

Working in and with local communities: Exchange Hub of EC supported DEAR projects EC Representation, Milan, 7th & 8th June 2016

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This paper ...

... provides a summary overview of the discussions and outcomes of a workshop with 19 participants from 9 different countries, involved in 13 European Commission supported DEAR projects.

The Exchange Hub ...

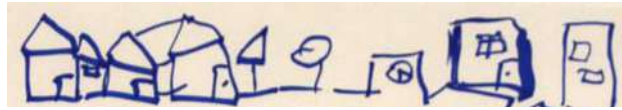
... provided an opportunity for participants to exchange and discuss their experiences of working in and with local communities within implementation of DEAR projects. The intention was to draw conclusions from those discussions which are valuable for DEAR projects to consider in their work of engaging citizens at a local level.

The Hub was organised to identify general experiences and impressions of participants, followed by more detailed discussion of the specifics of each of the projects represented at the event – and to arrive at a set of recommendations.

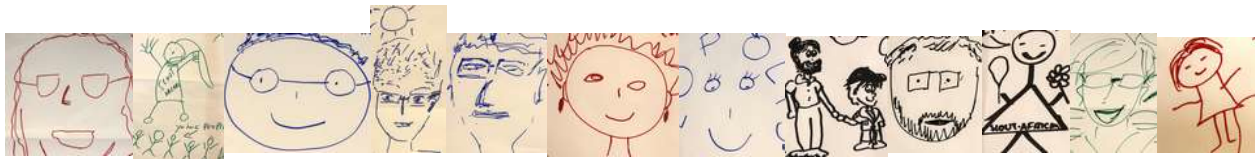
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1. The participants and the workshop format



Staff from Local Authorities and LA networks, NGO practitioners working in partnership with LA in local communities and schools, other local organizations and their staff: 19 people involved in DEAR projects and actions supported by European Commission participated on this workshop style event. It used participatory and group dynamics as well as plenary discussions and moments for sharing. The Exchange Hub kicked off with a largely informal presentation of the key issues of the workshop, allowing for introductions of the projects and their staff.



2. Three questions for the HUB – A) WHY?

A collective brainstorm introduced further harvesting of knowledge, experiences and recommendations from the participants – focused on the three main questions and their derivations:

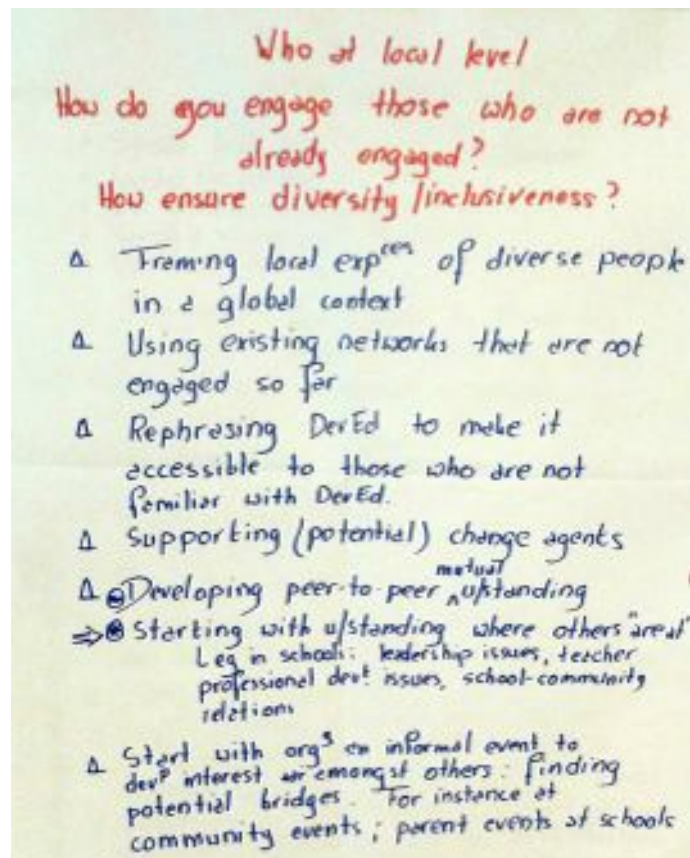
1. Why work locally for DEAR with European citizens? How different is it from simply making a trans-European mobilisation campaign? What is the change envisaged at local level?
2. Who to involve at local level? How to expand the already-engaged audiences, insuring diversity and participation?
3. How to engage locally European communities? Which approaches/methods, challenges and opportunities are available?

From this first brainstorm, a plenary discussion focused on **why** are we working at local level – instead of making transnational education projects, campaigns, political lobbying or other types of actions? What is the Most Significant Change you want to achieve with the project's action? This discussion was taken deeper the first day afternoon with a plenary discussion. These were the main ideas - at a local level, working with local communities:

- It is easy to obtain feedback, communicate, and create relationships
- Local work = practical action
- Escape the mistrust of upper level politics, while at grassroots level people feel connected
- Knowledge of context / local situation is immediately relevant to the project's participants
- Is the grassroots, the people, the base of the triangle (can also be an upside down triangle, narrowing down our specific target groups)
- People have to cope with change at local levels: e.g. the effects of migration, or the economic crisis
- Local Authorities are intermediaries between people + (inter) national levels (both politically and socially)
- Empowerment: at local level we can act and engage with global issues: making the most important "local-global links"

3. B) WHO are you working with?

The DEAR projects participating in the HUB work with a wide set of targets and local actors, including schools, scout groups, associations of farmers, networks of European Local Authorities, LA staff dealing with procurement processes, and social and solidarity economy organisations. This diversity did not stop the participants from finding key strategies to engage citizens, ensure diversity and participation, as well as working with the non-engaged. Find some clues summarised here:



Role play exercises illustrated these and other points effectively and in a fun way during the HUB.



4. C: HOW to engage locally: approaches, opportunities, challenges

Following the brainstorm session, a World café style activity developed further answers to the question of 'How to engage locally'. It addressed this question by looking at three levels: approaches, opportunities and challenges. Suggestions, based on participants' project experiences are given below.

Approaches (methods and tools)

- > Use social media with wisdom: social networks, youth networks, new technologies and Apps
- > Do not forget face-to-face contact: from simple meetings, to more intricate workshops and trainings, to meeting in unusual places (e.g. Why not meet people at the supermarket?)
- > Advocacy strategies to create 'multipliers'
- > Research your topics, get data, support 'change agents'
- > Get support not only from research, but also from international documents, reports, conventions (and do not forget local commitments - e.g. LAs for SDGs!)
- > Recognise and acknowledge people's perceptions of an issue (such as migration) – and don't assume that providing 'facts' will change people's minds

Opportunities

- > Economic and ecological issues can be entry points for example in the formal education system
- > Local elections are not only a challenge but can also be an opportunity to highlight the issues of your project – as long as one can engage all the range of political actors and avoid being instrumental
- > Relate the issues and approaches of your project to current trends or fashions, for example being 'eco-friendly', using fair trade, or enjoying 'slow food'
- > National and international issues can have an effect at local levels, for instance in the case of migration, changes at EU level force local levels to face new realities...
- > Start with what is alive locally: what are the issues (economic, social, environmental, political) and how do they relate to global systems and events?
- > Create positive competition mechanisms – e.g. a 'prize' for the most active teacher at engaging their school
- > and do not forget that to the local community a DEAR project can be an opportunity to network and have an experience at international level: getting knowledge, sharing best practices, receiving responsibility and legitimacy!

5. Going deeper on the HOW: challenges at local level

Each of the challenges and opportunities identified were related to those identified before. Participants grouped these into sets of 11 issues which were then addressed by the whole HUB. Multiple solutions were found and suggestions developed, including keys to transform the challenges into opportunities or minimise their negative aspects. The table of the following page summarises the challenges and HOW possible solutions may be found.



Local challenges DEAR projects might face	Key ideas, possible solutions, strategies
1. How to find opportunities for beneficiaries from different countries to share their experiences and create a community platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key events/dates/opportunities for engagement • Project staff can 'match make' opportunities in different countries/stakeholders • 'Twin' institutions on different countries and give joint tasks • Create InterEuropean goals • Use social media (not expensive/add on platforms or fora)
2. How to involve 'busy' people (teachers, local politicians)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it exciting! (attractive/innovative activities) • Emphasize benefits (and important role) they can have • Be clear about expectations • Go meet them where they are • But don't catch them at conferences or if you do follow up by talking to them in the office (face-to-face) even if only for 15 m. • Develop (good) contacts with secretaries of decision makers • Relate to their agenda e.g. design an activity that can become part of their work agenda such as a certified training • Make your point clearly and speak their language
3. How to overcome mistrust of Europe/EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing success examples e.g. EU exchange of practices • Engage local European Parliament members • Communicate policies in accessible language • Emphasize local partners rather than EU ones • Avoid saying 'EU is great' but instead say why this structure is able to change our life positively
4. How to keep long-term goals of DEAR in mind when dealing with short-term projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create contacts with people that can provide sustainability (policy makers) • Projects can only be part of long term mission/strategy of organisations – build on previous experiences and identify follow-up work • The project should produce an output that will survive and be useful beyond the project
5. How to involve not very motivated people (e.g. students with exams or nurses working in shifts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profit from attractive tools the target uses already (e.g. Apps) • Make 'incursions' – into out of the ordinary' places for DEAR actions • 'Award' them (e.g. 'Time' for very busy people) > Give them what they 'want' > and a bit more • Think of what their needs are and what your topic can have in common with these needs • Get their 'bosses' on your side • Try to connect with their ideas/experiences and use emotional language
6. How to make DevEd part of the (local/national) political agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use/translate into words/definitions/outcomes/ advantages that are relevant to different audiences • Recognise complexities/contradictions and be strategic about what + when info is shared • Link DevEd issues to the major public discussions/priorities by means of a good communications strategy and flexible tools • Bring together NGOs, politicians and other actors

7. How to join together different people (e.g. LA&Teachers&Farmers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise public events • Define a common purpose • Get them to work together often • Organic mixed working/debate groups • Meet/reach them individually first (use their language) and show the possible connections with other groups' 'interests'
8. How to measure/assess impact (of local DEAR actions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time assessing the 'quality' of your action (not only quantity) • Evaluate – re-evaluate – repeat! • Have initial benchmarks • Try to make a systematization about experiences in the projects • Evaluation 1,2 years after the projects ends • Divide impacts on different thematics/levels (political, economical etc.)
9. How to phrase the message and avoid being too 'academic'/jargonistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give real day -to-day examples, share stories, include pictures • Use quotes from beneficiaries • Check your materials with users > and involve them in producing those • Use language your grandmother would understand! • Make a test with your partner/friend/neighbour
10. How to identify and involve a potential multiplier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know how the department/organisation/school/informal group is organised (who is talking to whom) + talk to secretaries :) • Find relevant elements in their everyday work/life that can contribute to your project's objectives • Build strong relationships based on common goals
11. How to identify opportunities to increase project impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See what others do & learn • Involve potential multipliers • Find the easiest/cheapest way to spread the objective/messages of the project also outside of it > create synergies • Ask for feedback – include participation

6. In conclusion: Your recommendations

Answering the challenge of suggesting key points for other/future EC DEAR projects and for practitioners working in and with local communities, the participants draw up the following set of recommendations:

- Clearly identify and study locally the issue to tackle – include participatory planning, communication flow and develop a joint strategy
- Get to know your partners, allies, focal points (their capacities, roles etc.) - define roles and expectations, meet face-to-face
- Be ready to compromise (between partners, in the long term etc.)
- Anticipate cultural surprises – Plan B is good – be ready to adapt to realities/changes
- Honesty: don't promise if you can't deliver!
- Ensure your objectives relate to EC DEAR
- Do not rely solely on the 'boss' commitment: get the structure (the 'secretaries') involved
- Budget: include planning and communication activities
- Plan an exit strategy for the project – e.g. Link with other projects/actors
- Obtain endorsements for the project e.g. From LA
- Re-assess the realism of the original plans before implementing – again, planning and flexibility must be foreseen
- Be aware that elections may create consequences: deal this challenge as an opportunity
- Project governance/clear monitoring: have evaluation questions from the beginning; share tools; time to evaluate – and share/celebrate results!
- Plan internal communication systems and processes: must be clear and used by all partners
- Relate specific project activities to 'the big picture' + communicate that to your audiences
- Communicate also with those not directly involved
- Have fun!



7. Evaluation of the Hub

The second edition of the meetings, now re-named 'Exchange Hubs', was very positively evaluated and considered 'As ever a positive event - well done!' (quote from participant of HUB A) by the EC funded DEAR projects staff present in these 1,5-day workshops. Good networking among participants; good contact with the B2/DEVCO task manager present (even if most regret not having all the EC Task managers present and request EC budgetary reinforcement as well for their project's task manager visits onsite and closer communication); an adequate programme and facilitation: 'The programme of the workshop was excellent and flexible', 'if all other workshops would be as good!' (quotes from participants in HUB B).

From the participants feedback scores, based on 29 responses from the universe of 49 participants (a 60% large response rate):

- Achievement of participants' expectations: 8.31 (out of 10)
- Achievement of Meeting objectives: 8.83
- Relevance to participants' work: 8.24
- Facilitation by DEAR ST staff: 8.9
- Logistics support: 9.14



Overall success: **8.55** in 10 points – even better result than the 8.2 evaluation of the 2015 Cluster meetings in Brussels. Not referred on the online survey but extensively repeated by the participants on location, was their preference for an 'out-of-Brussels event – even if many of the participants regret not having all the EC Task managers present.

Furthermore, suggestions on HUB A were related to:

- Having more time, ideally a 2-day workshop, to go deeper on concrete project issues and cluster them;
- Sharing specific good practices and recommendations from academia, research or EC knowledge to wrap up some solutions for the challenges identified;
- This relates to what the participants see as positive: there should be more involvement of EC staff, providing good practices and guidance, not just clarification: 'although the EC staff did not play a huge role in the discussions it was helpful to know they were there listening to the debates and hopefully learning more about the context, priorities and challenges of DEAR projects';
- Participants suggested also that may be done some clustering by type of project/methodology/thematic or activities of projects, prepared in advance by some homework of participants - so there can be a session on this or a deeper presentation of the projects if clustered;
- Sharing the results of the sessions on a screen, by means of participant rapporteurs that can write on the computer – this results can be more effectively be seen on screen and printed for participants to take at the end of the events and feedback to the report;

Maybe not related directly or exclusively to the HUB objective but relevant to the overall EC management of DEAR Programme, participants suggested that:

- Need more guidance on reporting and on financial management, that could be given to Project Managers;
- EC should put in practice a workshop/networking system to link the different projects financed on the same subject as well as a memory/repository of old projects, their materials and their knowledge capitalised ('a session which looks particularly at the history/theory of DEAR, and shares learning from past experiences would be of value') - e.g. internal communication and management tools.

8. Further information

Project	Website
AMITIE CODE	www.amitiecode.eu
Do the Right(s) thing!	www.dotherightsthing.eu/
Eat responsibly!	http://glopolis.org/en/projects/we-eat-responsibly/
Food Smart Cities for Development	www.foodpolicymilano.org/en/food-smart-cities-for-development-2/
Global Schools	www.globalschools.education/
Jede Kommune zählt - Fairer Einkauf jetzt!	www.dortmund.de/de/leben_in_dortmund/umwelt/lokaleagenda21/faire_beschaffung/projekt__jede_kommune_zaeht/index.html
LADDER	www.ladder-project.eu/
Rural DEAR Agenda	www.ruraldearagenda.eu/
Scouting our way towards active global citizenship	http://www.nazemi.cz/en/scoutsandguides
SSEDAS	http://www.solidarityeconomy.eu/
Young People on the Global Stage	http://www.tidegloballearning.net/secondary/young-people-global-stage-their-education-and-influence

