings, interviews and focus groups with local stakeholders took place, while the **LERI local collaborators** were identified. The local collaborators who finally became part of the LERI local research team along with the LERI experts included two Roma representatives with a good reputation among the Roma and with experience in Roma integration actions. One was the director of the ROMNET, a national-level Roma association, and the second was the president of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Collaborators. The two Roma representatives worked closely with the LERI field experts throughout the project. Thus, the LERI local research team consisted of the LERI field experts and the two local Roma collaborators, and there was continuous contact with a municipal representative, who had been chosen by the municipal council to be their LERI contact. Moreover, through the implementation and depending on the nature of each intervention the LERI local research team was supported by other local stakeholders, as described in detail in the next section.

Once the local needs were identified and the core LERI local research team was created, the next step was to determine which needs were most important to the community, to identify potential interventions that could address these priority needs, and then select and prioritise the interventions to be applied.

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<sup>5</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (2015) “Education of Roma children project: Description of interventions and mapping of qualitative and quantitative data, school years 2010-2013” (Πρόγραμμα: Εκπαίδευση των παιδιών Ρομά 2010 - 2013. Περιγραφή Παρεμβατικών δράσεων και αποτύπωση ποιοτικών - ποσοτικών δεδομένων για τα σχολικά έτη 2010 – 2013”), Athens, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, available at <http://www.keda.uoa.gr/roma/index.php/mmedia/formspublications/12-mmedia/publications-press/101-romabookmap2012-2013>.

Following many shifts of focus as a result on the participatory approach of the research – further analysed below – three interventions ultimately took place. The first concerned education and culture and focused on supporting desegregation measures and strengthening the Roma and non-Roma community ties by utilising the dynamics of the PAR technique photovoice at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School (Gymnasium) of Aghia Varvara. The second intervention was a course in entrepreneurship. The training and its modules, co-designed and chosen by Roma the entrepreneurs themselves, aimed to support local entrepreneurs and unemployed to contemplate and find alternatives for the development of entrepreneurial activities to overcome the effects of the economic crisis and unemployment. Following the outcomes and findings of the PAR needs assessment in the locality it was clear that there was an urgent need for the local Roma entrepreneurs to differentiate their current economic activities to be capable of facing the new economic challenges. Most of the Roma entrepreneurs who participated in the focus groups or were interviewed, highlighted their willingness to improve their entrepreneurial skills and competence, and mentioned that in the past training had been conducted in entrepreneurship but had been so theoretical and academic that in the end it had not provided them with any practical support. To this end, based on the priorities identified by the Roma themselves, the training ultimately focused on the following thematic areas: (a) e-commerce, (b) international trade (imports–exports) and (c) current funding opportunities.

Finally, an issue identified with regard to the monitoring and evaluation of Roma integration at local level – extensively discussed with many municipal representatives – resulted in the LERI research team, in collaboration with the municipal representatives, deciding to run a course on local consultation methods and techniques. This shift mainly occurred in order to provide as much support as possible to the municipality to address the internal municipal needs and mainly to finalise the Local Strategic and Operational Plan 2016–2019<sup>6</sup> and its required procedures, such as local consultation.

Having identified the above-mentioned needs to be addressed by the project interventions, the methodology progressively developed, as further described in the next section.

### 3. PAR methodology employed

The methodology of the study developed little by little in order to provide reliable tools for the LERI experts to study all aspects of Roma social integration within their context and understand what works and what does not work for Roma social inclusion at local level. Overall, the research was divided into three cycles. The first PAR cycle launched in January 2015 and lasted until June 2015 once the fieldwork experts had built up relations with local stakeholders and the initial local needs identified. Then, in July 2015, the second PAR cycle began and ended with a consensus conference in October 2015. Finally, the third PAR cycle lasted

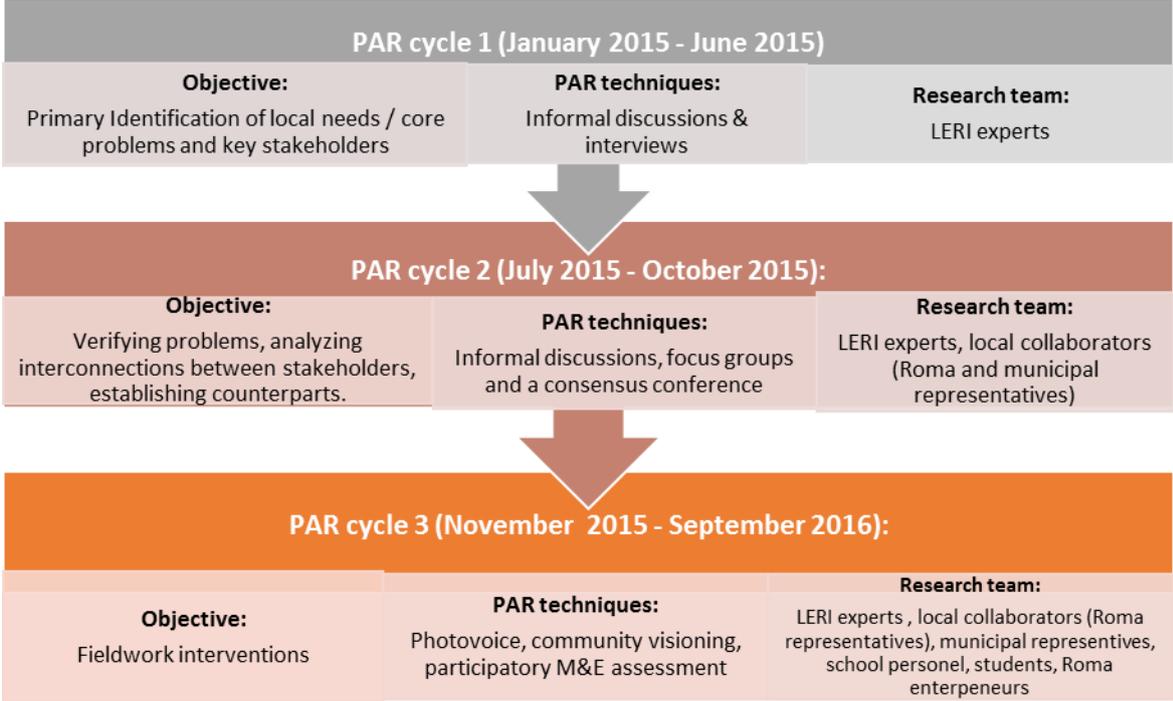
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<sup>6</sup> The five years term local strategic and operation plan (Στρατηγικός και Επιχειρησιακός Προγραμματισμός Ο.Τ.Α. α' βαθμού) is obligatory for all Greek Municipalities under the Greek Law 3852/2010 (OJ A 87/7.6.2010) 'Reorganisation of Local Government - Kallikratis Program' (Νέα Αρχιτεκτονική της Αυτοδιοίκησης και της Αποκεντρωμένης Διοίκησης - Πρόγραμμα Καλλικράτης), 7 June 2010.

from November 2015 to September 2016 during which the implementation of the interventions took place.

The figure below illustrates the three PAR cycles, the objectives of each cycle, the PAR techniques applied and the members of the research team who participated in each stage.

**Figure 1. The three PAR cycles**



Source: LERI Field expert, 2016

**PAR cycle 1**

In the first PAR cycle, the LERI field experts focused on building trust with the local stakeholders, clarified the aims and the objectives of the project with everyone and gained the official support of the municipality. The first PAR cycle, was a preparatory stage during which the local dynamics were observed and an initial mapping of the local needs and core problems was carried out. At the same time, key stakeholders with the potential and wish to act as local collaborators were identified, and the commitment of local authorities confirmed. The first PAR cycle implemented by the LERI field experts and the PAR techniques applied comprised informal discussions and interviews with key stakeholders and Roma people.

During that phase, the main research questions were the following:

- What are the key problems and challenges faced by the Roma community?
- Who are the key actors in the locality?
- What are the core problems, and their roots causes, to Roma integration at local level?
- How will these problems be addressed and by whom?

Once a level of trust had been established with most of the participants, the local research team started conducting informal discussions with members of the community regarding the possible further actions to be taken within the LERI project. Through those discussions, the LERI field experts recorded a series of local and needs and then the first PAR cycle completed.

## PAR cycle 2

The **second PAR cycle** was a PAR needs assessment that focused on verifying and further analysing the identified problems, mapping the current local needs and root causes per policy area, while analysing the interconnections between stakeholders, and establishing the LERI local research team. The research questions of the second cycle were:

- How can the identified problems be addressed, and by whom?
- How to develop actions for and with Roma?
- What are the relationships among all related stakeholders?
- What are the most urgent problems? In which policy areas?

Through project implementation, the LERI research team frequently considered which intervention would yield the desired results most efficiently, given the context of the community. Thus, based on the findings of the research at each stage, some shifts of focus occurred. For instance, in the beginning, three PAR techniques were selected, however during the implementation it emerged that additional techniques were needed. Initially, interviews, focus groups and a consensus conference were planned. However, a number of consultation meetings and informal discussions were also arranged with the aim of supporting needs identification in a participatory and open way, and to build trust among the participants and researchers. Due to the fact that none of the participants had experience in participatory research actions (PAR), the LERI local research team had to contact a number of local actors on a bilateral level, to explain and clarify the participatory and active perspective of the LERI research.

Thus, two focus groups were conducted. The first focused on entrepreneurship/employment and the second on culture/education. In total, 11 participants were invited to the first focus group on entrepreneurship and all were residents of Aghia Varvara: six of them are local Roma entrepreneurs, the deputy mayor of Aghia Varvara responsible for social policy issues, three Roma municipal councillors, and the president of the Roma Commercial Association of Aghia Varvara. All except the three Roma municipal councillors took part in the focus group. The participants had already been informed about the project through informal discussions and interviews. The focus group lasted two hours and was coordinated by two facilitators, the LERI field expert and the Roma local collaborators. The focus group was divided into two sessions: in the first session the facilitators, explained the aim of the focus group, presented the findings of the research so far and invited the participants to express their opinions on them. The second session focused on sharing and discussing problems and needs and looked for feasible actions and possible interventions in relation to entrepreneurship.

The main result of the focus group was an identified urgent need for local entrepreneurs to differentiate their current economic activity in order to be

capable of facing the new economic challenges. Discussions focused on how the LERI project could support them.

The second focus group interview covered education and culture and the participants invited were all key local stakeholders in education and culture. In total, 16 participants were invited. Some of them had been interviewed or were informed about the project from the informal discussions, while others were invited because someone had suggested them (snowballing technique). The focus group was divided into two sessions. In the first session, the facilitators explained the aim of the focus group, presented the findings of the research so far and invited the participants to express their opinions on them. The second session focused on sharing and discussing problems and needs, and looking for feasible actions and possible interventions in education and culture. Among other points made, at the very beginning of the focus group the participants highlighted that there is no differentiation between Roma and non-Roma in Aghia Varvara and agreed that joint efforts have been made in the area of culture. For example, recently, the music group Sam Roma organised a concert, which raised funds for the 'Social Grocery', thus helping the most vulnerable social groups of Aghia Varvara. Overall, participants agreed that they have successfully co-organised many cultural events in the past. As they stated, the municipality organised four local festivals every year. All local associations participate in those festivals and they have the opportunity to inform their members about the actions of each association and at the same time be informed for the actions of others.

One of the main findings of the focus group was that most of the participants perceived culture as a means of escape from the difficulties of everyday life and as an opportunity to learn about each other. The economic crisis has had a significant impact on the way people behave in their everyday lives. In the past, Greek people used to spend leisure time with friends and relatives and despite ordinary problems; they always found an opportunity to get pleasure from cultural and social events. However, as some of the participants stated, as a result of the economic crisis "we have reduced our participation in social and cultural gatherings, mostly because coping with job and family issues has priority and thus, entertainment, social gatherings and cultural opportunities are overlooked."<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting a contradiction between the findings of the interviews conducted in the first PAR cycle and the findings of the focus group of the second PAR cycle, which ultimately resulted in a change of research focus. During the first PAR cycle of the project, the limited knowledge of common historical roots among the Roma and other refugees, who mainly came to Greece from Asia Minor and settled in Aghia Varvara between 1922 and 1960, was identified as a core priority. Many of the interviewees stated that despite living together in the locality for many years they did not really know the local history well. However, the participants of the focus group, both Roma and non-Roma, argued that they have organised several cultural events in the past where all communities participated equally. They stated, "We don't need a project to support us for organising such an event. We can do it by ourselves. Actually, we have done it

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<sup>7</sup> Community member, focus group interview, 22 July 2015, female.

successfully in the past.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, through the interviews, the same people had argued exactly the opposite, that Roma and non-Roma people do not really join in each other’s cultural events. For instance, Roma do not attend the Pontic’s traditional dancing event and vice versa. Surprisingly, their statements changed once they were all together in the focus group. Thus, based on that development that considered organising of a cultural event as a low priority need for the community, the priority shifted focus.

Among the participants of the focus group was the principal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara – a school with a large number of Roma students – who presented a number of interesting ideas in culture and education. Thus, after the focus group the LERI local research team frequently communicated with him. Once the new school year began, some segregated behaviours in school have been noticed. According to the principal and the teachers of the high school, several non-Roma parents have applied to transfer their children to other high schools because of the increasing number of Roma children enrolled in that school. At the same time, there was ‘pressure’ from various local stakeholders and Roma associations to transfer Roma students from other high schools to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School. Considering that such behaviours could result in school segregation of Roma children in a locality where Roma are integrated into society to a large degree, constituting the best example of Roma integration in Greece, the LERI local research team agreed that the participation of this school in the LERI project was of high importance. As a result, it was decided that one of the project interventions would aim to support advocacy techniques to advance desegregation and strengthen the capacity of Roma at the community level, as described in detail in the next section.

The second PAR cycle concluded with the consensus conference. The consensus conference was arranged with the aim of presenting and discussing the interventions with the public, and achieving the highest possible participation of the local community members. The consensus conference took place at the Town Hall of Aghia Varvara. The participants of the consensus conference included all key stakeholders: among them was the mayor and the deputy mayor of Aghia Varvara, and the head of the Equality and Citizens’ Rights Department of the FRA.

### PAR cycle 3

The findings of the second PAR cycle were utilised to design the fieldwork interventions of the project. Thus, the **third PAR cycle** consisted of **three fieldwork interventions**: one on education and culture, one on entrepreneurship and one on local governance. The fieldwork interventions in Aghia Varvara were divided into three parts to activate as many stakeholders as possible, address the local needs identified in the two previous cycles, and at the same time examine what works and what does not work in a participatory way.

In particular, the first intervention entitled ***‘Exploring “segregated behaviours” through students’ lenses: Support student’s committee identify positive and negative aspects of school using photovoice’*** focused on examining, on the ground, Roma and non-Roma coexistence in a participatory

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<sup>8</sup> Community member, focus group interview, 22 July 2015, male.

and empirical way. The PAR technique applied was **photovoice**. The key stakeholders involved were representatives of the school community, Roma and non-Roma students, the municipality, other local schools, the Roma NGO Heromact, and the Parents' Union.

The second intervention focused on **supporting entrepreneurship** by providing training on specific business and market issues that were requested by the Roma. The PAR technique applied was **community visioning**. The key stakeholders involved were Roma and non-Roma entrepreneurs, unemployed and local commercial associations. This particular need had also been identified during the initial stage of LERI and, through the PAR needs assessment, was strongly confirmed by the key stakeholders and people from the Roma community and the implementation of the selected PAR techniques. As a Roma shop owner stated:

*"If I did not have a job, I could not send my children at school and I would have problems in every aspect of my everyday life. I would be forced to send my children begging at the traffic lights. This is why I consider the issue of having a job so important – for not sending my children to the traffic lights"* (Roma, community member, shop owner. Informal discussion, 18 March 2015).

Finally, the third intervention took the form **of training on consultation at local level**, which was designed and conducted in a participatory and active way. The PAR technique applied was based on the principles of **participatory monitoring and evaluation assessment**. The key stakeholders involved were mainly representatives of the municipal authorities, municipal personnel and councillors as well as citizens from local community.

The next section analyses the implementation of the fieldwork intervention, and discusses specific aspects of the PAR techniques that were applied.

## 4. The local intervention description – Goals, partners, process and results

### Intervention 1: Exploring 'segregated behaviours' through students' lenses

This intervention aimed to address one of the core needs identified from the beginning of the research, which was to utilise culture as a means for boosting cultural and social coexistence of Roma and non-Roma at a local level. Due to the long coexistence of Roma and non-Roma in Aghia Varvara, this need had been mentioned as a priority by many stakeholders, mainly from Roma people and representatives of local associations in the first research stages when a number of interviews and informal discussions with local stakeholders were conducted. Based on this finding, a focus group interview was conducted to discuss how and why an intervention in this field could benefit the locality. The focus group was held in July 2015 with the participation of stakeholders related to cultural and educational issues at local level. The participants invited were representatives of the Union of Cretans, Megalonisos (*Η Μεγαλόνησος*), the Association of Greek Pontics, Faros (*Ο Φάρος*), the Panhellenic Cultural Association of Greek Roma (*Πανελλήνιος Πολιτιστικός Σύλλογος Ελλήνων Ρομά*),

the Panhellenic Cultural and Educational Association of Greek Roma (*Πανελλήνιος Επιμορφωτικός και Πολιτιστικός Σύλλογος Ελλήνων Ρομά*), members of the music band Sam Roma, a woman mediator from the University of Athens, responsible for a previous photography project, the Byzantine-Christian Museum, the Public Welfare Enterprise of the Municipality, the Parents' Union of Aghia Varvara, the principal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School (Gymnasium), three Roma municipal councillors and a member of the Cinematic Club of Aghia Varvara. All invitees, except the three Roma municipal councillors, took part to the focus group. The focus group lasted two and a half hours and was coordinated by two facilitators, the LERI field expert and Roma local collaborators.

As already mentioned, among other points, participants highlighted that there is no differentiation between Roma and non-Roma in everyday life and they all live peacefully together in Aghia Varvara. They agreed that they all treat each other equally and joint efforts have already been made in the area of culture, mainly by the municipality. Overall, participants agreed that they have successfully co-organised many cultural events in the past, but they could not quite understand how a 'small-scale' local intervention could provide something new for the locality. As participants stated, "we have done it in the past so many times" and "Of course we join cultural events of other cultural groups, for instance Roma going to Pontiac musical events."<sup>9</sup> (As mentioned in the previous section, it should be noted that this finding contradicted what some of the same participants had stated in the informal discussions and interviews: "I have never gone to a Pontiac event" or "Yes, it would be interesting to co-organise a cultural event altogether we have not done it before." Because of that finding, the research had to shift focus from the organisation of a cultural event to a more targeted action. Under this circumstance, among the participants of the focus group was the principal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara who was invited to participate as the school at that time was facing challenges related to Roma social integration; the principal had expressed his willingness to support the implementation of advocacy and participatory approaches. In particular, during that period, some desegregated behaviours have been taken place at the school. As stated by the local Roma collaborators, "after 70 years of coexistence of Roma and non-Roma in the locality, it is the first time that recent behaviours indicate a rise of racism in the locality."<sup>10</sup> According to the representatives of the school, several non-Roma parents had applied to transfer their children to other schools as a result of the increasing number of Roma children enrolled in that particular school (in 2014–2015, 46.5% of the enrolled students were Roma<sup>11</sup>). At the same time, there was a demand from Roma parents to transfer Roma students from other schools to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School.

Considering that this development could result in the segregation of Roma children, the decision was made by the LERI local research team to implement an

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<sup>9</sup> Focus group with community member, 22 July 2015, male.

<sup>10</sup> LERI local Roma collaborator, informal meeting, July 2015, male.

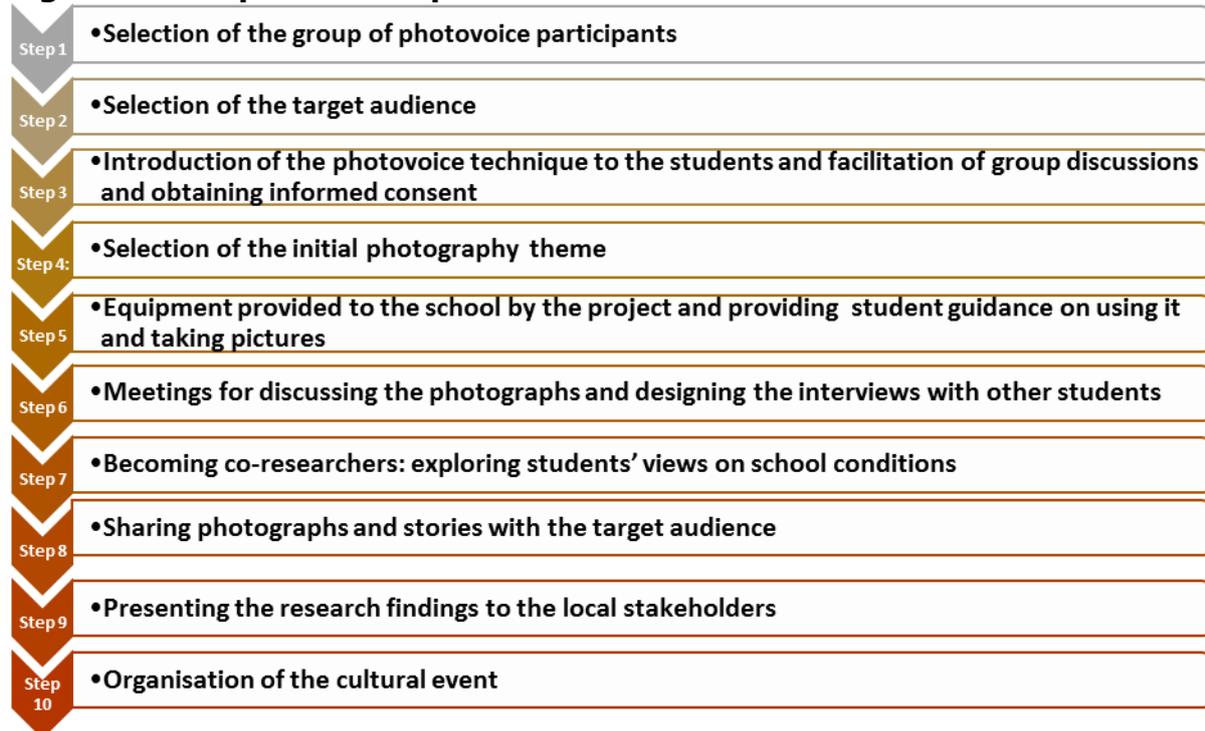
<sup>11</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (2015) "*Education of Roma children project: Description of interventions and mapping of qualitative and quantitative data, school years 2010-2013*" (Πρόγραμμα: Εκπαίδευση των παιδιών Ρομά 2010 - 2013. Περιγραφή Παρεμβατικών δράσεων και αποτύπωση ποιοτικών - ποσοτικών δεδομένων για τα σχολικά έτη 2010 – 2013"), Athens, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, available at <http://www.keda.uoa.gr/roma/index.php/mmedia/formspublications/12-mmedia/publications-press/101-romabookmap2012-2013>.

intervention at that school, focusing on the provision of support to the school community to develop advocacy techniques to advance desegregation, and strengthen the capacity of Roma at the community level. The LERI field experts and the local Roma collaborators took the decision after consulting municipality and local cultural associations. In this regard, several meetings and discussions took place with the school representatives, the principal and a teacher, as well as with the Parent's Union and municipal representatives. An additional reason for selecting that particular school was that it has received several awards in competitions and has a good reputation. Moreover, it comprises teachers who are very experienced and willing to implement actions in favour of Roma.

Thus, the intervention was developed progressively in a participatory way where each research step was based on the results of the previous. In the beginning, it was decided that the intervention would aim at the organisation of an event or action in a participatory way that would allow the engagement of all related stakeholders. Then, the LERI experts examined which PAR technique could best address that particular case and the most appropriate PAR technique was selected. In this context, the **photovoice** technique was selected as the most suitable for activating and motivating the students to work together, while also creating the conditions for raising awareness of the conditions at school. The LERI experts selected this particular technique as the most appropriate research tool for approaching that specific group of students. Taking photographs, then thinking about and discussing them could motivate students to actively participate in the research and not only see their participation in the project as a simple course or a reason not to attend class.

The implementation of the photovoice involved the LERI local research team (LERI field experts and Roma local collaborators) in close collaboration with a teacher and the principal of the school. At the initial methodological planning, the intervention was divided into three stages, where the first included a raising-awareness event through a visit by the FRA to the school. However, at the end of the process, the intervention explicitly put into action the photovoice steps as described below.

**Figure 2: The photovoice process**



Source: LERI Field expert, 2016

### **Step 1: Selection of the group of photovoice participants**

The first step towards this intervention was to establish the team of students who would participate in the research process. Based on the findings of the preparatory stage and by exploring the dynamics within the school community it was decided that LERI would work closely with the 15 elected students of the Students' Committee. Moreover, the team was supported by two more students who were educated as school mediators under a human rights project last year, implemented by the European Wergerland Centre's 'Dromologia' ( $\Delta$ -POM-ΟΛΟΓΙΑ)<sup>12</sup>. Ultimately, the team consisted of 17 students: 15 students from the Students' Committee and two school mediators – the majority being Roma boys. Specifically, 15 students were boys and two were girls, and of the 17 students 14 of them Roma and three non-Roma. The reason that LERI worked with those two groups of students was because they had been elected had previous experience in mediation and had a strong influence on the school community. It is worth noting that those students played a leading role at school: many of them were able to strongly influence conflict among Roma and non-Roma students, as well as conflicts between Roma students themselves. Thus, once the team was established, the first meeting between the LERI team and the group of students was held in November 2015.

During this stage, the driving forces of the intervention activities were the local Roma collaborators, together with the principal and one teacher from the school who contacted the students, and other teachers who prepared the ground for implementation. In this stage, the municipality was kept informed of the progress of the intervention, but did not have any active participation.

<sup>12</sup> Under a project of the European Wergerland Centre's entitled " $\Delta$ -POM-ΟΛΟΓΙΑ" ("**D-ROM-OLOGIA**", i.e. "Routes").

## **Step 2: Selection of the target audience**

In parallel, the target audience was all the participants of the focus group interviews conducted in the previous PAR cycle. Hence, the main target audience was all cultural and educational-related local associations and the municipal authorities, along with the local Roma Associations. Among them was the NGO Heromact, a newly established Roma organisation located at Aghia Varvara but which acts at national level; the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Collaborators, a national association with representatives active in Aghia Varvara; the Cultural Association of Greek Roma, representatives of the University of Athens responsible for the 'Education for Roma children' project; the Parents' Union of Aghia Varvara; the Parents Association of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara; the Union of Cretans; and the Association of Pontic Greeks.

## **Step 3: Introduction of the photovoice technique to the students**

In December 2015, the LERI research team in collaboration with the school representatives held an initial meeting with the team of students with the aim of familiarising them with the photovoice concept and method, as well as the research ethics. In this meeting, the objectives of LERI were also shared and discussed. The teacher responsible explained the importance of participating in the LERI activities, highlighting that the results of this intervention could be beneficial for the wider local community. As already mentioned, "Aghia Varvara is a good example of the coexistence of Roma and non-Roma and possibly one of the best examples in Greece. This has to be promoted." She continued by saying that "In this team, you are both Roma and non-Roma students and this is a very positive step. We should make it widely known that the good points of coexistence of Roma and non-Roma students are greater than the negative ones."<sup>13</sup>

Afterwards, the students were invited to keep notes in a 'research diary' that was distributed. In the diary, students were advised to write a thought/feeling or an idea after every action taken under the project. The aim of the diary was twofold: on the one hand, to encourage students to reflect on their own thoughts and, at the same time, to monitor the entire research process. Furthermore, at this stage the LERI fieldwork experts discussed the importance of informed consent with the representatives of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School, and informed the students' parents, through the Parents' Union, on the project scope and methods, and asked for written consent for their children to participate.

## **Step 4: Selection of the initial photography theme**

The next step involved the LERI local research team together with the principal and teacher discussing the content of the intervention and selecting the themes for the photography. It was agreed that they would focus on how students perceive their life at school and how this changes over time. School bullying was stated to be one of the main problems of school life, so the intervention was linked with this. Hence, it was decided to ask the students to take photos of their everyday lives at school with the aim of presenting both the positive and negative aspects of it.

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<sup>13</sup> Student at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School, photovoice discussion, December 2015, female.

Based on the primary needs identified, i.e. the desegregated behaviours and the coexistence of Roma and non-Roma, along with the emergence of the problem of school bullying, the first photographic theme was 'places of conflicts', followed by the theme 'places of cooperation' – as further described in the next step.

### **Step 5: Taking pictures**

As the next step, in January 2015, the LERI project team provided the school with a professional digital camera, a laptop and a projector with the aim of supporting the implementation of the photovoice requirements. The team then discussed the selected themes, and the students were instructed on how to take pictures. Once it was revealed that all students had their own smartphones with digital cameras, the decision was made to use their mobiles to take the photos. Thus, the team was divided into three groups and they were given 30 minutes to go around school and capture places of conflict. At the next meeting, the same groups of students took photos of places of cooperation. All the photographs had been collected into a file and on the upcoming meetings, the photographs were discussed and analysed.

### **Step 6: Meeting(s) for discussing the photographs and designing the interviews**

Once all photographs collected to one folder by the teacher two meetings were organised with the aim to discuss about the photography theme. During the first meeting, the LERI local research team, the school representatives and the team of students reviewed all the pictures taken. The students, with the coordination of the teacher and the LERI experts, demonstrated, in their way, how they perceived themselves. The discussions were based on the following questions:

- What do you see here?
- What is really happening here?
- How does this relate to our lives?
- Why does this situation exist?
- What can we do about it?

During the second meeting, all students were asked to select and talk about one or two photographs they felt to be the most significant for them. This process aimed to make students think about their own behaviour at school. The students expressed some very interesting points, explaining, for example, how and why 'fights' between them occur in those places. One student said, "When I was taking the photos I was wondering why most 'bullying' actions happen there."<sup>14</sup> Others mentioned that "there are only ten students who do damage and bad things and they destroy the school's reputation."<sup>15</sup> Bullying happens in the corridors once the bell rings, in the bathrooms, in corners hidden from the teachers' eyes, near the school's mini-market and the stairs; while the places depicted under cooperation were mainly the classrooms, the gym and the library. The students had some interesting views, with the majority of them stating that "our school is terrible and very dirty (...) we have to do something", while others proposed ideas for preventing bullying, such as changing the teachers' supervision times and places, or creating a student team of supervisors.

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<sup>14</sup> Roma student of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara, photovoice discussion, January 2016, male, 13 years old.

<sup>15</sup> Roma student of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara, photovoice discussion, January 2016, male, 13 years old.

Moreover, it emerged from the photos that the school has a lot of litter left around, an issue that all students complained about. It was therefore decided that this fact should be shared with the local stakeholders at the end of the process.

### **Step 7: Becoming co-researchers: exploring students' views on school conditions**

As the visual part of the photovoice ended, the students became co-researchers and undertook interviews with their classmates. In March and April 2016, LERI field experts introduced students to social research methodology and students then undertook the interviews. The aim of the interviews was to gather views on the strengths and weaknesses of the school community as well to share ideas and suggestions for improvements. The research findings together with the photos will assist students in realising, in practice, how they can fight for their rights and act as a team in a democratic way. In total, 15 interviews were conducted, some of them in the library and the remainder in a teachers' room. The interview questions were initially formulated by the LERI field experts, then discussed with the school representatives and finally selected together with the students. In total, 10 questions were included. Among them were questions about Roma and non-Roma coexistence in the school, the positive and negative aspects of school life, and recommendations for the local authorities. As one interviewee mentioned, "it is difficult for Roma and non-Roma to coexist"<sup>16</sup>, while another said, "*After so many years that Roma have lived in Aghia Varvara, we are all one.*"<sup>17</sup>

The interviewees included girls and boys, some Roma and some non-Roma. All students showed great interest in the interviews. It is worth noting that most of the students pointed out the litter left around and dirty walls of the school as the main problems, while many of them identified the school's participation in a range of activities, and the friendly relationships among the school community as strengths. In response to the question 'Do you have any ideas for improvement that you would like to share with the municipal authorities?' many students stressed the need for creating more leisure-time opportunities.

### **Step 8: Sharing photographs and stories with the target audience**

At a next meeting, the primary findings were analysed and the way that students would present research findings started to take its final shape. Due to the early closure of the school, it was decided the findings would be presented as a slide show to stage their photographs, stories and recommendations to the local stakeholders.

### **Step 9: Presenting the research findings to the local stakeholders**

In May 2016, as the final step in the photovoice technique, the team of the students visited the Town Hall and presented their research findings and recommendations to the municipality. The meeting was attended by the mayor of Aghia Varvara, two deputy mayors, heads of departments, municipal officials and a representative of another high school in Aghia Varvara. Each student presented

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<sup>16</sup> Roma student of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara, photovoice discussion, April 2016, male, age 13 years old.

<sup>17</sup> Non-Roma student, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara, photovoice discussion, April 2016, female, age 13 years old.

one slide of a PowerPoint presentation, which included information on the entire research process, photos and quotations from the interviews, and suggestions for improving the situation in school, as well as in the city. The attendees showed great interest in the project presentation and asked the students about the difficulties they had encountered during the research, extent to which they had been influenced by the research process, what they knew about their city and had learned through their participation in the research process, etc. The participants warmly congratulated the students, the LERI local research team, and the representatives of the school for the important work undertaken. Indicatively, one of the participants welcomed the fact that:

*"the students did not attempt to show only the positive aspects of the school and the city, but also the negative ones, acknowledging that this is essential for improving not only the situation in the school and the city but mainly the way of thinking".*

Finally many of them mentioned the importance of such a research approach for the students because "it will change the way of acting and understanding in the long term."<sup>18</sup>

### **Step 10: Organisation of the cultural event**

The intervention was planned to conclude with the organisation of a cultural event. In this event, the photographs would be exhibited and the students could present on their experience participating in the research. However, because of time limitations due to the early end of the school year and the fact that the most of the participating students had completed junior high school and in the next school year would continue to high school, the intervention ended at Step 9 with the presentation of the findings to the local stakeholders.

Overall, the design of the photovoice element changed shape, as some parts that were decided in the beginning of the process were not relevant for the steps as they developed during implementation. Even if the objective of this intervention had remained the same, the methodological approach and the context of that intervention had to change shape through project implementation in order to address accurately the local needs as they emerged through the participatory research process.

For instance, in the beginning, the creation of a blog or update of the school website was suggested, however, during the realisation of the process it emerged that this was not possible, mainly due to technical and administrative difficulties. The students proposed creating a page on Facebook to share their experience of participating in this project, since they did not like the idea of creating something on the school webpage because "no one will read it." However, this was also not possible, mainly because with Facebook, many ethical concerns arise, and the content would have proved difficult for the teachers and the LERI local team to manage. Therefore, this aspect of the intervention was not ultimately undertaken. In addition, the notes in the research diary, originally anticipated to be used (i) as a means for students to reflect on their everyday experiences, (ii) for collecting quotations, and (iii) for monitoring and evaluating

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<sup>18</sup> Participant, Photovoice, presentation, May 2016, male.

the implementation of the entire activity, were not as expected, mainly because students had difficulties expressing their thoughts and ideas in writing. The diaries were distributed to the students at the end of each meeting with the request to write down a thought, a feeling, a recommendation or anything else related to the research process at that time. However, students showed limited interest in doing this.

Finally, the limited participation of Parents' Union of the school, which was one of the key actors of this intervention, was the main obstacle to the engagement process. The parents were informed about the project once the intervention had started, however, their interest in actively participating was limited: the main reason given was 'little time'. The LERI field experts formally informed representatives of the Parent's Union about the LERI aim and activities and the importance of parents' involvement in it. However, during the implementation phase it was difficult for the LERI field experts to reach the parents directly. Thus, the LERI research team mainly contacted them through the principal of the school, who always tried to find the best moment to reach them, since he was aware of all the wider issues. However, other issues concerning school life, such as conflict among students, visits outside of the school and issues related to the attendance of students were also the priority for both the school representatives and the parents, so there was no time for the LERI research, even if they considered it to be of high importance. It is worth noting that it took three months to collect all the parental consent forms.

## Intervention 2: Supporting entrepreneurship and employment of Roma through specialised/tailored-made training courses, requested by Roma

Following the outcomes and findings of the PAR needs assessment (PAR cycles 1 and 2) in the locality, it was clear that there was an urgent need for the local entrepreneurs to differentiate their current economic activity, mostly connected with the grey economy, to be capable of facing the new economic challenges. This particular need had been identified during the initial stage of LERI when interviews and informal discussions with many locals had been conducted. The key stakeholders and Roma people had also confirmed it through the PAR needs assessment, particularly in the focus group interview on entrepreneurship held in July 2015 and at the consensus conference organised in September 2015.

To this end, the objective of this fieldwork intervention was to design a 'tailored-made' course in entrepreneurship in collaboration with the Roma. The core aim of the training was to support local entrepreneurs in thinking about and finding alternatives for the development of entrepreneurial activities, to overcome the effects of the economic crisis and unemployment, while motivating them to act in a collective and collaborative way. Development of the training took six months, from September 2015 to February 2016, since it was extensively discussed with many local Roma entrepreneurs through informal meetings. A participatory approach was applied for planning the content of the training with the aim of implicitly activating the local Roma entrepreneurs to cooperate and work collectively to solve a common problem. The initial idea of the training came from the focus group finding that "training is useless (...) we have participated in

many of them and it was waste of time; a lot of theory without any practical information."<sup>19</sup> Based on that statement, which was commonly accepted by the majority of participants, the obstacles to learning and the weaknesses in previous courses were analysed. Among them was the content of the courses, which as stated was "so much academic instead of practical"<sup>20</sup> and consequently difficult to understand. Another limitation was the time the training took place. Roma entrepreneurs are only available when shops are closed so any activity should only take place then.

Apart from the obstacles, the participants also expressed their concerns, and shared ideas on how they could gain the most from the project fieldwork intervention. They were asked to consider how the project might support them and together they analysed possible local actions. Many ideas emerged through this participatory process, from establishing a social enterprise (KoinSEP) to creating a common e-shop. However, in the end, the majority of them decided that due to the new business challenges and the impact of economic crisis, training that could address those specific challenges would be very useful.

Hence, in January 2016 the training started taking its final shape and, based on the priorities given by Roma themselves, focused on the following thematic areas: (a) e-commerce, (b) international trade (imports–exports) (c) tax issues, and (d) funding opportunities. Overall, 22 Roma entrepreneurs and unemployed males participated in the courses, held on Monday and Wednesday evenings to be convenient for the entrepreneurs. It is worth noting that although the training was organised in close collaboration with the president of the Roma Commercial Association of Aghia Varvara, the president did not attend any of the training sessions.

All courses were held in February 2016. The first course focused on international transactions (imports–exports). A customs broker delivered a training where he presented some basic terminology, the various administrative forms used for the purposes of exports and imports, and provided practical advice on importing from third countries or countries that have preferential agreements with the EU. The second course focused on tax issues concerning the establishment and operation of a business, as well as practical guidance on how to improve the daily operation of the trainees' businesses. Tax issues, documentation, invoices and related issues constituted the main part of the training provided.

The third course focused on e-commerce. Tax issues related to the set-up and operation of an e-shop, as well as issues related to the country of establishment (and the associated tax issues) were discussed.

Following the end of the training, a community visioning session took place. The main topic under discussion/visioning was how the trainees expected their everyday life and their entrepreneurship activities to be after the operation of the new metro station in Aghia Varvara, expected in 2018. Discussions were conducted in an informal manner, without being audio taped, to allow the participants to feel free to share their thoughts and expectations. One of them, who was a peddler, stated that the operation of the new metro station would

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<sup>19</sup> Roma local entrepreneur, focus group interview, July 2015, male.

<sup>20</sup> Roma local entrepreneur, focus group interview, July 2015, male.

have a significant impact on the peddlers. "Things are bad, and the metro will make them worse, since we will not be able to go around the street as we used to." Another participant explained that the metro station would serve only the residents of Aghia Varvara, and highlighted that, based on what he has observed, "when a new metro station operates, large shops open nearby the metro station which attracts all customers and therefore all other nearby shops are forced to close". All participants agreed that the way they currently operated their businesses was not sustainable and had to change in order to keep up with local developments. They expressed the need to differentiate their business operations. As stated by the local collaborators, all entrepreneurs felt "confined" and "weak", without knowing how to change their business orientation successfully.

The last course focused on the available financial and funding opportunities for entrepreneurship development in Greece. Four funding calls were currently open, presented and analysed under the Sectoral Operational Programme 'Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Innovation'. Some participants showed particular interest in this session as they had expressed an interest in apply to one of these open calls.

At the end of the training, participants filled in an evaluation form that consisted of a small number of questions to allow the participants to provide brief feedback on the training. In particular, the questions were:

- Did the seminar meet your expectations? If yes, why? If not, why?
- Were the questions that you had before the training, or developed during the training course, answered satisfactorily by the trainers?
- Did you find it easy to follow and understand the content of the training?
- Do you think that the knowledge gained through the training will allow you to improve the daily operation of your business or your plans to set up a new one? If yes, in what way?

However, because those 22 entrepreneurs and unemployed did not participate in all the courses, but rather attended only the courses that they found interesting to them personally, it was difficult to evaluate the training as a whole.

In this context, a second community visioning and evaluation session was planned with the aim of further analysing community life and at the same time exploring if and how the training had really supported the participants in their future business planning. In particular, the aim of the evaluation session would be to assess the output of the training, to re-discuss and further analyse the business expectations of the participants, and share with them some possible developmental ways forward. However, by June 2016 it had proved hard to motivate them to attend such a session. The main obstacle faced, apart from empowerment, was timing since during this period many of them were travelling abroad for supplies.

### Intervention 3: Training on local consultation methods and techniques

The municipality of Aghia Varvara has extensive experience of designing and implementing social integration actions and projects, while its social services

department is very active and well-targeted towards addressing the needs of all vulnerable groups. As frequently stated by municipal representatives, "the residents of Aghia Varvara are all treated equally, regardless of origin and any socioeconomic characteristic."<sup>21</sup> This integrated approach, even if it is more than positive considering human and fundamental rights, creates certain difficulties when comes to policy. From the frequent visit of the LERI field experts to the Municipal Hall, and through the various informal discussions with municipal representatives during the entire project over the last three years, it became clear that from planning, to implementation and then to monitoring and evaluation, the policymakers based their policies on empirical data and the experiences of the municipal personnel. For instance, it is impossible to count how many Roma received social services or how many Roma are unemployed, because collecting data based on ethnicity or Roma background, even self-identification, is considered as a sensitive issue by the municipality.

From the very beginning of the project, the need to support the municipality of Aghia Varvara in finalising its local strategic plan was clear. More specifically, even if the municipality has implemented many Roma integration projects, what emerged, through the initial PAR needs assessment (PAR cycle 1) and was verified in PAR cycle 2 through informal discussion with municipal representatives, was that there was no concrete monitoring and evaluation tool in force. By considering that Roma social integration is an *ex ante* conditionality of the new programming period of the European Structural and Investment Funds, initially it was decided by the LERI field experts to provide support to the municipality to establish a monitoring and evaluation tool. Thus, the LERI experts shared their findings and observations with the municipal representatives. The findings showed that a monitoring and evaluation tool could significantly improve social integration actions at local level. In this context, municipal representatives agreed with that and the LERI research team started working on that.

The proposed tool would aim to support the general local integration strategy of the municipality, the implementation of the upcoming integrated interventions, the design of new projects and the utilisation of new funding opportunities. Additionally, it was intended to give local stakeholders and members of the community direct access to information on the development of all Roma-related actions at a local level, through the organisation of local consultation forums. Technically, this tool would include a digital application, which would allow the users to enter, collect and retrieve data based on specific criteria, while local consultation meetings would be boosted their design and realisation.

Nevertheless, after several informal discussions with many municipal representatives it was decided to modify the core aim of the intervention and turn the focus from monitoring and evaluation to consultation as a process.

The milestone of this shift was a meeting held in February 2016 with municipal representatives and the deputy mayor responsible for education and culture issues, the head of the department of programming, development and ICT and the general secretary of the municipality. The aim of the meeting was to discuss further the steps towards implementing the monitoring and evaluation M&E tool

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<sup>21</sup> Municipal representative, informal meeting, May 2015, female.

in a participatory way. The tool, shaped through bilateral informal discussions, was presented to the municipal representatives and then an open discussion followed. The municipal representatives shared some new ideas with the LERI field experts, derived from the recent developments at municipal level. They also shared concerns that an obstacle to the monitoring and evaluation process would be the structure of the municipal annual report per se; they also had concerns about the information provided, as data is not collected in a regular basis. Moreover, they pointed out the lack of human resources which results in time limitations as an obstacle to the local M&E, which in turn results in giving priority to the implementation of projects rather than to their evaluation. The discussion then focused on whether the tool would be open to the public as part of the municipal website or not. Despite its potential and capacity to support several tools and pages, the municipality portal, designed under a co-funded project, is not easy in use. As the deputy mayor said, *"that portal is like you are driving a big luxury car while what you need is a small and flexible one."*<sup>22</sup>

Because of these new concerns, it was decided that the municipal representatives would discuss them further internally. In March 2016, they came up with a proposal to co-design a local consultation forum, and requested some assistance in drafting their local strategic plan. Hence, having had extensive discussions with all related municipal representatives, the intervention shifted focus from the development of a monitoring and evaluation tool to the provision of a seminar on methods and techniques of public consultation at local level. The seminar took place in May and June 2016 and was divided into three parts/workshops: one for municipal personnel, one for the administration of the municipality (i.e. mayor and municipal councillors), and another for the citizens. Moreover, given that the municipality was drafting its Local Strategic Plan during this period, LERI provided support concerning the design and the evaluation of integrated actions for vulnerable groups.

Thus, in May, the first part of the training for the municipal council, co-organised by the municipality and the LERI local experts, focused on the methods and tools for public consultation at local level. In the seminar, the mayor and all municipal councillors of Aghia Varvara participated, along with mayors and councillors from neighbouring municipalities (Egaleo and Korydallos), who were invited by the mayor's office. Overall, around 50 persons attended the initial part of the seminar. Then, the second part of the seminar on public consultation for municipal personnel was held for the department heads and additional personnel suggested by them. In total 24 persons attended the workshop, although not all departments were represented.

Finally, in June 2016 an open consultation forum was organised with the support of the project. The subject discussed was a new municipal regulation on the use of public spaces. An open call to the citizens was sent via email by the municipality and an announcement posted on the municipality's website. However, only five citizens came to the consultation forum, and none of them was Roma. The reason for the low participation could be the lack of information, since many locals have no regular access to the Internet. According to one of the citizens "the participation would be higher if municipal officials had informed,

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<sup>22</sup> Deputy Mayor of Aghia Varvara, meeting, February 2016, male.

door-to-door, the citizens."<sup>23</sup> However, as a municipal representative replied, this would have been difficult because of the sensitivity of the topic, which could have raised many concerns among citizens, in particular with shop owners who use public spaces for their business. The low participation of this workshop/pilot consultation forum corroborated those municipal officers who, at the previous workshop, pointed out that the citizens will show limited interest because of their disappointment with the government and its national policy. As mentioned at the workshop:

*"the municipality is the closest governmental structure to the citizens, and as such citizens frequently express their frustration and disappointment for the economic crisis towards municipal councillors and personnel and consequently lack of interest to support any relevant collective effort."*<sup>24</sup>

In this context, it can be said that if more proactive efforts had been made by the municipality to directly engage with the Roma and non-Roma businesses the level of participation could have been higher. Yet participation also depended on the topic and the degree that it influenced community life.

All the above-mentioned fieldwork interventions ended with an evaluation session and all participants had the chance to evaluate the content of the intervention, the methodology and the results and outputs from them. Specifically, all participants filled in an evaluation form. The students filled it in at the last meeting of the photovoice process, the Roma entrepreneurs and unemployed at the last course, while the participants of the consultation forum received the evaluation form via email, which was sent by the municipality in electronic format.

## 5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

With regard to the methodology as well as the interventions, the main empirical insights that emerged through PAR in Aghia Varvara could be clustered under the following main themes: 'trust building, 'access to information', 'differences between Roma and non-Roma life perceptions', 'from the passive role of beneficiary to the proactive role of active promoter' and 'administrative capacity'. Those themes emerge by looking back to the factors that mostly influenced the implementation of LERI.

### Theme 1: trust building

To build trust with as many Roma community members as possible was an essential factor that led to achieving LERI's ultimate objective, to explore 'what works and what does not work'. At the beginning of project implementation, the local research team worked closely with two Roma representatives that assisted their getting in touch with many Roma in the locality by applying the snowballing technique. Thus, during the first phase of the research (PAR cycle 1), the LERI field experts visited the locality several times, walked around the area with the two Roma representatives, visited the Municipal Hall and observed the local

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<sup>23</sup> Participant in consultation forum, June 2016, female.

<sup>24</sup> Municipal representative, informal discussion, April 2016, female.

social dynamics. Then, once trust had been established between the LERI field experts, the two Roma representatives and the LERI local research team was established, the two Roma representatives were asked to nominate other Roma and non-Roma individuals and organisations that could be part of the research activities. As a result, the LERI experts identified and approached a number of persons, and later conducted interviews and focus groups with them. Moreover, the fact that those two Roma persons worked as LERI local collaborators and members of the LERI local research team also assisted in approaching the municipal authorities in an easy-going and friendly way, sometimes avoiding official and time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. Obviously, the trust Roma people placed in the opinions of those two Roma was critical for boosting the trust among the researchers and the Roma community.

What was observed through the entire project implementation was that the majority of Roma rely on a few 'Roma leaders' who are the most educated and experienced in Roma issues at policy level. Thus, the Roma community do not spend time on community issues but rather expect the informal Roma representatives to mediate and solve any community demands on their behalf. This finding emerged through the implementation of all three LERI interventions in which the two Roma local collaborators played a central role. For instance, one of the reasons the intervention on entrepreneurship was successful was that it was coordinated by one of the two Roma local collaborators who is very respected, the director of ROM network, and recently a driving force behind the newly established Roma NGO, Heromact. He took the role of the coordinator; and empowered and motivated the local entrepreneurs to participate actively in all steps of the research process. Some participants clearly stated, "we absolutely trust him, his opinion counts since he knows so many things."<sup>25</sup> As a result, during the research process when some participants were asked to share ideas and thoughts, they referred to him without expressing their own views. A significant disadvantage of such an attitude was that many voices were not heard, while the LERI field experts had limited opportunities to encourage participation and promote the importance of 'having their say' for the improvement of community life. Considering these limitations, the LERI field experts opted to conduct the PAR community visioning technique, but without success. The initial community visioning was part of the training and so participants shared some first ideas and thoughts about how Aghia Varvara would be after the operation of the metro station in five years' time. However, following the end of the training on entrepreneurship the LERI experts asked the Roma local collaborators to approach Roma and non-Roma residents to participate in a community-visioning meeting to discuss further the future of Aghia Varvara. However, the meeting was not held due to the limited interest of the community.

Hence, it can be said that having Roma leaders involved to assist in the planning and implementation of social integration actions is beneficial, but at the same time can hinder the participation and empowerment of the Roma community as a whole.

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<sup>25</sup> Participant, Roma entrepreneur, informal meeting, February 2016, male.

One more drawback of the selected sampling technique was that the LERI experts could not control whom the Roma collaborators approached within the Roma community, since, as frequently happened with the snowballing technique, people used to propose people they knew very well.

In addition, the students' team showed great respect for the Roma local collaborators of the project, namely the director of the ROM network and the president of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Collaborators. In every meeting where they were present, the students behaved differently, showing an admiration and depth of respect towards them.

## Theme 2: Access to information

Roma people, especially the elderly, do not have regular access to the Internet. Although young people widely use the Internet, they mainly spend time on social media (especially Facebook). As a result, many Roma have limited opportunities for easy access to information for employment, entrepreneurship, funding mechanisms and tools and education. As a result, Roma often misses social integration opportunities. Therefore, face-to-face contact was essential for the implementation of project interventions and frequent contact with all participants and stakeholders was crucial at all stages of the research process. This observation emerged through the implementation of the training on entrepreneurship, since the majority of the entrepreneurs were unaware of the currently open funding opportunities that were announced only on the websites of the ministries and other national authorities. This was also verified by the limited participation in the local consultation forum, which had been announced on the website of the municipality and at Municipal Hall. Face-to-face communication is the most effective way to inform, but since this is not always possible, the municipality of Aghia Varvara has recently been developing communication mechanisms through text message (SMS) to mobiles. Still, this method needs careful consideration considering that many Roma cannot read Greek fluently.

## Theme 3: Differences between Roma and non-Roma cultures and life perceptions

Even though Roma people in Aghia Varvara are considered among the most integrated in Greece, it was observed that often, the meanings of words are sometimes different among Roma and non-Roma participants. For instance, education, for Roma parents, is considered only as a means to enter the labour market. The value of learning, which is of high importance among parents in Greece, is a lower priority among Roma parents. This difference is verified by the frequent absences, with parental permission, of Roma students from lessons, and the limited participation of Roma parents throughout the project's implementation.

Based on the above findings, the LERI local research team, in collaboration with the teachers of the school, submitted a proposal under the Erasmus+ programme with the aim of boosting the school community's and parents' realisation and handling of cultural differences and consequently of enhancing the quality of teaching and educational methods. The proposal was approved so the LERI field experts will continue collaborating with the school and will focus on improving the educational methods and techniques for Roma students.

Further evidence of different life perceptions is provided in the opening hours of local shops. Walking on the streets of Aghia Varvara one can notice that the shops owned by Roma are open after 11:00 in the morning and stay open until late at night; opening time nationally is 9:00 in the morning. As one Roma resident said, "here [in Aghia Varvara] we all live without stress, we live life day by day."<sup>26</sup> However, it should be noted that the late opening of the shops is also found in some towns around Greece.

#### Theme 4: From the passive role of beneficiary to the proactive role of active promoter

The social integration policy followed in the past, which was mainly based on subsidised training and on social subsidies, has resulted in the perception that all the 'beneficiaries' of any funded project have to be paid in order to participate in it. This statement emerged from the initial research stage and it was taken into consideration when the training was designed and conducted. For instance, the first question from many people was whether there would be a participation fee or not. The two Roma local collaborators shared this with the LERI field experts and as a matter of principle, and with the aim of breaking dependency with this 'beneficiary attitude', the LERI local research team together decided that none of the participants would receive any remuneration for their participation. Hence, participation in the training was limited and only a few people showed continued interest until the end of the process. However, the fact that some Roma, even a few, participated in a course without receiving any remuneration it is a step towards changing perceptions. Still, the active involvement of those Roma people in the design of the intervention from the beginning of LERI implementation along with the participants' assessment that the training assisted them in further expanding their business activities, could be seen as a positive development which might impact on future attitudes.

Empowerment and motivation are important to actions aimed at facilitating Roma integration. There is an apparent need to raise awareness that the State is not just a protective mechanism from which people have the right to request a certain quality of life, but rather that they are a living part of it, they can shape it and why not sometimes change it? Citizens should realise that relationship between the State and the individual is a two-way process. The State has the obligation to protect citizens' fundamental rights and the citizens have the right to fight for their rights. At the same time, Roma people, as any other citizens, should know that they not only have rights but also obligations, which they should be aware of and respect.

#### Theme 5: Administrative capacity

As mentioned above, the administrative personnel of the municipality have extensive experience in implementing actions and projects on social integration. However, following the local administrative reform under the Kallikratis programme<sup>27</sup>, many responsibilities and services moved from central to regional and municipal level resulting in a large workload for the personnel. Hence, priority is frequently given in the most urgent and short-term requirements and

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<sup>26</sup> Roma resident, informal discussion, January 2016, male.

<sup>27</sup> Greece, Law 3852/2010 (OJ A 87/7.6.2010) 'Reorganisation of Local Government - Kallikratis Program', 7 June 2010.

limited time can be devoted in planning and designing for the long-term. As a municipal representative wondered, "What is better, to evaluate if and how you manage to build two new schools or to build a new one?"<sup>28</sup>

Despite the controversial response to that concern, the fact is that local authorities have limited capacity to address all current needs of the most deprived, which are becoming more urgent in an era of post-economic crisis. Because of the economic crisis and the cuts in public spending, the local authorities have limited financial resources and a lack of human resources. This current situation reduces the administrative capacity of the local authorities to be competitive and seek alternative funding opportunities to support social integration actions, for instance through international and European funds.

Finally, generally speaking, a limitation to the LERI research implementation in Aghia Varvara was that an interconnection between the interventions was missing. If the interventions implemented had been linked in an integrated way the results of the entire process could have been more effective and sustainable. However, it was not possible in this case because the defined needs and priorities emerged at different times and did not allow the aligning of the interventions under a holistic integrated plan. In particular, the intervention on entrepreneurship started implementation in December 2015, the school intervention in September 2015, while the third intervention on consultation changed focus several times and was finally implemented in May 2016. This difference in the 'speed' of each intervention was mainly due to the nature of the PAR methodology used. Thus, as the research project's aim was more about the process rather than the final outcome, the LERI local research team decided to "let things happen" and observe what works and how, or does not work and why, rather than trying to achieve a 'successful' implementation. Nevertheless, if the project aim had been to develop and implement a local social integration strategy, a more integrated approach could have increased the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of interventions to address the identified problems.

Overall, the LERI project implementation in Aghia Varvara was an empirical research process through which a lot was learned, while some other elements failed. Just like in the famous Greek poem *Ithaka*<sup>29</sup>, at the end of the journey one realises that the voyage itself had greater value than the final destination. Through the LERI research, Roma and non-Roma participants learned from practice and had the opportunity to observe critically themselves and the social context in which they live and work. LERI was a learning process not only for the Roma and for non-Roma who took part in it but also for the municipality, which will benefit by the support provided by the project and had the opportunity to look at the conditions that influence the realisation of social integration actions at local level.

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<sup>28</sup> Municipal representative, meeting, February 2016, female.

<sup>29</sup> C.P. Cavafy (1992) *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Edited by George Savidis. Revised Edition. Princeton University Press (available at [www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=74&cat=1](http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=74&cat=1) (accessed on 01/06/2016))

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the fact that the municipality of Aghia Varvara has a long history of social integration of vulnerable groups, including Roma, the full implementation of the upcoming five-year municipal strategic plan and operational programme should be ensured via more systematic efforts in order to build a culture of social inclusion with awareness-raising activities and mediation. In order to implement these strategic steps effectively and make them sustainable, a number of key issues must be taken into consideration by municipal and national authorities. To have maximum impact, social integration policies at local level should not be addressed in isolation, but rather as an integral element of policies for local social integration in general and as part of a wider strategy to promote Roma inclusion.

Moreover, the municipality could explore alternative ways of communication and information in order to get closer to the Roma community. These means should take into consideration the low educational level of most Roma residents. In addition to that the influence of power relations between the Roma themselves should also be kept in mind during the design and implementation of any action related to the Roma community. Considering power relations is a key factor for the success or failure of social integration actions. As the experience of the entrepreneurship training shows, one powerful Roma person could strongly influence the attitudes of many others. For that reason, not only a few but Roma persons in general should act as key players in any Roma-related activity and, at the same time, noting those who participate in each activity and their relationships with the rest of the population should be explored.

In this context, further empowerment is needed if national and local authorities wish to establish and sustain a long-term social integration plan at any level. The failure of the LERI project to activate the Parents' Union of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School to take part in the project activities highlighted the need to look for new innovative ways to motivate them and enable them to actively participate in such processes. Sometimes, it can appear that Roma people live their own parallel society to the mainstream society, not as part of it, where certain unwritten rules implicitly influence Roma attitudes and behaviour. Further research is needed in order to examine those attitudes and understand them in depth. Integration is a two-way process. A process requires acceptance of the laws and ways of the majority by the Roma people without giving up their own laws and ways. However, this only happens with compromises on both sides. In order for a social integration process to work successfully, Roma and non-Roma should accommodate the viewpoints of the other in a bid to live harmoniously. In this context, Roma integration requires motivation and empowerment for the Roma people to become an active part of the majority culture, while at the same time, retaining their Roma identity. In parallel, information and aware-raising activities regarding the customs and ways of living of Roma are essential for the non-Roma people to identify more closely with them.

The local authorities might consider building community cooperation as an essential step towards a long-term and sustainable social integration strategy. The LERI experience has shown that the Roma are used to relying on a few key Roma representatives that have a good reputation, who are respected and well-

educated and the majority of Roma people do not spend time on community activities.

Furthermore, a conclusion from the PAR implementation in Aghia Varvara was that a carefully planned PAR approach could still allow for a switch of the main guiding question from 'what can the project offer to beneficiaries?' to 'how can beneficiaries actually make the project correspond to their local needs?'. In addition, the implementation of the LERI project resulted in realising that Roma integration actions could be efficient and effective only if the Roma thoroughly realise the benefits of being part of mainstream society.

Moreover, it is important for both Roma and non-Roma involved in research activities to be informed about the process before it begins. If they understand how research is undertaken and what the research question aims to identify, and why, this could boost their support for the intervention. A lack of information raises worries and uncertainty, which can have a negative impact on the research. The PAR methodology and interventions will not succeed if stakeholders do not understand their benefits and therefore fail to support them. Awareness raising and consultation are thus essential to ensure that stakeholders stay informed, provide feedback, participate and feel ownership of the process.

## 7. Additional Information

The LERI field experts, Lucas Katsikaris, Eleftheria Koumalatsou and Dimitris Ntontis, wrote this study. The realisation of the LERI project in Aghia Varvara could not have been possible without the essential involvement and expertise of the two Roma collaborators; Mr. Manolis Rantis, Director of ROMNET Network and the current president of the newly established Roma NGO, Heromact; Mr. Kostas Paiteris, president of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and Collaborators. Moreover, a debt of gratitude is also owed to Mayor George Kaplanis and the municipal representatives Ms. Sia Siapera, director of the administrative and financial department and Ms. Ntina Nezi, head of programming, development and the ICT unit of the municipality for their commitment to support LERI activities and promote social integration of vulnerable people. Finally yet importantly, we would like to thank Principal Dionysis Vithoukias of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Junior High School of Aghia Varvara and Ms. Maria Potiropoulou, the teacher responsible for the LERI students' team, as well as all the students who took part in the photovoice intervention.