



Summary Report

ECVET Agent Exploration Study

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Introduction

The Europe 2020 strategy has as its target a 75% employment rate for European citizens aged between 20 and 64 years of age. Despite this aim, figures taken from a 2011 study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) state that the situation among the European Roma population is very different, with less than 30% of Roma adults in employment, and with 90% of households living in circumstances below their national poverty line (UNDP, 2011). Following the publication of the 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' by the European Commission in 2011, there has been an increase in the number of initiatives and projects in the areas of education, employment, health services and housing for the Roma communities across Europe; as EU Member States scramble to implement reforms to their national integration policies.

The Roma population of Europe is the largest ethnic minority on the continent; numbering an estimated 10-12 million in all of Europe, with approximately 6 million of these individuals living within the EU and most of them EU citizens. Despite their number and their legal status as citizens of the EU, the statistics show that Roma have low levels of educational attainment, poor economic status, inadequate housing and little access to services and healthcare. Only 15% of young Roma adults attain upper secondary or vocational education, and the enrolment rate of Roma children in primary schools rarely peaks above 50% of the population (UNDP, 2011). Discounted and excluded across Europe, Roma are consistently segregated from mainstream society, and find themselves often on the margins of society, at risk of poverty and deprivation. Often the programmes which are designed with these people in mind are unsuitable and inaccessible for them.

The main objective of the ECVET Agent research process was to consult with local members of the Roma Community in each partner country and interview business and agriculture subject experts to establish an evidential base upon which to build the ECVET Agent curriculum.

This report contains an executive summary of the desk-based and field research completed by project partners and a succinct list of core recommendations for consideration in the design, development and delivery of the ECVET Agent curriculum. Individual country-specific research reports from Romania, Austria, Slovakia, Croatia, Italy and Ireland are available to access via the project website www.ecvet-agent.eu.

Methodology and Profile of Research Participants

The aim of the ECVET Agent research process was two-fold:

1. To ensure early engagement with and animation of the project's primary target groups i.e. long-term unemployed jobseekers, specifically those from the Roma Community
2. To identify their training needs and requirements in the field of agricultural entrepreneurship

Primary research was conducted by each project partner with at least 40 individuals from the target group and at least 2 experts in the fields of entrepreneurship training and agricultural entrepreneurship. In order to ensure a standardised research process, Meath Partnership developed a common research schema which was agreed and implemented across the project consortium. Partners deployed a mixed research methodology of questionnaires, online surveys, focus groups, telephone and/or face-to-face interviews and used their networks of local stakeholders and client databases to engage and reach the survey sample of 40 Roma- and long-term unemployed jobseekers.

In total, 294 members of the end-user target group were engaged and surveyed through the implementation of the research questionnaire, and 16 expert interviews were conducted across the consortium as broken down in Table 1 below.

Country	Participants	Experts
Austria	40	2
Romania	46	5
Ireland	40	2
Slovakia	90	3
Italy	40	2
Croatia	41	2

Table 1: Break-down of Research Respondents per country

Of the 294 research participants, 64% were male and the majority of participants stated that they were long-term unemployed, out of work and currently jobseeking for a period of more than 2 to 5 years. There was age diversity across the research sample with respondents from 16 years to 65+ years participating. As reflected in the desk-based research and analysis of this target group, our findings endorsed the educational and skills profile of the target group, with respondents declaring low levels of educational attainment



and weak skills profiles. 55% of the research sample identified themselves as members of the Roma Community.

When asked to state the perceived reasons for their joblessness, the four top aggregated responses were as follows: there are not enough jobs; inadequate level of education; attitude of employers/ not knowing the right people; and lack of relevant experience.

As the ECVET Agent project is concerned with the potential self-employment for this target group as a pathway out of joblessness and economic deprivation, their attitude to self-employment was assessed. The results varied greatly from 58.9% positively disposed towards self-employment in Slovakia to that of 10% in Croatia. A positive attitude to self-employment should be cultivated with this target group, and the benefits of self-employment highlighted as a viable option for improving their socio-economic status.

Prior experience of agriculture, growing vegetables and entrepreneurship was mixed amongst the research sample, with inconsistent statements and overall not sufficiently strong in terms of skills, knowledge and competences to build a business from this prior experience.

Recommendations for Curriculum Development

A detailed overview of the collated responses to the research questionnaires and expert interviews can be viewed in the full ECVET Agent Research Report available on the project website www.ecvet-agent.eu. This data has been analysed by Meath Partnerships, and from it, recommendations to inform the design, development and delivery of the curriculum have been extrapolated. These recommendations, presented below, will act as the framework within which the curriculum will be developed.

Based on the research conducted in the ECVET Agent project we can conclude that while designing a training programme for Roma Communities, several criteria must be taken into consideration. These include psychological, anthropological, organisational issues and the actual content of the curriculum should also be given particular attention.

Training style and delivery mechanism

Across all partner countries, the research respondents strongly highlighted their preference for a practical kinesthetic course. They would be interested in a training programme which features practical workshops, skills demonstrations, professional mentoring, case studies, work placements, experiential learning and study visits. This style of training delivery was overwhelming rated as opposed to self-directed or online learning.

Based on the research outcomes, it is recommended that the pilot training should be face-to-face in format, with limited ICT components due to the reported skill limitations of the target group in this field. The analysis of the expert interviews and the survey data corroborates that the level of individual learning among the target group is very low; therefore the training delivery should use traditional, learner-centred approaches, supported learning and the development of practical knowledge. Respondents also suggested that internships and/or work-placed mentoring would be beneficial if they were arranged as part of the pilot training.

Accreditation

The curriculum should contain elements that are practical and verbal, as language and literacy issues can be a barrier if programmes are reliant on writing, reading and assessment. For this reason, accreditation is not viewed as an important factor to the Roma target group as it may prove to be too complicated and text-based for this group.

Barriers to training participation and retention

The main barriers to learning cited by the target group in all partner countries were the cost of training, courses that have irrelevant course content to the training needs of the learners, location of training offering and time commitment required to complete the training. For these reasons, it may be required to run this training programme in smaller groups in different locations so as to ease the burden of cost and time on participants and perhaps to deliver the training directly within the Roma Communities.

With regard to participant retention, research outcomes indicate the need to identify the motivating factors for the target group and to be clear on the message as to why they should participate in the pilot training. In this way, it is important for the consortium to build trust with the target group. This can be achieved through a variety of means; however, in some partner countries the need for “compensation” in terms of participation was identified as a requirement for success. This means that the project partners would cover the travel costs of the participants to ease the burden on them. Further incentives would include an “opportunity cost” to cover the earnings which participants could potentially make during the hours they will be attending the course. It was suggested that participants should also be screened and only those with an interest or previous experience in growing vegetable and farm work would be encouraged to complete this course.

Scheduling of training courses

As the responses to the question regarding preferred frequency of training differed significantly across partner countries; with Ireland indicating training scheduled over 1-2 days per week, Slovakia and Italy preferring 5 days per week, Romanian respondents indicating training delivered for 5 hours per week and Austrians preferring training delivered



over 3-4 days per week. As this is the case, the curriculum should be modular in design and partners should be given flexibility in delivering the training so that they can provide relevant, practical training which is accessible to Roma Communities in their locality.

Proposed Course Content

The following list of proposed modules should be considered by the partners when designing the curriculum, and members of the target group should be involved in finalising the content curriculum to ensure these modules are relevant to their needs:

Agri-horticulture Topics	Business-related Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Food and vegetable growing➤ Pest control and fertilising➤ Protection and care for plants➤ Processing of agricultural products➤ Safe use of machinery (trackers and forklift also)➤ Ecological approach to farming (organic farming)➤ Composting and fertilising➤ Animal husbandry➤ Opportunities in the local agricultural sector➤ Food safety and hygiene basics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Setting up your business (tax, legal and insurance)➤ Financing your business➤ Sales and marketing of agricultural products➤ Time management for successful business➤ Business etiquette (acceptable behaviours)➤ Local agricultural market and business opportunities➤ Types of business set-ups i.e. social enterprise or co-op models➤ Negotiation skills➤ Mental hygiene and personal development

Additional Curriculum Supports

Based on the analysis of the national reports, for this pilot training to be implemented in each partner country, each partner will need to have access to the following resources:

- Land (soil/garden or allotment)
- Equipment
- Raw materials (seeds, crops, veg etc.)
- Experienced and culturally sensitive trainer(s)
- Consistent and committed mentors

- Support from other stakeholders and agencies
- Training supports in terms of providing food for participants before or after each training session, covering the costs of children and/or transport, etc.

Analysis of the research responses also highlights the need to incorporate the planning of supplementary supports into the curriculum design. These will be additional supports which learners can avail of once the training programme has completed. Here, the research emphasises that the project partners need to cultivate a positive attitude towards self-employment by providing participants with encouraging examples of successful entrepreneurs from the Roma Community. Further to this, partners should design and develop career planning roadmaps outlining the next steps which might be considered by the trainees in setting up their business; these resources should also highlight the non-project supports that are available in their country, linking them to existing services, offers and training programmes.

It was also highlighted that partners should demonstrate the relevance of the course to the target groups' employability not just in terms of self-employment, but in developing practical business acumen which can be applied in the world of work. In this regard, integrating internships, work placements and/or job-shadowing activities into the curriculum design will enhance the employability of participants.

A Word from the Experts

The experts who were interviewed across the consortium offered partners some valuable insights into working with the Roma Community, including some additional recommendations for delivering entrepreneurship training with participants of varying reading, writing and IT literacies.

Firstly, experts highlighted that there is inconsistency between working with participants with low literacy and technical capacity but requiring them to have the skills and competence to start their own business. Experts highlighted that partners should appreciate the level of complexity of becoming an entrepreneur and to keep this in mind when designing the curriculum content. Is it important here to emphasize that self-employment is not a soft or easy option as a route out of unemployment, but rather is requires an understanding of all facets of business and financial management and planning, as well as sales and marketing, communications skills, customer relations, time management, etc.

Secondly, experts stressed the need to consider the Roma culture and ways of working in terms of curriculum design. Experts emphasised the need to ensure that the curriculum content and delivery model is culturally sensitive. One suggestion to achieve this aim of a culturally apposite course delivery is to involve a "group leader" from within the Roma Community, during the design and delivery of the curriculum. This will ensure that the



needs of the Roma Community are respected and addressed by the ECVET Agent training programme and that trust is established from the outset.

Further to this, experts highlighted that there is a high cost of business start-up in the agri-food and horticulture sector, in that to successfully set up a business, participants will need access to land and equipment (purchased or rented) and raw materials, as well as compliance with national rules. The issue with these start-up costs is confounded when we consider that there is a lack of state structures or supports for entrepreneurship targeting the Roma Community.

While the ECVET Agent project is seen as ambitious, as it aims to instil skills and competences in members of the Roma Community which are conducive to self-employment and it strives to overcome financial and other barriers to their self-employment, experts regard it as a very positive step forward in addressing the needs of this community. This is largely because there are so few initiatives which are targeted at this community and so while the project sets ambitious targets for the Roma participants involved in the training, the project was broadly welcomed.

Conclusion

Employment is one of the basic and determining pre-conditions for social integration. In order to ensure the social inclusion of this disadvantaged target group, improving their educational attainment and their practical skills will enhance their employability. In a target group which traditionally would favour self-employment to being employed, it is imperative that local, national and European policies respond to this entrepreneurial competence and that strategies are implemented to foster entrepreneurial tendencies. Policy-makers must realise that the key to ensuring a more inclusive society for Roma communities is encouraging them to become active members of society and the economy, and employment, or self-employment, is a pragmatic means of achieving this.

Long-term unemployed individuals are among the largest societal group at-risk of disadvantage and poverty. Long-term unemployed Roma individuals face the difficulties of non-Roma jobseekers, however they also face additional discrimination and cultural alienation when it comes to competition in the labour market; and with almost 70% of the European Roma population currently unemployed, and 90% of Roma households living below their nation's poverty line (UNDP, 2011), it is fair to deduce that very often when Roma jobseekers apply for employment opportunities, they lose out to other jobseekers and are living in unacceptable economic conditions as a result.

While low levels of educational attainment and insufficient practical work experience hinder their employment prospects, from the figures quoted above it is clear that the current strategies to integrate Roma into education programmes and the labour market are not working. It is time for a new approach. The ECVET Agent Curriculum will be pioneering in its aim to focus solely on the needs of the long-term unemployed and Roma jobseekers; to design a curriculum tailored to their needs with regard to content, duration and delivery, and with ample supports to assist these learners in progressing to self-employment. The purpose of this research process was to ascertain what this bespoke curriculum should look like and to determine how the partners should begin the curriculum design process. Based on the responses collected from 264 individuals, partners now have a clear picture of how the curriculum should be designed to ensure that it addresses the learning needs of this disadvantaged target group.

Unemployment hampers an individual's self-esteem, self-confidence and personal development. It can have a negative impact of family-life and on children; and this process of unemployment can become systemic in families where children do not learn good working habits from their parents and siblings. Lack of suitable education and employment opportunities can prolong this cycle of poverty in low-income families and communities. However, by equipping Roma jobseekers with the knowledge, skills and support they need to start their own businesses, the ECVET Agent consortium is asking these jobseekers to take control of their own economic situation, and to positively impact their social, economic and family life; instead of trying to 'pigeon-hole' this disadvantaged community into a pre-manufactured government initiative which only offers short-term solutions to a long-term problem. From the research conducted, it is apparent that there is a real need for this type of training programme and support among the Roma population of Europe. As such, the recommendations of the target group and experts will form the evidence-base of the curriculum to be designed by project partners.