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SUMMARY REPORT

FINAL EXTERNAL
EVALUATION

Labour-market
inclusion
for disadvantaged
young adults in
Romania

Project 942.403
phase 2



ABOUT THE EVALUATION

This is a summary of the endline evaluation conducted by Triskuel Consulting of the project "Labour-market inclusion for disadvantaged young adults in Romania" implemented by HEKS/EPER Romania and partners from Diakonia Sf. Gheorghe Christian Foundation and Orthodox Philanthropy Alba Iulia Association. The evaluation assessed the project's effectiveness, impact, relevance, sustainability, and partners' staff capacities across its three main components: education (career counselling and remedial classes for 8th grade students), education (counselling and girls' clubs for 5th grade socially disadvantaged girls in Covasna), and employment (information, counselling and job mediation).

The evaluation used a methodology called "Outcome Harvesting" to assess the project's contribution to its goals. Data was collected from desk review, interviews with project coordination staff, implementing staff, local employers, school staff, and young employees (a total of 18 interviews with 21 participants), 14 focus groups with 125 participants (8th-grade students, 11th-grade vocational school students, school staff, and parents of 8th grade students). This implied 1 2-day visit in Covasna and 3 one day visits in Alba.

PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS

The evaluation identified four critical elements that made the intervention successful. The project's effectiveness was further enhanced by consistent attention to individual student needs, strategic use of out-of-school activities to build relationships, and investment in staff capacity building. These factors combined to create an intervention model that achieved its intended outcomes while building sustainable capacity within participating institutions.

01

Relationship-focused approach

Building trust with schools, communities, and individual students created sustainable foundations for impact. Project staff became integral to school operations rather than external service providers.

02

Professional expertise

Team members with backgrounds in psychology, psychopedagogy, and business provided specialized knowledge that schools largely lacked. Roma mediators served as inspiring role models, particularly for female participants.

03

Adaptive management

The ability to modify activities based on evidence and feedback enabled continuous improvement. Local context adaptation, particularly in Covasna, demonstrated the value of flexible implementation.

04

Institutional support

Strong partnerships with HEKS/EPER Romania and between local organizations provided the structural foundation necessary for sustained effectiveness.



PROJECT OUTCOMES

The evaluation found evidence for the three big objectives of the project.

EDUCATION	EMPLOYMENT	INCLUSION
Increasing the transition of disadvantages students from 8th grade to 9th grade	information, counselling and job mediation for vocational school students and young graduates	Reducing inequality and discrimination

RESULTS

EDUCATION Supporting the Transition from 8th Grade to 9th Grade

Academic Performance and Motivation

Between 32% and 40% of participating 8th grade students increased their academic performance, though the original target of 50% proved challenging to achieve within the one-year timeframe. The impact was particularly pronounced for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who gained access to tutoring support they could not access elsewhere due to household responsibilities. Students consistently identified academic support as the most relevant benefit of the project, with teachers observing measurable improvements in both exam results and classroom participation.

Career Guidance and Decision-Making

The project successfully expanded students' career horizons through counselling activities, company visits, and the use of the Cognitrom platform. While most 8th graders typically make educational choices based on institutional reputation rather than career preferences, project participants demonstrated increased confidence in making informed decisions about their futures. The Cognitrom Career Planner proved particularly valuable for opening discussions about diverse career options, though counsellors noted some limitations with the repetitive nature of certain reports.

Psychological Well-being and Relationships

Students showed marked improvements in emotional regulation skills, self-esteem, and communication abilities. The project's external counsellors created safe spaces for students to express difficult emotions and process negative school experiences. This approach was particularly effective because counsellors operated outside the formal school assessment structure, enabling more trusting relationships. Many students maintained contact with their counsellors after project completion, indicating the depth of relationships formed.

Systemic Impact on Schools

School staff increasingly recognized career counselling as valuable for supporting disadvantaged students' transitions. The project filled critical gaps in educational institutions, particularly in navigating complex bureaucratic systems that parents from disadvantaged communities cannot easily support. Teachers gained better resources for inclusion of vulnerable groups, with Roma mediators proving especially effective in bridging relationships between Roma students and school staff.

EMPLOYMENT

Information, Counselling and Job Mediation

Self-Esteem and Professional Orientation

Before addressing employment directly, job mediators focused on building self-esteem and motivation among vocational students who often perceived their educational path as failure. Professional visits to schools and role-playing exercises for job interviews proved particularly effective. Students were especially inspired by alumni success stories, which dispelled misconceptions about vocational careers being "lesser" options.

Market Understanding and Informed Choices

Vocational students gained realistic understanding of labour market realities through personalized counselling approaches. Rather than simply matching students with jobs in their qualification area, counsellors listened to individual needs and offered tailored support for diverse pathways including further education, entrepreneurship, and alternative career options. This approach was particularly important given the substantial number of students experiencing poor matches with their vocational profiles.

Employment Outcomes and Retention

Students advised by the project demonstrated better job search skills, increased confidence in interviews, and stronger understanding of employment rights. In Covasna, graduates showed good retention rates, attributed to more realistic expectations and better employer-employee matching. Job mediators' ongoing support after placement contributed to workplace adaptation and obstacle resolution.

Employer Engagement and School-Industry Cooperation

The project fostered stronger relationships between vocational schools and local employers through company visits and partnership development. Employers gained increased awareness of disadvantaged youth needs and developed more inclusive hiring practices. Some companies entered into new partnerships with vocational schools, offering practical training placements and dual education opportunities.

INCLUSION

Reducing Inequality and Discrimination

Support for Disadvantaged Girls

The Roma Girls Club proved particularly effective in supporting disadvantaged girls' educational continuation. The Roma mediator served as a powerful role model, demonstrating that higher education was achievable. Activities created safe environments for girls to address personal challenges and develop confidence to pursue their dreams, with documented cases of girls opening businesses and continuing education despite family opposition.

Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination

In schools with Roma mediators, discriminatory attitudes decreased through intercultural learning activities and honest conversations about cultural heritage and discrimination. The project's individual counselling approach provided disadvantaged students with opportunities to address sensitive questions and prepare for anxiety-inducing social situations. Tools like the Cognitrom platform motivated students from marginalized communities by suggesting career possibilities they had never considered.

Widening Aspirations

Project activities significantly expanded students' aspirations, particularly through experiences outside their immediate communities. For rural students and girls especially, opportunities to visit cities, attend camps, and participate in extracurricular activities provided crucial exposure to possibilities beyond their villages.

Project Sustainability

The project has established a strong foundation for sustainability through demonstrated stakeholder buy-in, institutional adoption of key activities, and committed local partner organizations. However, the evaluation reveals a critical gap between schools' intentions to continue activities and their actual capacity to maintain the quality and scope of interventions without specialized support.



'It helped me a lot with my confidence, because it made me believe that I could achieve what I set out to do. But it also helps me with the motivation to work on my goals. Sometimes, I'm lying in bed and I don't feel like doing math, but then I remember: "Wait, I set these goals to become something in life". And then I get up and do some more maths, maybe just a little, but I still do something.'

(8th grade girl)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continuity/Length of Intervention

Longer project duration in Covasna enabled stronger relationships with schools and employers compared to Alba's shorter timeline. Extended implementation periods are essential for building trust with reluctant school staff and establishing sustainable partnerships.

Need for More Psychological Support and Soft Skills

Participants require enhanced life skills training in conflict management, emotional regulation, and self-expression beyond career orientation. Vocational school students need individualized psychological support for family/peer relationships and workplace challenges like bullying.

More Practical Workshops and Resources for School Staff

Secondary school representatives need training and workshops to develop skills for supporting students and continuing project activities.

Ensuring Peer Support for All Project Implementing Staff

Cross-regional networks should be established to enable practitioners to exchange ideas and best practices.

Expanding Age Groups for Earlier Start

Interventions should begin at least one year earlier (7th grade and 10th grade) to allow sufficient time for trust-building and orientation activities.

Activities Addressed to Parents and Families

Parent engagement through school showcases, demonstrations, and community events can strengthen interventions while addressing high levels of mistrust toward vocational education and training.