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UPLIFT – Urban PoLicy Innovation to address inequality with and for Future generaTions

Deliverable 4.6

Co-creation with young people in Sfântu Gheorghe

Research approach and Reflexive Policy Agenda

February 2023

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1 Introduction

Informed by the national data on early school dropout and the situation of NEET youth (youth not in education, employment or training), in Romania, work package 4 (WP4) of the UPLIFT project focuses on education. Romania is among the countries with the highest level of early school dropout in the EU. Although national legislation and policies have created a framework for preventing early school leaving and segregation, ensuring support for children and their families with vulnerable backgrounds, local institutions usually fail to create a coherent, collaborative and sustainable local policy agenda for implementing national policies and responding to local problems. There is no practice countrywide of local collaborative policy development, planning, and monitoring of implementation. Institutions work in a fragmented manner, with sporadic cooperation and a very weak linkage with the target group.

In order to tackle these problems, work package 4 of the UPLIFT project aims to develop a Reflexive Policy Agenda (RPA) in the field of education through a participative process.

Through the development of the Reflexive Policy Agenda the UPLIFT project aims at addressing the gaps between national and local policies, between the sectors involved (education, employment and social services) and between institutional views regarding needs and the needs defined by the target group itself.

In doing so, the project does not aim to develop educational policies, but rather to outline the challenges from both sides (institutions and target group) when it comes to improving school participation of marginalized youth, enhancing the access of vulnerable youth to quality education and maintaining school attendance. Thus, UPLIFT endeavours to outline measures that better link the education system to social and employment services, and institutional means that better respond to the specific needs of the vulnerable youth in improving their educational path.

The present report tracks both the participatory process that was carried out in Sfântu Gheorghe to develop an RPA and its result, consisting of a policy document that will be presented to the Municipality and that aims to improve the access of vulnerable youth to quality education in the city. The report focuses on the methodological aspects of the process in order to contribute to the policy development practice in Romania. Our assumption is that if we aim at social transformation then the policy development process has to have at least the same weight and needs as much attention as the policy content itself. The main objective of the project was to try out a new way of policy-making on the local level, based on youth participation and wide institutional collaboration.

2 Research context and problem statement

2.1 Definition of the target group and their problems

In 2015, nearly one-fifth of Romanian young adults (15-24 years old) were not in education, employment or training, one of the highest rates among EU countries. Among the 15-34 years old, those who did not attain upper secondary education were more likely to be unemployed, with a 13.5% unemployment rate compared to 7% for those who attained tertiary education (Kitchen et al, 2017). Income inequality in Romania is the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2016, Kitchen et al, 2017). Even though education is compulsory until 16, about one-fifth of the student population has dropped out by 16 (Kitchen et al, 2017). Studies show that selection based on ability (at the end of lower secondary school) and the perceived poor quality and relevance of the upper secondary vocational education together with the limited access to tertiary education are the main factors responsible for the precipitous school drop-out at this particular age (Fartusnic et al, 2014).

In 2018, the rate of early leavers from education and training (age group 18-24) decreased for the second consecutive year to 16.4%. Although well below its peak of 19.1% in 2016, the rate remains one of the highest in the EU (EU average: 10.6%). Early school leaving persists due to a combination of factors, including socio-economic aspects and gaps in the provision of quality education. In rural areas — where poverty is highest and the quality of education tends to be lower — one in four people aged 18-24 has left school too early. By contrast, the rate is 15% in towns and only 4.2% in cities (Education and Training Monitor Romania, 2019).

The challenges that Sfântu Gheorghe is facing are not much different from the usual challenges of an Eastern-European small city: outmigration of the youngsters, lack of well-paid jobs, and increasing social inequality. The most robustly shrinking age category is the 15-24 age category, where between 2002-2016 a 48% decrease was registered (while in the same period the population aged over 65 years increased by 66%), which can be explained by internal and external migration (Strategia de Dezvoltare Locală Sfântu Gheorghe, 2017).

The educational infrastructure of the municipality is adequate: there are 4 high schools, 3 vocational schools, 1 art school and local branches of several universities. The average percentage of students passing the baccalaureate exam (completion of high school studies/middle education degree) in Sfântu Gheorghe was 60,6% in 2019 and is above the county average (in 2019 the county average was 58,41% and the national average was 63,78%), but there are schools where this percentage is extremely low. In 2014 for instance 7.47% was the lowest percentage that could be observed (Strategia de dezvoltare a județului Covasna 2015-2020, 2015 / Development Strategy of Covasna County 2015-2020, 2015). In 2022 the

county baccalaureate passing average has been the highest from previous years reaching 72,5%[1], mirroring the last 12 years' highest national average of 73.3%.

Half of the high school pupils from Covasna county[2] (NUT-3 level administrative unit) are studying at one of the high schools in Sfântu Gheorghe. Over 2000 students are enrolled in the high schools present in this city. The gaps between the various high schools in the national tests (baccalaureate exam) are very large, and this situation is not recent: in 3 high schools from Sfântu Gheorghe the passing rate was over 90%, but in another high school that also aimed to reach baccalaurate, only 17.6% of the pupils managed to pass the exam, according to County School Inspectorate. These less-performing vocational and high schools concentrate on pupils with low socioeconomic backgrounds with low access to the existing educational, economic, cultural, etc., resources. Interviews with experts in education at the local level show that a large part of pupils from segregated environments (especially Roma), but as well as from rural areas, do not complete high school or even start it. This situation reinforces the idea that policies and initiatives, including the local ones, that aim to reduce inequalities still do not yield the desired results.

The definition of marginalisation in education and the definition of the target group for the purpose of the UPLIFT project was part of the preparatory phase of the Reflexive Policy Agenda development process. The definition of marginality and vulnerability was refined throughout the WP4 process, contributing to a better understanding of the phenomena. Due to the fact that specific data is missing regarding the characteristics of the early school leavers, we used interviews with institutional representatives to get a better insight into this group (see also Chapter 4.1). In our view, the factors that increase the probability to be marginalized in education contain the following elements:

- low socio-economic background of the parents;
- low educational status of the parents;
- pupils living in rural areas;
- pupils lacking adequate parental care (raised in the child protection system and those suffering from abuse and neglect in their families, or lacking nurturing relationships with adults);
- pupils residing in segregated Roma settlements;
- pupils with special educational needs (learning difficulties);
- pupils with mental health issues (with psychiatric diagnoses).

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[1] Covasna County School Inspectorate (2022): Press Release. Rezultate finale–Bacalaureat, iunie-iulie 2022,. https://isj.educv.ro/sites/default/files/comunicat%20de%20presa_rezultate%20finale%20Bac%20iunie-iulie%202022.pdf

[2] Covasna County is situated in the centre of Romania, surrounded by the Central Carpathians. It is the smallest county in Romania. In the territory of the county there are 5 towns: Sfantu Gheorghe – the county residence, Tîrgu Secuiesc, Covasna, Baraolt, Intorsura Buzăului. The total population of the county is 200.042, more than 50% live in rural areas. The ethnic structure of the county is the following: Hungarians represent 71.8%, Romanians represent 22,3%, Roma 3%, other ethnic groups 2,9%.

The Reflexive Policy Agenda is targeting youth with complex needs at risk of early school dropout and of social marginalisation. The aim of this agenda is to keep them in education and to provide them with better developmental conditions through strengthening the local support system and creating synergies between educational, social and employment services.

2.2 Institutional and policy context

Education in Romania is based on a free-tuition and an egalitarian system. Access to free education is guaranteed by the Constitution. Each phase of the educational path has its own form of organisation and is subject to different laws, directives, programs, and strategies. The compulsory educational path one must follow is 10 years (from preparatory grade at age 6 until 10th grade at age 16) including the primary and upper secondary educational stages (see also Figure 2.1). Adult education includes training programs at all qualification levels, organized in the public or private sector.

Figure 2.1. Structure of the National Education System (Source: Eurydice)
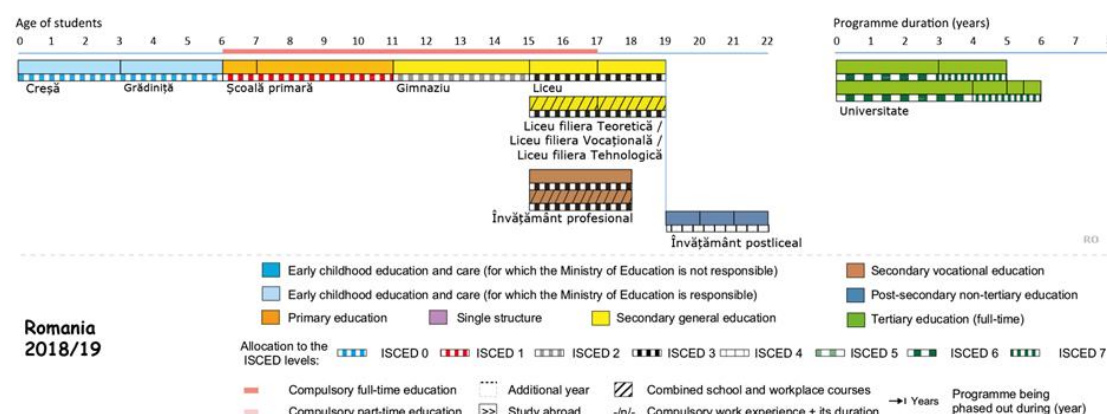
The Law of National Education no. 1/2011 (which came into force at the same time of the issuing of the EU Framework for the National Roma Inclusion Strategy) flags the importance of ensuring equal opportunities in education for vulnerable groups. It also reinforces the principle of inclusive education, forbidding the structuring of the education system on discriminatory criteria. The law provides sanctions in cases when children are placed in special education based on criteria such as race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, or because they belong to a vulnerable group. Subsequent regulations include prevention and correction of early school leaving, the development of methodological documents for the Second Chance program, etc.

A strategic framework for reducing early school leaving in Romania was adopted by the Government in 2015. The strategy is based on the following four pillars: a). ensuring that all children go to school and receive quality education; b). ensuring that all children complete compulsory education; c). getting early school leavers back in school and d). developing

appropriate institutional support. The law includes important provisions for establishing the status of the school mediator and reinforcing the allocation of special places for Roma students in secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. All the pillars are intended to be backed up with national programs, although there are no assessments available regarding the implementation and success of these programs.

Local context

The presentation of the local context is based on the results of WP2 and WP3, as well as on the analyses carried out by the institutional stakeholder group and the youth group in the framework of the RPA development process.

Generally, and Sfântu Gheorghe is not an exception from the rule, educational policies are not translated rigorously into local-level policies and programs. Institutions work in a fragmented way, without living and operationalized partnerships, and only a weak feedback loop between responsible institutions and their target group exists.

As it can be seen later (chapter 6), one of the most basic findings of the Sfântu Gheorghe co-creation process in the field of education is that the general organising principle of the local education system is segregative. This means that local education is organised on a top-down scale, from the "best" schools to the "worst" schools, and there is commonly shared knowledge and consensus among local citizens regarding the hierarchy of the schools in the city. Therefore, although the National Educational Law prescribes the distribution of children in schools based upon their homes' proximity to the school, parents with a larger access to resources enrol their children in those schools that have the greatest reputation in town regardless of the distance to their home. As a consequence, the social gap between families and children is strengthened by the local school system.

The conclusions of the problem analysis also include the following:

- very few verifiable data on local level - lack of adequate data collection system
- national education system as well as the local one increases social inequalities instead of decreasing them
- the local educational system is not inclusive at all, the selection of children begins at an early age mostly by parents but by the age of 13-14 (the end of the 8th grade) it is institutionalised by the examination system
- local development interventions in the field of education are mostly infrastructural investments financed by EU funds. This approach results in two things: first, on an infrastructural level, the investments are not need-based but based upon eligible funding resources and second, there is no long term vision of how the future generation of Sfântu Gheorghe should be educated. Therefore, there are no investment projects in quality management of education, in pilot projects in schools, in reforming teaching styles etc.

In order to increase school results and decrease the dropout rate, there are several programmes that the Covasna County School Inspectorate has implemented (national programs and local initiatives). Sfântu Gheorghe has benefited since 2005 from the so-called "Second Chance" programmes that aim to increase the rate of (re)integration in the education and training system of children and young people who left school early and of adults who have not completed compulsory education. Within these programmes, with limited duration, there are usually several hundred beneficiaries from the whole county or even from the wider region. Since 2005, there have been several such programmes that have won funding and that have been able to support hundreds of beneficiaries at different levels of education. WP2 professional interviews reflecting on institutional motives of early drop out showed that the success rate of these programmes is below expectations because, very often, according to the interviewees, teachers face reluctance of beneficiaries or high absenteeism.

Although the quantitative indicators of national programmes are mostly met, the actual impact of these programmes is not rigorously assessed. As the interviews conducted in WP3 showed, many practitioners tend to attribute the responsibility for programme failure to the 'beneficiaries' and hold individual characteristics (such as motivation, perseverance, interest) solely responsible for the (lack of) success of programmes. We often see a reluctance on the part of institutional actors to examine the role of structural and organisational factors in the outcome of policy implementation, despite their deep awareness of the systemic weaknesses they regularly encounter.

However, the transformative potential of educational institutions has been proven by the WP3 study (Case study report, Sfântu Gheorghe/Romania, 2023), which succeeded to identify one high-school in the city which was named as the main (and solely) organisation which made a change in the life of some of the interviewees. This school succeeded in catering to the needs of the children whose parents didn't have the means to take them to more central "stronger" schools in the city. The school has made considerable efforts to assist the parents in raising their children, an effort that is widely recognized and appreciated by the parents (many of them former students of the same school) themselves. The interview with the representative of the school showed that the whole staff has a special focus on keeping the children in the school recognizing the role that the school can potentially have in the lives of the children with vulnerable backgrounds. Special training, innovative teaching methods, and a conscious and supportive relationship with parents were mentioned as tools used in creating an attractive environment for children and parents at school.

The Local Development Strategy for Marginalised Urban Areas[3] is a relatively new initiative that is worth exploring because of its comprehensive approach, even if the target group of UPLIFT WP4 only partially covers the target group of the strategy. The strategy aims to integrate education and employment interventions with social services, while targeting the most vulnerable, segregated, mainly Roma community in the city. The results of the implementation of the strategy are not yet fully available, but the lessons learned in terms of institutional cooperation and the creation of cross-sectoral synergies could be very valuable for the future.

Despite these positive examples, our assumption is that public policy development agents don't have a deep understanding of the experiences, needs, and visions of marginalised, isolated, and discriminated communities. In addition, there is not yet a standard (procedure) to assess practice and impact, which would allow (re)evaluation of institutional functioning and tailoring it to the needs of the target groups. Thus, the public policies and subsequently the public services do not necessarily build on the needs, vulnerabilities, perceptions, and resources of youth nor do they take into account the cultural, economic, and social specificities and resources of this target group.

In our approach, we intended to open a space of reciprocity for the public policy development agents and the targeted youth community. The process was built on the local resources, experience, and receptivity of the implementer partner LAG Sepsi and tried to create a climate of partnership and cooperation between communities of youngsters and identified institutional stakeholders, thereby assuming the responsibility for change.

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3 The Local Development Strategy of Sfantu Gheorghe, elaborated under the principle of Community Led Local Development for 2017-2023 has identified 3 Marginalised Urban Areas (MUAs) in the city. One of these areas in the Őrkő district, which is a segregated Roma community with around 2000 inhabitants. The district has its own school, owned by the Catholic Church and built in 2002, which has served for many years the children of the community as they hadn't been enrolled in any school before. Nowadays it is considered to be the "gipsy" school and it bears all the characteristics of a segregated educational institution.

3 Objectives of the co-creation process

3.1. Societal objectives

The main societal objective of the WP4 intervention is to create a policy framework, which facilitates better access to education for vulnerable youth and contributes to reducing school abandonment and increasing employability. Thus, the project intends to carry out a co-creation process of education policies that enable disadvantaged youth to enter and stay in mainstream education; that improve educational outcomes, including remedial education (Second Chance); and that integrate support services with mainstream and alternative educational services.

On the other hand, the project creates the context for acknowledging the fact that youth, including those with vulnerable backgrounds, should have a decisive role in identifying structural causes that maintain social inequalities and finding tailored solutions to the problems they face in their educational pathway. Thus, the project aims at contributing to the empowerment of youth with vulnerable backgrounds, and the valorisation and legitimization of their social contribution.

It is generally acknowledged that participatory design enhances engagement and contributes to ensuring implementation success. However, there is little empirical evidence on the actual results of participatory processes, especially on those implemented by youth and vulnerable youth. By creating a reflexive policy agenda, the UPLIFT project attempts to fill this gap, ensuring that young people have opportunities for involvement in the creation of a local policy agenda together with the policy makers and community leaders. Thus, one of our societal objectives is to offer a framework that reduces power differences between vulnerable youth and institutional representatives / decision makers, bringing their visions closer to each other – thus contributing to democratising arenas of social production. Principles, such as enabling and empowering youth, sensitising institutional actors towards considering power differences and cultural sensitivities as well as restoring harmed relationships were at the core of our co-creation processes. As a result of these collaborative processes, we envisage the development of public policies that support young people's aspirations and contribute to improving their educational outcomes and their chances of finding a better job.

3.2. Institutional objectives

The main long term objective of WP4 of the UPLIFT project in Sfântu Gheorghe is to contribute to a shift of the state of mind on the institutional level regarding public education. This means that throughout the implementation, the Suppedito and the LAG Sepsi team have emphasised the role of partnerships between institutions on one hand, and between institutions and youngsters on the other hand, in order to come to new perspectives, approaches and collaborations with regard to the often problematic access of vulnerable youngsters to quality education.

A long term institutional objective that the UPLIFT project wishes to contribute to is firstly the desegregation of (Roma) education in the city and, secondly, transforming two local marginalised schools into pilot schools where innovative education methods and management will be implemented and tested. The upcoming European financial mechanism will have calls regarding pilot schools and the LAG Sepsi team intends to partner up with two segregated schools in order to apply for these specific funds.

Expected changes within the institutions:

- Increased knowledge and skills leading to more commitment and openness towards innovation and approaching the youth, including the youth as active participants in defining and improving services;

- Engaging in anti-discriminatory practices, encouraging equality of opportunity in working with vulnerable youth/Roma youth;

Opening up for new co-operation methods between stakeholders in the context of power imbalances.

3.3. Policy oriented objectives

Due to the fact that Romanian educational and social systems leave little room for manoeuvre at the local level, as mentioned earlier, the policy oriented objectives are addressing existing policies in terms of improvement of their local implementation and creating synergies between different sectors that are working in a fragmented way.

Expected changes on policy making level:

- Increased political commitment and a greater level of receptivity of local decision makers for changing the status quo and supporting catalytic innovation;
- Changing attitudes, introducing a new conceptualization of social services which need to be seen as tools for ensuring fundamental rights rather than for exerting social control;
- Enhanced capacity to translate needs into policy solution;
- Reforming the local fund allocation system to schools in order to balance at least the infrastructural differences between local educational institutions. (The local municipality is responsible for all the infrastructural development in schools.) This step is important in the long term if the final goal is to reduce the distance between what is considered to be a "good school" and a "bad school". The present situation leads to an educational segregation where parents with more resources can decide upon the schools their children attend.
- Elaboration of an at least 30-year-long educational desegregation programme, which aims at the reduction of inequalities between resources the children have access to throughout the system. This objective is strongly related to the above mentioned goal regarding the new conceptualization of social services.

3.4. Academic objectives

The methodology of participatory policy development has been piloted and the lessons learnt are described in the present report. Hence, the research addresses the impacts and opportunities for change, and the added value of the participatory approach which could be included in the local policy development repertoire. Project reports will be elaborated in a way to serve the public audience and the interest of local and national stakeholders. It also targets the academic community through scientific publications and conference presentations.

4 Institutional framework for the co-creation process

4.1. The main stakeholders in the co-creation process

For identifying the relevant stakeholders, a stakeholder map was elaborated by Suppedito (research partner) and LAG Sepsi (implementing partner) and subsequently checked by MRI (contributing partner). The aim of this map is to identify potential collaborators (institutions and NGOs) in the field of education, child protection, social services and employment services. This mapping led to the identification of the interest and potential influence/impact of potential collaborators on the development and implementation of Reflexive Policy Agenda. Defining stakeholder and target groups was a process through which the research partner assessed the interest and motivation of the potential collaborators. For this purpose 13 interviews were conducted with:

- vice mayor;
- 4 schools;
- Covasna County School Inspectorate;
- Covasna County Educational Resource Center;
- Covasna County General Directorate for Child Protection and Social Assistance;
- Local Social Assistance Directorate;
- 4 NGOs providing social services;
- County Employment Agency.

Interviews targeted the following topics:

- Presenting the purpose of the project;
- Finding out the opinion of institutional representatives regarding the vulnerable groups which could become the main target group of the project;
- Finding out the fields of interest, needs and resources of these institutions/organisations;
- Finding out their opinion on the factors affecting change;
- Checking the level of and motivation for involvement of the institutions/organisations in the reflexive policy agenda development process;
- Identifying representatives of the organisations who will be the main collaborators.

Based on the results of the interviews, the composition of the stakeholder group was decided by the two Romanian partners in consultation with MRI (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1   Composition of the stakeholder group and the role of each participant

Name	Contribution to the co-creation process	Level of involvement
The main stakeholder is **the Sfântu Gheorghe City Hall**. The president of the LAG Sepsi Association (implementing partner) is also the deputy mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe. His double role is the basis of our cooperation with the Municipality. The other vice-mayor who was appointed during the implementation and who is a young woman, proved to be very interested in the project. The mayor was informed regarding the objectives of the UPLIFT project and his support was gained for integrating the results (RPA) in local policies (Youth Strategy and Urban Development Strategy) and for financial allocation for implementation.	Participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Social Assistance Department from the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe. It is responsible for the social strategy of the Municipality and offers social services and financial benefits for all vulnerable groups defined by the legislation. Implementing child protection policies is one of the main tasks of the Social Assistance Department. Thus, prevention of school abandonment, providing support for vulnerable families and enhancing parental capacities are included in their mandate.	Definition of vulnerability, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection is a county level institution which is responsible for specialised services (including residential) for children and youth without adequate parental care. This institution deals with the most vulnerable population in the whole county.	Definition of vulnerability, identification of potential members for the youth group, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
The **Employment Office Covasna County** is a decentralised institution responsible for implementing national policies in the area of employment, increasing employability (lifelong learning) and unemployment subsidies.	Definition of vulnerability, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary

Name	Contribution to the co-creation process	Level of involvement
School Inspectorate Covasna County is responsible for implementing national policies at local level in the field of education, coordination of schools, evaluating needs and trends, management of educational staff, educational methodologies etc.	Definition of vulnerability, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Educational Resource Center Covasna County is responsible for coordination of school psychologists and evaluation of learning difficulties and special educational needs. Also responsible for hiring and distributing educational experts who are not teacher but have the task of assisting the learning process of the pupils.	Definition of vulnerability, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Áron Berde Vocational School is the second biggest technical school in Sfântu Gheorghe with around 800 attending pupils. The school offers ISCED 3 and ISCED 4 level of specifications in Romanian and Hungarian languages mostly in service industries (commerce, tourism, public administration, beauty and service industry). The institution also provides evening classes for high school students. Pass rate at the baccalaureate exam in 2022: 51,28%.	Definition of vulnerability, identification of potential members for the youth group, promotion of the Youth group in the school, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Ferenc Gödri Gymnasium is one of lower secondary schools (ISCED 2) from one of the marginalised urban areas of Sfântu Gheorghe. The total number of pupils is around 200, including attendants of the Second Chance programme for elementary school. Children with special education needs constitute 16,75% of the total school population. Pass rate at the national evaluation exam in the 8th grade is low: 35,71%.	Definition of vulnerability, identification of potential members for the youth group, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary

Name	Contribution to the co-creation process	Level of involvement
Constantin Brancuşi Vocational School is the smallest technical high school in the city, with classes only in Romanian language offering professional qualification on ISCED 3 level in the hospitality domain, commerce and beauty industry, some in evening classes and quality control and stylist specialisation on ISCED 4 level. The school provides boarding for a considerable number of pupils coming for the rural area, the total number of enrolled pupils are around 350. Pass rate at the Baccalaureate exam in 2022: 50,28%.	participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Caritas Association is a nationwide NGO with branches in several counties. It offers social services for vulnerable families and children and is involved in poverty alleviation efforts. In Sfântu Gheorghe the organisation runs several projects in the area of education, employment and family care, targeting the marginalised urban areas, including the segregated Roma community, called Őrkő.	Participation in the co-creation meetings with the youth group	Secondary
Malta Association is a nationwide NGO with branches in several counties. It offers social services for vulnerable families and children and is involved in poverty alleviation efforts. In Sfântu Gheorghe the organisation runs several projects in the area of education, employment and family care, targeting the marginalised urban areas, including the segregated Roma community, called Őrkő.	Definition of vulnerability, participation in stakeholder meetings, problem mapping, solution tree, co-creation with the youth group	Primary
Esély Foundation is a grassroots NGO which provides social services for young mothers in Őrkő.	Participation in several stakeholder meetings	Secondary
Red Cross Association is a nationwide NGO with branches in several counties. In Sfântu Gheorghe the Red Cross organises and mobilises a great number of young volunteers, who are involved in different charity activities in the city. The Red Cross does not target the marginalised youth and families, but the director has a great deal of knowledge in the field of marginalisation, being involved for many years in social and community development processes in the city, also in Őrkő.	Definition of vulnerability, identification of potential members for the youth group, participation in few stakeholder meetings	Secondary
Diakonia Foundation is a local NGO, which focuses on employment services for youth with disabilities and psychiatric diagnoses.	Definition of vulnerability, identification of potential members for the youth group, participation in few meetings	Secondary

4.2. Institutional coordination of the co-creation process

The co-creation process had several phases as described in Chapter 6. The institutional group was organised by LAG Sepsi and designed and moderated by the Suppedito team at the first phases and coordination was taken over by LAG Sepsi since the beginning of phase II.

The institutional group has been divided organically in two formats: there was an inner group which included the most active organisations that participated throughout the whole process and there was a larger group, which included, besides the inner group, the rest of the stakeholders mentioned in the table above, who participated either sporadically, or just at the first stages of the process. The final phase of the process (the implementation phase) will again target the larger group, to give the opportunity for contribution to all stakeholders who were involved in one way or another.

The original stakeholder group consisted of 24 representatives of 19 institutions and NGOs including two members from Suppedito and the LAG Sepsi team. All vocational schools and two elementary schools from two marginalised urban areas were among the participants at the project launch conference in January 2021. At this meeting, the Suppedito team presented the project, the expected outcomes and the role of each stakeholder invited. One vocational school let the organisers know from the beginning that they did not want to participate in the project due to lack of time and staff but the rest of the invitees expressed their consent to play an active role in understanding the educational problems of the city and in the shaping of the RPA. Further meetings, either workshops or trainings, were organised and held according to these expressed consent of participation.

Due to several reasons such as the COVID restrictions, the demanding or laborious programme of the heads of institutions and the too-long breaks between the first and the second meeting, some of the participants dropped out. This led to the distinction between participants that is explained above.

When establishing the appropriate meeting structure we focused on four basic aspects: timeframe, location, content, and methodology. Regarding the duration of the meetings, we had some 3-4 hour meetings, some in consecutive days, as well as some all day sessions. With regard to the location, the shorter meetings took place in the city, and the longer ones were often planned outside of the city in order to enhance focus and engagement of the busy professionals forming the stakeholder group. Lighter content such as presentations, casual meetings, trust building activities or feedback rounds were allotted shorter time periods, and for deep work, analysis, and ideation we aimed for a longer duration, often all day activities, or consecutive sessions. The preferred methodology during the co-creation phase was facilitation and workshops, based on tasks and small group activities, but on occasion, mostly in the preparation phase, we also used group cohesion exercises, capacity building activities, and technical presentations.

5 The Youth Board

5.1. Recruitment and commitment strategy

5.1.1. Recruitment

Recruitment and retention are the most vital components in forming the Youth Reflection Group/Youth Board. Recruitment efforts were made in at least two areas: school and community and we have also tried to find young people who have lost connection with the institutions.

The strategies to recruit and to engage the youth in forming the Youth Board were:

- Meetings with school principals and teachers who popularise the UPLIFT project in their classes;
- Organisations such as Red Cross and Child Protection Services informed their target group about the opportunity to participate in the Youth Board;
- Peer-to-peer word of mouth: Youth can ask their friends to participate.

The formation of the youth group has had a special dynamic: after a few recruitment meetings the group mainly consisted of volunteers mobilised by the Red Cross organisation. This group was completed with youth from Áron Berde Vocational School, while about half of the original group members dropped out. Those who dropped out were youth who had complex life situations and the group was too demanding for them. The latter group remained the core group. It was enlarged by new participants, who attended occasionally, for example youngsters from the Child Protection system.

In constituting the group, at the recruitment phase several factors were taken into consideration: age distribution, gender balance, ethnic inclusivity (the presence of Roma youth), special situation of the youth from child protection services (residential care, foster care). Ethical requirements were followed rigorously as specified by the project's ethical guidelines (consent forms for those under 18 were signed by the parents).

5.1.2. Commitment strategy

No explicit commitment strategy was developed. The commitment from the group members was built in an implicit manner. According to the feedback of participants, their motivation for participation was the possibility to be together with peers and friends but also with adults who pay attention to them, and to their problems and ideas.

There are some factors that we believe also have contributed to engagement:

- stability of the facilitators, good relationship, safety in the group;

- stability in meetings: relatively frequent meetings (biweekly, two afternoons, adapted to the availability of the group members);

- good group cohesion was the engine of the group;

- assuming representation in turns, according to the topics of interest;

- assuming responsibility in presenting the group work (creating videos, written materials);

- facilitating the group occasionally by different group members, assisted by the adult facilitators;

- playfulness;

- shared meals;

- offering a youth camp and travel to Barakaldo (UPLIFT consortium meeting in September 2022) as incentives.

Thus, the time spent together, the attentive and supporting presence of adults (the facilitators), the learning opportunities (self-development and learning about institutions and social systems), and the opportunity to influence and make a change were the most important incentives for the youth group. Group rules were defined together with the group.

5.1 Composition and size of the Youth Board

The Youth Board counted between 7 and 20 members, depending on occasional presence. The participants are between 17-24 years old. They were coming mostly from vocational schools and the older ones are working in different areas (bakery, post office), or in some cases looking for a job.

There were 2 participants who were looking after children, some participants with a Roma ethnicity, and about 20% commute from rural areas. Most participants had a hetero-identification. The majority of the stable participants were attending the same vocational school (the one which hosted the group meetings), but some others had attended a "weaker" gymnasium and vocational school. Many of the participants were lacking adequate family support and domestic violence was also revealed (not in an explicit way) in some cases.

The Youth Board was not a stable structure within the initial larger youth group, but it formed organically based on the availability and interests of the group members. The core Youth Board always had the support of the larger youth group.

5.2 Inclusiveness and gender sensitivity

The most vulnerable youth in the city, who are the members of the segregated Roma community in Őrkő (as showed in WP3) were not included in the youth group. We consider that involving the most vulnerable groups assumes extra resources in terms of time, finance and professionals. Specific recruitment and retention strategies would have been needed, for

which the project did not have sufficient resources. If the gap is too large, this would need a specific preparatory process, prior connections with the community, good field knowledge, extra preparation time to assess specific needs and map the necessary conditions for participation, field visits also during the process etc. However, the composition of the group reflected still deep vulnerabilities as defined in the first phase of the process.

With regard to gender equality, no special measures were taken because there was no need for it. Spontaneously, the number of girls and boys was quite equal. However, attention was given to ensure equal participation of boys and girls in the group work, but also in discussions about the group work with the institutional stakeholders.

6 The co-creation process

6.1. Generic approach

In our approach we open a space and create a framework for reciprocity between the public policy development agents and the targeted youth community. Therefore, the focus is equally divided between institutional facilitation and community facilitation. Furthermore, a lot of attention is dedicated to training bot to young people and institutional stakeholders (e.g. how to handle power relations, horizontal leadership, restorative practices). The two processes (institutional facilitation and community facilitation) were run in parallel, with the aim of developing communication channels between the two societal actors. Due to the fact that institutional objectives include enhancing local capacity to engage in participatory policy making processes, the aim of the institutional work was to ensure a frame for self-reflection and safe internal process-analysis in a supportive way.

Two main phases can be distinguished in our co-creation process.

Phase I: Preparatory phase

Step 1. Stakeholder mapping (described in Chapter 4)

Step 2. Defining stakeholder and target groups (described in Chapters 4 and 5)

Step 3. Recruitment of youth group (described in Chapter 5)

Step 4. Forming two stakeholder groups from a group dynamic point of view, namely preparing the two groups (the youth groups and the institutional stakeholder groups) for collaboration through creating "safe place" in the groups. The two groups have worked in parallel to prepare for the co-creation process. In order to create a circle where people can openly share their ideas and visions without fear of reprisal, various group facilitation techniques were used.

The aims of the preparatory phase for the institutional group and for the youth group have some overlaps but are slightly different. On one hand institutional stakeholders should be prepared for collaboration and receiving the voices of the marginalised youth. On the other hand, they should have a clearer image of their own functioning and potential obstacles in relation to responding to their target groups' needs.

In terms of the process this means:

- Building trust, creating a safe place, sharing experiences, visions and values;
- Formulating own motivation and common goals;
- Analysing system resources and setbacks;
- Becoming open for receiving the visions, expectations and energy of the youth group.

The aim of the preparatory phase for the youth group is detailed in sub-chapter 6.2.1.

Step 5. Identifying problems and solutions by each of the two groups in parallel. How do groups define change? The aim is collecting visions of youth and professionals, articulating thoughts on catalysing / hampering factors and the ways change can be achieved, identifying and prioritising problems and solutions.

Phase II: Co-creation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda (details in Section 6.4)

The aim of this working phase was to elaborate a common and realistic policy solution document. In this phase the two groups (youth and institutional representatives) worked together.

6.2. Overview of all activities/meetings

6.2.1. Preparatory phase for the Youth Board

Table 6.1 gives an overview of all the activities that were organised during the preparatory phase of the Youth Board. No less than 27 meetings and a 3 days youth camp were held at this stage. The group work had a special focus on the group dynamics, and the stages of group development were worked out: forming, storming, norming and performing. Thus, the group process unfolded through stages like creating a safe place, building trust and inviting openness, solving conflicts and accepting all members, developing the norms of the group and the collaboration, increasing cohesion and achieving the group's tasks.

The preparatory phase process was unfolding based on the following thematic structure:

- identifying problems in the field of education, housing, health, employment;
- identifying inner resources and coping strategies;
- common values in the group;
- creating an ideal city with structures and rules;
- experiences and expectations related to public institutions - police, health services;
- leadership and representation;
- resources for cooperation;
- roles in collaboration.

The main outcomes of the preparatory phase at youth community level:

- Preparing the youth for collaboration: safe space for youth to reflect on their new knowledge and understanding, within peer groups, as well as build their confidence in their ability to act and voice their views;
- Creating Youth reflection group (larger group of participants) and building capacity: empowerment and enhancing self-esteem

- Creating the Youth Board (smaller number of participants – 4-6 persons), building capacity: empowerment, enhancing self-esteem and training on specific topics. It is important to note that this empowerment refers to the development of self-confidence, but not to sharing information on how the educational system works. The researchers believe that the experience of young people was sufficient to formulate problems, gaps and solutions and the facilitators' role was to "translate" these into policy recommendations. According to the approach, knowledge regarding the educational system would be necessary on the level of representation (e.g. Youth Parliament).

Table 6.1 Youth Board meetings during the preparatory phase

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
Youth group 1.	4 (2 on 4/12/2020, 2 on 12/03/2021)	Recruitment, presentation of UPLIFT	30 participants in total	Creation of the youth group
Youth group 2.	3 (2 on 20/01/2021, 1 on 26/02/2021)	Getting to know each other	16 participants in total	Group cohesion
Youth group 3.	1 (13/03/2021)	Formulating common goals	9 participants	Group cohesion, common goal as a group
Youth group 4.	1 (19/03/2021)	Cooperation inside the group	18 participants	A new group has been created, with new members, some of the old members left the group
Youth group 5.	1 (23/03/2021)	Experiencing cooperation with institutions	12 participants	Sharing negative experiences with institutions
Youth group 6.	1 (24/03/2021)	Awareness and responsibility	7 participants	Raising responsibility for own actions and sharing positive experiences in this regard
Youth group 7.	1 (09/04/2021)	Role models	12 participants	Working on positive self-image 'Who is your role model and

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
				why? Make yourself a role model!'
Youth group 8.	1 (28/04/2021)	Building an ideal city for youth (Eldorado)	12 participants	Group work regarding building an ideal city and rules/laws of cohabitation
Youth group 9.	1 (29/04/2021)	Formulating personal goals, obstacles and resources	10 participants	Mapping personal needs and resources
Youth group 10.	1 (25/05/2021)	Cooperation with the institutions	7 participants	Creating a strategy for cooperation with institutional stakeholders
Youth group 11.	1 (07/06/2021)	Sharing difficult actual experiences at school	6 participants	Supporting each other in facing difficult situations at school
Youth group 12.	2 (13/07/202, 17/07/2021)	Formulating problems on community level	17 participants in total	Problem mapping in the field of education, employment, housing, access to public services
Youth group 13.	1 (08/08/2021)	Maintaining contact during vacation	8 participants	Summarising the process so far
Youth group 14.	1 (16/09/2021)	Reunion of the group after vacation	10 participants	Summarising the process so far and discussing further plans and steps
Youth group 15.	1 (27/09/2021)	Organising the youth camp	9 participants	Finding the date for the youth camp, discussing organizational issues and working on the

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
				content part of the camp
Youth group 16.	1 (27/10/2021)	Preparing the presentation for the EU Week of Regions	7 participants	Preparing the video for the online presentation
Youth group 17.	2 (23,24/11/2021)	Re-planning the UPLIFT Youth Camp	8 participants	The Youth camp was cancelled and re-planned due to the COVID pandemic. Discussion regarding increasing the representativity of the UPLIFT project and the possibility of making a small sized research on the needs and solutions of marginalized youth in Sfântu Gheorghe.
Youth group 18.	1 (20/01/2022)	Summarising the process, developing a questionnaire and first brainstorming on solutions	9 participants	The group developed the questionnaire they want to implement before the youth camp. First analysis of solutions.
Youth group 19.	1 (03/02/2022)	Preparing for the youth camp	9 participants	The last preparations for the youth camp were made. The results of the questionnaire were discussed.
Youth group 20.	YOUTH CAMP (17-19/02/2022)	Developing the problem and solution maps	13 participants	New group members were received. Problem and solution maps were defined.

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
Youth group 21.	1 (08/03/2022)	Introduction of the co-creation process with the institutions	8 participants	LAG Sepsi implementing partner introduced the steps for the co-creation phases.
Youth group 22.	1 (21/03/2022)	Introducing new possibilities for collaboration with the Municipality and with institutional stakeholders	8 participants	The preparation of the co-creation process has continued. A joint 2 days' workshop was planned.
Youth group 23.	1 (12/05/2022)	Developing a problem tree based upon the research and transforming it into an objective tree	8 participants	LAG Sepsi conducted a workshop on structuring problems and transforming them into objectives and possible solutions.
Youth group 24.	1 (16/08/2022)	Drawing the map of the city based upon the felt distances between the youngsters' home or school and the city centre.	5 participants	Mind mapping: how the youngsters sense distances between city centre and their home/school/leisure time places/workplace
Youth group 25.	1 (07/02/2023)	Recruiting new Youth Board members and carrying out some youth initiatives.	5 participants	The Youth Bureau of the Municipality took over the mentoring of the Youth group. A next meeting with new recruits will take place in March 2023.

6.2.2. Preparatory phase for the institutional group

Table 6.2 shows the meetings that were held with the institutional group in the preparatory phase.

Table 6.2   Meetings held with the institutional group in the preparatory stage

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
Institutional group 1.	1 (Oct 2020)	Presentation the UPLIFT project	15 participants	Dissemination of the UPLIFT plan, invitation to join the stakeholder group
Institutional group 2.	1 (Jan 2021)	Presentation of the WP4 plans and designing the recruitment of the youngsters	6 participants	Ideas for planning the WP4 implementation in Sfantu Gheorghe
Institutional group 3.	1 Workshop (Feb 2021)	Discussing the possibility of a joint protocol	15 participants	The stakeholders were open for signing a protocol, although they didn't really know what to expect from the project
Institutional group 4.	1 Workshop (May 2021)	Presentation of the methodological aspects of the participatory process carried out with marginalised groups	11 participants	The principles of the participatory development process were presented, and some examples of the participatory approach used in Pata-Cluj project's educational program were given. The opportunities of using restorative practices were also presented.
Institutional group 5	2 days Workshop (August 2021)	Creating a group in a dynamic sense, increasing engagement for the process	12 participants	The outcome of the WS was defining values, clarifying purposes and analysing problems

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
Institutional group 6	1 day Workshop (September 2021)	Continuing the work of analysing the current situation and identifying topics for intervention	10 participants	Defining the working process and structure, identifying 5 topics for small group work.
Institutional group 7	5 online meetings (October-December 2021)	Analysing the 5 topics in small groups	12 participants	Creating a problem map through analysing the 5 topics
Institutional group 8	2 days Workshop (April 2022)	Finalising Problem Tree and working on Solution tree	12 participants	The Problem Tree was further refined and the Solution Tree was drafted. These materials are the bases for the co-creation phase and for the RPA document

In terms of the content, topics for the institutional group included:

- Presenting the framework of the project and the decisions regarding the target group;

- Preparing the institutional stakeholders for collaboration (training on structural violence and restorative practice/language);

- Participants were encouraged to share their vision regarding the possible changes in the course of the project;

- Discussion on and development of a bilateral and a common collaboration protocol regarding the group's involvement in the project;

- Forming a primary (board) and secondary (reflection) stakeholder circle;

- Presenting the process of developing the reflexive policy agenda and the added value of the participatory approach;

- Identifying the most commonly shared problems and lacks the educational institutions are facing in terms of enhancing vulnerable youngsters' access to quality education;

- Roles of each institution in a). developing the policy agenda; b). supporting the youth group in the RPA development process; c). implementation, monitoring.

Working groups

Meeting 6 of the institutional group was done in small working groups. These working groups were set-up with the purpose of analysing the challenges, existing resources, new solutions, and levels of responsibility with regard to the following topics

- Education of children with special educational needs;

- Identifying risk factors for school dropout, prevention, recovery and monitoring;

- Preparing teachers for working with children with a disadvantaged background;

- Working with families for preventing school dropout;

- Institutional cooperation in enhancing access to quality education for youth with disadvantaged backgrounds.

This group work resulted in the elaboration of 5 problem trees and 5 solution trees with specific objectives (see Figure 6.1, 6.2).

Figure 6.1   Example of an institutional problem tree on the professional challenges faced by teachers
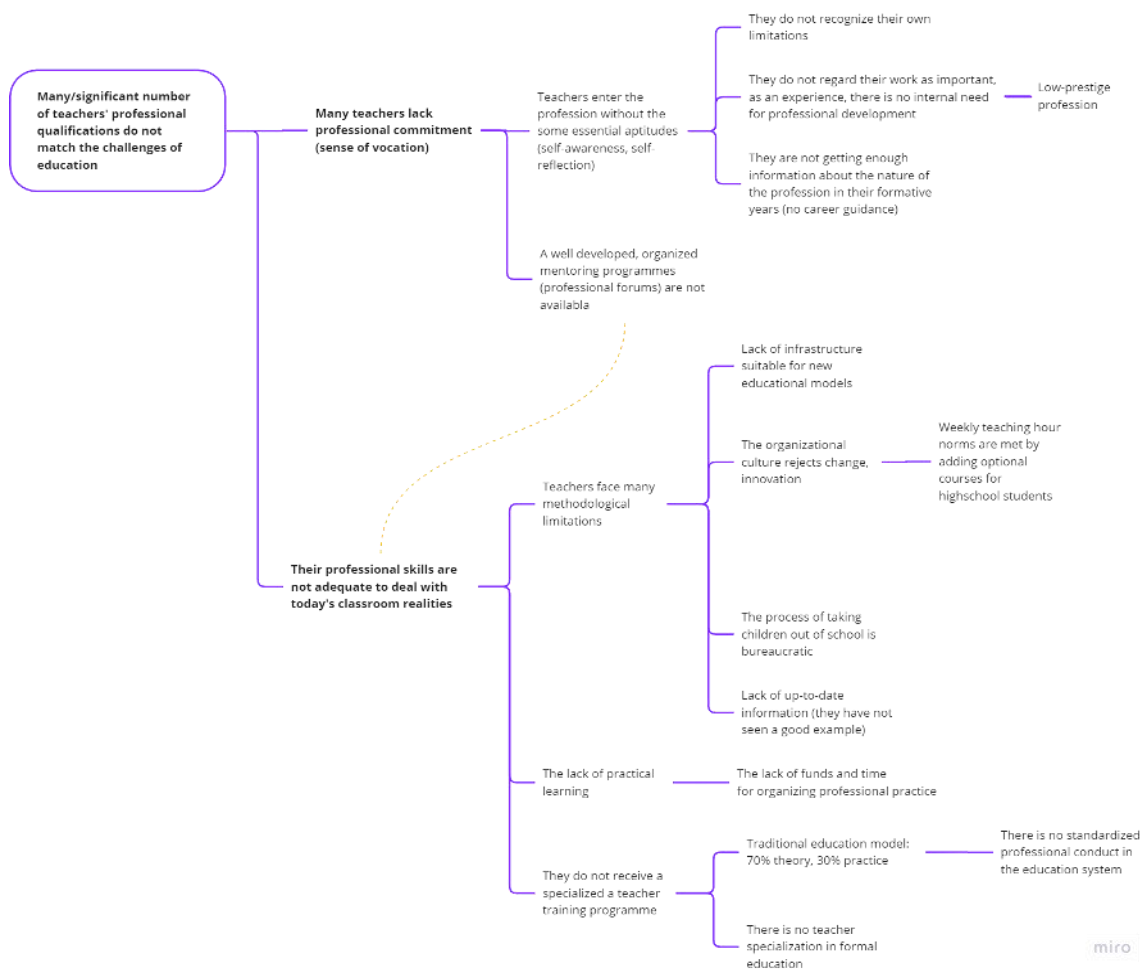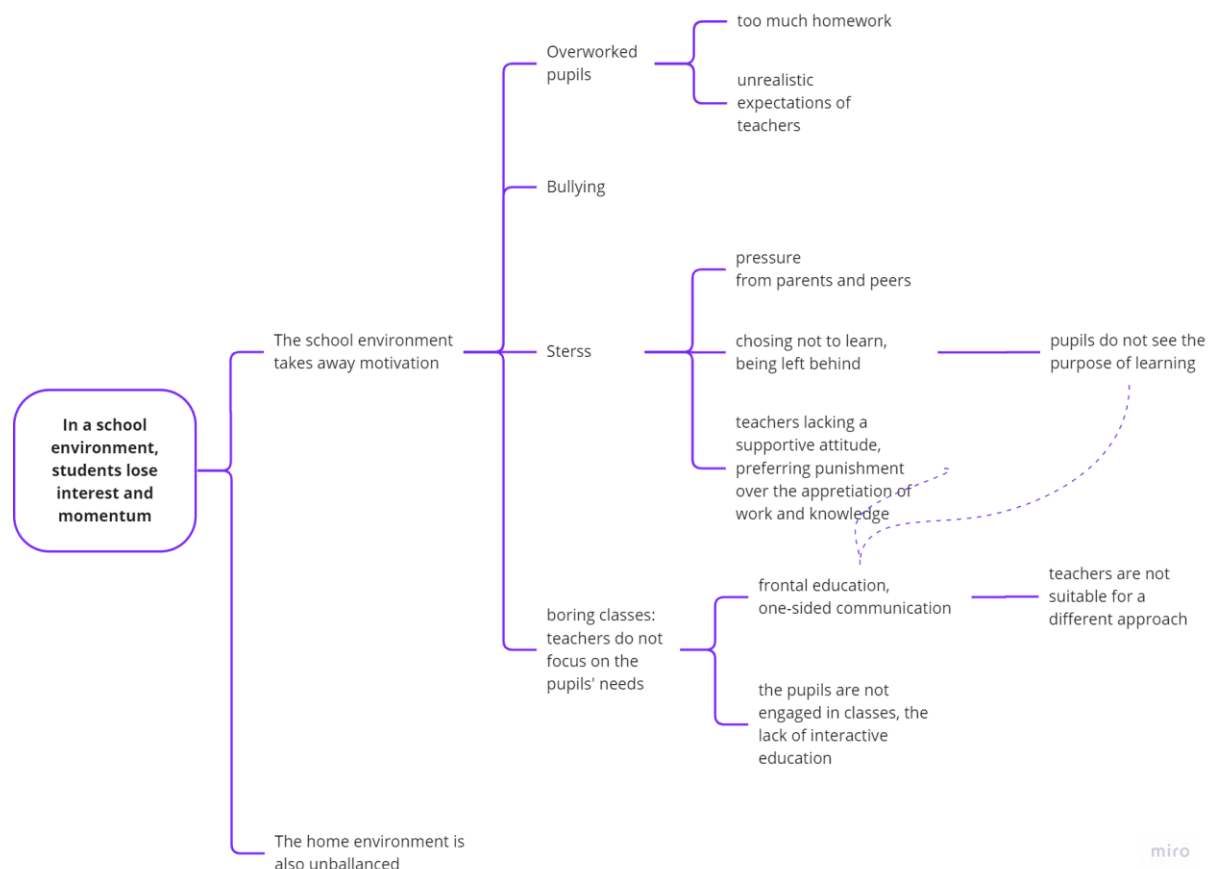
Figure 6.2   Example of a Youth Board problem tree on the lack of motivation of high-school students

6.2.3. Co-creation phase for both groups

In Phase II of the co-creation, the Youth Board and the institutional group worked together on the creation of a Reflexive Policy Agenda. Table 6.3 gives insight into the meetings that were held in this phase.

Table 6.3   Meetings in the co-creation phase

Type of meeting	Date and number of meetings	Purpose of the meeting	Participants	Outcome
Joint group 1	1 (November 2021)	Presentation of the problems identified by the youth group	20 (institutions and youth group representatives)	The work of the youth group was presented to the institutional group.
Joint group 2	1 (March 2022)	Visit at the Youth Bureau and the Mayor's Office: discussing the Youth Board's problem map	10 (2 Municipality, 1 LAG Sepsi, 7 YB)	The Mayor was informed about the biggest problems the vulnerable youngsters face in the schools.
Joint group 3	2 days WS (May 2022)	Working on a common agenda	19 (8 YG representatives, 2 LAG Sepsi, 3 School representatives, 3 institution representatives, 2 YG facilitators, 1 NGO representative)	Based upon the previously identified problem maps, the two groups have started working on common solutions. 4 project proposals were detailed
Joint group 4	1 (12 July 2022)	Follow-up for the May workshop	7 (4 YG representatives, 1 institution representative, 2 LAG Sepsi)	Planned for a follow-up meeting about the projects detailed at the May workshop but due to limited presence of the institutional stakeholder group, the outcome of the meeting was to check the youngsters' relation to the problems identified by the institutional group.
Joint group 5	1 (22 February 2023)	Review and validation of the RPA and the WP3 policy brief	19 (5 YG representatives, 9 institution representatives, 3 LAG Sepsi, 2 Suppedito)	The WP4 implementation partners and youngsters proposed amendments to the content of the RPA and the WP3 policy brief.

6.3. Capacity building and enhancing creativity through-out the co-creation process

6.3.1. Capacity building

In terms of process, preparing the youth group for the co-creation endeavour means supporting the youth in finding their voice, formulating needs and mobilising energy for solutions, through:

- Connection: building trust, creating a safe place, engagement;
- Reflection on visions, values, personal motivation;
- Defining own roles and voice in the process;
- Discussing leadership topics in the group.

As the youth group was composed mostly of high school students, there weren't any frontal teaching methods used. The youth were encouraged to engage in self-reflection and self-expression, which is a new skill, as the Romanian educational system doesn't put much emphasis on the development of these qualities. As many youngsters lacked adequate support in their families and in (formal) schools, raising self-esteem and self-confidence was one of the most important capacity building objectives. For these purposes, a lot of self-development games (such as identifying and expressing one's emotions, attuning with oneself and others, identifying inner strengths and supportive relationships, learning to ask for help etc.) were used as well as collaborative group work. Implicit learning occurred through raising consciousness of one's experiences, finding the support of the group, being mirrored by the group and having the compassionate attention of the adult group leaders.

The capacity building had targeted the whole group and was not restricted to the Youth Board. Topics proposed in the initial Action plan were adjusted to the interest and preparedness of the group. As a consequence, topics like *Developing participants' understanding of the role of youth organisations in voicing concerns and needs of young people and their communities and Developing restorative practice/restorative language in order to improve and repair relationships between people/communities/institutions, repairing harm"* were not touched upon.

Capacity building objectives like *"Developing participants' organisational management competences"* however were addressed through discussing and exercising decision-making, conflict management, empowerment, strategic planning, and advocacy through the group process. Reflecting on democratic leadership and democratic practice was also a topic in group work. Another explicit capacity building activity was the visit to the city hall, meeting the mayor and the vice-mayors and having a meaningful conversation with them.

6.3.2. Enhancing creativity

The Youth group usually worked in small groups during the meeting sessions. At the end of the session, the groups then joined each other and presented the work they have done.

Between meetings, youth group members volunteered to fulfil several tasks by themselves: creating presentation videos about the group (for this purpose they usually gathered at one member's place), making questionnaires etc. The group members were very creative by themselves, the only contribution that was offered was the safety and support of the group leaders and the framework of the project, namely a free space for experimenting and expressing their own ideas.

The materials that the Youth group has created (the problem and solution maps) were used as a basic input for the institutional group, where they were further developed with topics raised by the institutions. None of the input of the youth was "ruled out", but rather the adequate place was found for it (E.g. other kinds of local policies - urban development strategy, youth strategy etc.).

6.4. Interaction between the Youth Board and institutional stakeholders

The first meeting of the two groups was organised in November 2021, after a serious preparation phase on behalf of both parties as described above. This was the first time that the two stakeholder groups had ever met and the meeting's objective was to get to know each other. Moreover, the Youth Board had the opportunity to present the findings of their research among 80 high school students from the city. Based on this research and the work in their group, the YB had elaborated a presentation about the most urgent problems the vulnerable youngsters are facing in the schools.

The meeting was conducted by the Suppedito team including the two social workers that were leading the YB, in order to ensure security and support for the youngsters. Being the first meeting with the institutional group, there was no room for debates, only for presentation and feedback. The importance of the meeting was that this was probably the first time that people working in different institutions related to education, occupation and social welfare for the youngsters of the city, were offered an honest image of the lacks and problems these young people face. Feedbacks showed that many of them were not completely aware of the depth of the everyday experiences of the young people.

In the next phase, common and realistic policy solutions were developed. In this phase the Suppedito and the LAG Sepsi team organised a two-day long workshop outside the city of Sfântu Gheorghe when representatives of the Youth Board and of the institutional stakeholders group worked together for two days in order to come up with realistic and achievable actions that may offer solutions on a long term for at least some of the problems identified by both groups. The major finding of this workshop was that youngsters and institutional workers have a very different perception on the issue of access to quality education, nevertheless the core problems are the same. The organisers had, therefore, a special task of "translating" the point of views and of helping the other group understand the content of the problems identified and also of finding the common base.

Different perspectives about the same problems: By the age of 15-16, youngsters are aware that they are less adequate than their peers from better high schools. The perception is not relevant because the only criterion upon which these differences are made, is their exam score at the end of the eighth grade and the name of the school they are enrolled in. Therefore, when speaking of better access to quality education, they formulate needs like engaging teachers who show interest and understanding towards them, safe environment in school regarding bullying and power abuse, harmonising the school's timetable with the public transportation's timetable so that pupils outside the city can come to school in time and go home before the nights falls. Those having different types of learning difficulties sustain that they would have scored better at the exams if their disorder had been discovered earlier and if they had had a supportive educational environment where their specific needs had been taken into account.

On the other hand, teachers and other professionals from education-related institutions also agree that the current system sorts out all those children who may need a slightly (or very, thereof) different approach but when identifying the causes, the farthest they get is either the County-level School Inspectorate or the Ministry of Education that doesn't let them do their job as they wish to.

The biggest difference between the two approaches is that while institutional workers identify problems on a systemic level with a lower degree of self-reflection, the youngsters identify problems and seek solutions for them on school level.

As a result of the 2 day workshop, a draft local policy document (agenda and action plan) was developed targeting the main areas of intervention necessary to improve the educational situation of the vulnerable youth in Sfântu Gheorghe. The LAG Sepsi team has worked on the action plan and organised a follow-up meeting with both groups. The main objective of this workshop was to verify if the problems and solutions identified on institutional level can be translated into action plans that coincide with the actions proposed by the youngsters at the previous workshop. The result of the workshop was similar to what had been already formulated, namely that problems and solutions tend to overlap although their approach is very different.

6.4.1. Detailed description of the joint co-creation meetings

Because the joint co-creation meetings are such a fundamental element of the Sfântu Gheorge co-creation process, a detailed description of these meetings is provided below.

First joint group meeting, November 2021
This meeting was organised at the stage when the youth had developed their first draft of the problem map. The aim of the meeting was to present it to the representatives of the institutions, which at this stage were still working on their own Problem map.

The institutional group members were asked to listen to the problems listed by the youth, without giving any feedback. The aim of this instruction was to ensure that the institutions will

not try to convince the youth of their point of view or to find solutions at the moment, but to stay open, listen and hold space for the experiences shared by the youth group.

As most of the problems raised by the youth were linked with abuse, discrimination, racism, bullying, neglect, and lack of empathy experienced by the youth in the educational system, the representatives of the institutions were both touched and defensive. Reactions like "there must be good things too, after all the work we've done in the past 30 years, after the Revolution", express reluctance to believe that the problems, based on the youth experiences, are not just exaggerations. The problems identified by the youth were prioritised by the whole group by socio-metrics: each problem identified by the youth group was presented one by one and all the institutional participants were asked to occupy a place in the room according to their level of agreement. So, those who believed that the problem is real, relevant and urgent stood in the first line and those who believed that this is an exaggerated, unrealistic "whining", stood in the fifth line. Everyone else stood in the second, third and fourth line according to their perception of the relevance of the presented problem. We repeated this exercise with all the problems brought up by the youngsters.

The meeting was empowering for the youth, who felt supported by the facilitators, as well as for part of the institutional stakeholders. However, some of the stakeholders were a bit frustrated for not having the possibility to "respond" to the youth, and not being able to express their disagreement.

March, 2022, meetings at the City Hall and Youth Bureau
After the first joint group meeting, LAG Sepsi representatives met twice with the youth group discussing further steps in the co-creation process from their point of view. One of the needs expressed by the youngsters was their lack of knowledge regarding institutional networks. Therefore LAG Sepsi organised a meeting with the Mayor's Office on the 23rd of March which was preceded by a visit to the Youth Bureau, led by the vice-mayor. Participants of the meeting were the youth group, the LAG Sepsi team, the colleagues of the Youth Bureau, the vice-mayor and the mayor. The topics discussed were the problems identified by the youngsters' research, their involvement in the Youth Bureau's field of work and possible solutions for the problems that were encountered. The methods used were free talk and open discussion.

During the Youth Bureau meeting the vice-mayor presented the work of the bureau as well as some projects in which they are looking for initiatives, ideas and volunteers. The YB representatives presented their research and the main problems identified by the research.

The meeting with the mayor was the highlight of the day as this was the first time the youngsters had seen the mayor in person and had the opportunity to talk to him about their future plans in life. The youth group presented the most urgent problems found in their research among 80 pupils city-wide. The mayor responded to the problems by clarifying which ones fall under the competency of his administration and which ones don't. At the end of the

meeting they started to propose projects together (e.g. on the issue of abusive teachers) and the mayor promised to deal with some of the problems presented.

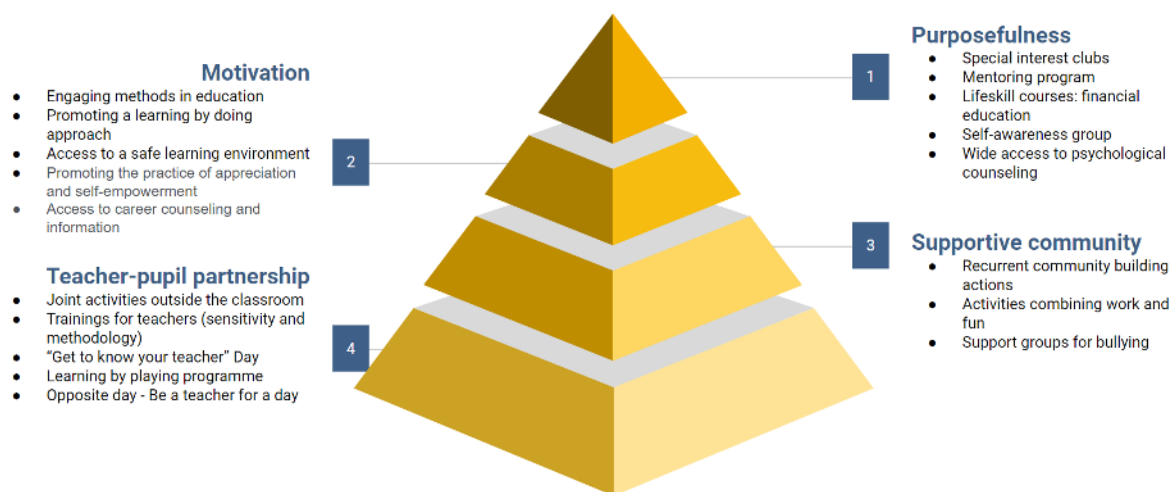*May, 2022, RPA Co-creation workshop at Tusnad city, two days long*
This mini-camp or workshop was the first interactive meeting between the youngsters and the institutional group. The workshop was preceded by a preparation phase for the Youth Board, led by their team leaders in order to strengthen their confidence and to deal with possible fears or restraints if any. Eight members of the YB and seven representatives of the institutional group participated alongside two YB group facilitators and two members of the LAG Sepsi team.

The leaders of the workshop were the two facilitators and the two LAG Sepsi representatives with the following responsibilities: the facilitators led the ice-breaking exercises, the teambuilding games and the evaluation process at the end of the meeting, the LAG Sepsi members led the professional and the content-generating work.

The following methods were used: ice-breaking and getting to know each other, presenting the problems identified by the youngsters and by the institutional group, mapping of the common problems that got the most votes from the participants, creating small working groups based upon the following issues: 1. lack of motivation, 2. teacher-pupil partnership, 3. purposefulness (tools that help define a balanced long term self-vision for vulnerable youth, giving purpose to the act of learning and personal development), 4. supportive community.

Each working group consisted of at least one participant from the YB and one representative from the institutional group and they worked on actions they considered to be useful for partially resolving the identified problems and to be achievable and accessible. These actions and proposals represent the skeleton of the Reflexive Policy Agenda for Sfântu Gheorghe in the field of access of the vulnerable youth to quality education (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. The main objectives and activities proposed for the Reflexive Policy Agenda

Motivation
- Engaging methods in education
- Promoting a learning by doing approach
- Access to a safe learning environment
- Promoting the practice of appreciation and self-empowerment
- Access to career counseling and information

Teacher-pupil partnership
- Joint activities outside the classroom
- Trainings for teachers (sensitivity and methodology)
- "Get to know your teacher" Day
- Learning by playing programme
- Opposite day - Be a teacher for a day

Purposefulness
- Special interest clubs
- Mentoring program
- Lifeskill courses: financial education
- Self-awareness group
- Wide access to psychological counseling

Supportive community
- Recurrent community building actions
- Activities combining work and fun
- Support groups for bullying

The identified solutions were mostly student focused, and aimed at building a solid base for preparing the vulnerable youth for adult life. While the interventions were developed by and for vulnerable youngsters, these represent a much needed shift of priorities for the education system as a whole. In order for the education system to provide the necessary guidance and skillset for a youngster, it is essential to base the teacher-pupil relationship on trust, professionalism and partnership. Some of the activities developed promote extracurricular activities with the teachers, introduce the learning by doing and learning by playing concepts and recognize the need for specialised trainings for the educators. The next layer of support comes from the community: the classmates, fellow colleagues, youngsters of the same age group from different schools and the professional communities of the different specialisations the pupils learn. All the activities related to building these communities and creating meeting opportunities for people with similar interests. By creating a stable environment, supportive relationships both inside and outside the classroom teachers will have an easier job in increasing the youngsters' motivation towards learning, working and seeking career advice. The suggested methods that promote motivation are characterised by openness, engaging class activity, appreciation and the empowerment of the youngsters by the educators. All these aspects contribute to a safe space for personal growth for the youngsters. By providing mentoring programmes, special interest extracurricular activities and counselling to youngsters, their ability and confidence to make purposeful life choices will increase.

July, 2022, Feedback and follow-up on the May workshop, LAG Sepsi offices
This meeting had a different outcome than planned because unfortunately only one institutional representative and four youngsters participated. The date presented the main challenge as many group members were on summer vacation. Given the circumstances, the

LAG Sepsi team transformed this meeting into another type of workshop gathering information essential for the final draft of the RPA.

The dynamics of the May co-creation workshop weren't adequate for discussing in depth the problems and solutions identified in the institutional stakeholder group. In spite of the fact that both the Suppedito and the LAG Sepsi team had a clear vision about the common points of the findings of both groups' work, the cross checking was essential. Therefore, the LAG Sepsi team conducted a discussion about the core problems identified by the institutional group such as the lack of professional staff in schools focusing on integrating pupils with special educational needs, the lack of professional training of teachers in areas such as different educational needs, handling violence and bullying, creating a safe space for personal development, or the lack of partnership between school and parents, school and pupils.

The discussion led to the shaping of these problems due to the inputs the youngsters had on each topic.

February, 2023, Validation of RPA and WP3 Policy brief

The last two joint meetings of the two stakeholder groups were held at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, respectively in May and July 2022, the latter already during the summer vacation. The low presence of the institutional representatives indicated that better timing is needed for productive work, so the next joint meeting was postponed to the autumn of 2022.

However, the new school year brought other hindering circumstances for all three interested parties (WP4 implementation partners: Suppedito and LAG Sepsi had scheduling difficulties programming further meetings, the institutional stakeholder group's engagement was low and the a critical part of the youth board left the city to study or could not participate due to long working hours). Thus by the end of 2022 it has become clear that there won't be another joint meeting about the proposed chapters of the Reflexive Policy Agenda and there won't be a co-writing activity of the document but the two implementation partners will use all the information and data gathered during the co-creation process and the research activities in WP2 and WP3 in order to elaborate the Reflexive Policy Agenda for Sfântu Gheorghe in the field of education.

The first version of this document, alongside with the WP3 Policy brief has been prepared by Suppedito and LAG Sepsi teams by the end of January 2023. Based upon the two partners' experience throughout the co-creation process, the local implementation team's decision has been to first draw up a document in English, then to summarise it in Hungarian and Romanian and present it to the two stakeholder groups for review and feedback.

The next and probably the last joint meeting in the framework of the co-creation process was held on the 22nd of February 2023 during a day-long workshop and debate. Prior to the event, chapter 8 of the RPA and the WP3 Policy Brief were sent via email to all stakeholders in Hungarian and in Romanian in order to ensure full access to the content and to offer enough

time for reviewing them and preparing for the feedback discussion. The meeting had several objectives:

- To present both stakeholder groups the structure that has been chosen in order to organise all data and information gathered from them.
- To present the structured approach of the common problems expressed from different perspectives.
- To present from a top-down perspective the global map of problems identified in the local education system with special regard to the access of vulnerable young people to quality education, starting from the structural problems of the national system down to the locally researched lacks and needs expressed by the stakeholders.
- To present the set of proposals both on policy level and on action level that should or could be undertaken by the stakeholder groups.
- To verify if all the information coming up during the co-creation process can be found in the documents and also if the main ideas strengthened are the same with the stakeholders' main interests.
- To present the action plan for the following 5 months of the Uplift project and also the sustainability plan for the local policies.
- To engage participants in taking up actions from the action plan as implementers in their field of work.
- To present the plans for the local and national conference on Uplift findings in the field of education and to engage them into co-organising the events.
- To make amendments of the RPA and eventually of the WP3 Policy brief based upon the comments, feedback, suggestions and opinions.
- To gain validation for the final version of the RPA and of the WP3 Policy brief having in mind that both documents, but mostly the Policy brief is to be presented to local decision makers in order to start policy making in the field of education.

There were 19 participants joining the workshop, 5 of them on behalf of the Youth Board, 9 representatives of public and private institutions (Municipality, schools, Child Protection Service, Directorate of Social Services and NGOs) and 5 members of the Sepsi LAG and Suppedito teams. After the greetings, the Sepsi LAG members presented the Policy Brief's key findings and the priority structure of the RPA. The second big activity of the group was to form smaller working groups (1 of the young people and 2 of the institutional representatives) who received the printed version of the RPA chapter 8 and had the task to talk over the six priorities and the actions proposed under each priority. Coming back to the big circle, all working groups had to present their observations, feedback and comments on the proposed priorities. The Sepsi LAG team made notices and all amendments were integrated into the present document. The second round of feedback focused on the co-creation process they had been part of since the beginning of the project. The most important feedback regarding the process were the following:

- participants would have needed a stronger cooperation between the two groups, they would have liked to meet sooner
- a deeper understanding of how institutions work, what are the inner processes, especially in the context of elaborating or validating a strategic document, would have been welcome by the participants
- there was a tangible fluctuation of participation on behalf of the institutional group, participants think that it would have been better if the same persons, preferably on management level had been more active
- more participants from the same institutions would have been beneficial, in order to have a larger institutional impact
- it would be a great idea for a next, similar project to involve employers and parents
- everyone is concerned about the follow-up of this work, institutions as well, but youngsters expressed unanimously their need to participate in such creative process in the future
- the need for building similar processes in (regular) institutional functioning was expressed
- institutional workshops may have been more activity and game based, like it was in the young people's group.

The workshop continued with the presentation of a Hungarian company that has developed a set of IT based games for schools that can use these games in extracurricular activities as a method that enhances creativity, imagination, group work and co-creation.

After this short presentation, the organisers continued the joint workshop with a new activity regarding the action plan of the 6 priorities of the RPA. There have been 6 places set in the room, all bearing the name of the priority and marked with different colours. Participants were asked to propose actions under the priority they are most interested in but the actions they propose to be relevant, realistic, achievable and assumed by the participants. This activity lasted for 30 minutes and the results were presented by a sociometrics: at each priority stood up all those who proposed an action for that priority and presented their action. At the end of the activity the implementation partners got a new set of actions as well as some clarifications of the existing ones. These recommendations are built in the present document.

The final round of the workshop was a feedback round of the whole day's activities.

6.5. Role of the Youth Board in the implementation and evaluation process

Due to the specificity of the Youth Board, namely that the group is formed largely by high school students, the members will change by the end of the process. The next challenge, until finalising the project, is to recruit new members who can overtake the process and enter in the implementation phase. The implementation phase is planned to be piloted by a few small

actions carried out by the youth, with the involvement and support from some of the stakeholders:

- One possibility is to involve the Áron Berde Vocational School in a more active way to host and facilitate the Youth Group during the implementation period of the pilot projects and beyond if a strong ownership is established.
- Another possibility is to create strong linkages with the Youth Parliament project   of the Municipality, which launches in the spring of 2023. This action could focus on building the capacity of the local Youth Bureau and the Youth Parliament by actively involving youth with marginalised backgrounds (using local resources for training e.g.).
- The Youth Development Strategy of the Municipality is in the making and will be finalised in the first half of 2023. The conclusions and the action plan of the co-creation process and the RPA may be included in the strategy.
- The Municipality's Local Development Plan was published for public consultation in July 2022 and will be debated in the City Council. The Plan has a separate priority axis (field of Intervention) dedicated to desegregation of the school system. The Youth Board can be involved in the further shaping of the concrete action plan regarding this field of Intervention, and also in the implementation of certain actions.
- Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan for 2023 as well as the upcoming financial period of the Structural Funds have a separated development branch for education, focusing mostly on reducing early drop-outs. Three of the segregated schools of Sfântu Gheorghe are already involved in the direct financial mechanisms but there will also be funding for piloting inclusive schools nationwide. One possible role of the Youth Board - reflected in the RPA - is to actively participate in shaping such pilot schools.

6.6. Ethics requirements

The UPLIFT ethical requirements were fulfilled by the following actions:

- Using the consent forms for participating in the project, signed by parents in case of minors;
- Using special consent forms for participating in the youth camp;
- Keeping confidentiality in relation to school teachers and other persons.

6.7. Risk management: influence of the Corona crisis

The COVID crisis has affected the process mostly on the stakeholder level. Face-to-face meetings with the youth were held on a regular basis in 2021 and 2022 as the regulations allowed face-to-face after school activities and one of the schools was able to host the meetings. The Youth camp had to be cancelled once and reorganised due to the COVID situation. The institutional meetings were more difficult to organise. The institutions were overwhelmed by the COVID crisis, as the regular activities had to be reorganised, which required extra management capacity on their behalf.

7 Evaluation of the co-creation process

7.1 Evaluation methods

The process hasn't been evaluated yet with the stakeholders. A focus group is planned to be organised after the process finishes in the first semester of 2023. Evaluation forms were sent to the stakeholders and to the youth groups, but only a few forms were completed. The lessons learned presented below are the results of the analysis of the process carried out by the research partner and the implementing partner.

7.2 Lessons learnt

7.2.1 Preparing the co-creation process

Problem statement
The Urban Report of Sfântu Gheorghe (Urban Report Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania, 2022) and other national analyses show that in Romania there is a large gap between the objectives of national policies and the results of putting them into practice. This is partly due to insufficient financial resources. On the other hand, the funded national programmes do not deliver the expected results either. The process of developing the RPA also sets out to examine this gap, which means that the aim was not only to have a policy agenda that addressed local needs, but also to look at the obstacles that lead to the local failure of national strategies. Thus, in order to improve school participation and success for youth with marginalised backgrounds the process of developing an RPA also seeks to answer some questions linked to the above mentioned situation.

At the first stage of the process the institutional stakeholders were addressed through putting these questions in the focus:

- What are policy gaps that hinder putting national policies into practice at the local level?

- What are the institutional gaps (processes that are missing) that hinder putting national policies into practice at the local level?

- What changes are needed on policy and institutional level to overcome these gaps?

- What kind of support institutions need for these changes to happen?

The institutional group initially found it difficult to grasp the purpose of the process to which they were invited. As the framework and theme proposal was deliberately general, in order to minimise directing the content, the first meetings were devoted to defining the purpose of the process and their role in it. Identifying the local policy level throughout the process was a challenge for the group. The levels of analysis, as well as the proposals for solutions, oscillated between national, local policy and institutional or even professionals ' levels.

Engaging institutional stakeholders

Engaging the relevant public institutional stakeholders was a success due to the institutional relationships of the implementing partner. As the president of the implementing partner is one of the vice-mayors of the city, the invitation to participate in the process was perceived as part of the institutional duty.

However, in order to carry out the kind of institutional analysis this approach requires, on the one hand, a high degree of openness and motivation is needed on the part of the management. On the other hand, it requires mandate and trust in the process on behalf of the participants to be able to work on institutional changes. During the work process we encountered several challenges in this regard.

Fluctuating participation of some of the members, partly due to the work overload but also due to low engagement and constant questioning of the purposefulness of the process.

The absence or fluctuating participation of some important NGOs can be attributed to the same reason. On the other hand, the open-ended process was unfamiliar to the participants, who are usually used to a faster, problem-solving approach. They found the analysis and listening to each other's ideas interesting and inspiring, but still too time-consuming. Despite the financial and legislative commitment of the municipality, there have been difficulties in building ownership of the process, due to low institutional decision-making power of some of the participants and lack of resources on the management side. Also, previous project experiences have an unforeseeable impact on the quality of work and on the trust in the process, in our case there was a considerable fatigue regarding European projects and the trust in the efficiency of these projects were very low. The lack of hope that structural problems will or can be resolved is a major obstacle in the process and also led to a high level of skepticism regarding the usefulness of the RPA.

The external position of the facilitators could also have contributed to the dynamics mentioned above. However, the stakeholder group had a constant positive, nurturing attitude towards youth participation and expressed the need to deal with the problems of the education system on a local level. The cross-sectoral composition of the group allowed know-how transfer between different institutional actors. There was an active, engaging attitude to the analysing process, but a less proactive attitude when it came to action (initiating change).

Setting up the institutional group as an open group is an option, inviting local experts from the same institutions represented at managerial level to the thematic meetings could have increased engagement and showcased existing resources.

Setting clear goals

Goals were supposed to be set by the group itself, within the frame of the problem statement. The intention of the facilitators was to leave space for the group to create its own goals and structure the process, in order to mitigate the power imbalance linked with the complex

position they were in: special expert, outsider, academic researcher, only ones being paid, etc. A healthy group process leads to clarifying rules, roles and tasks in the group (norming phase)

Organising the process
Organization of the process was not made by the facilitators but by the local implementing partner. Organising the meetings is also an organic part of the process which enhances relationships, gives the possibility between meetings to get more feedback and understanding about issues related to the engagement, possible disappointments, discomfort etc. of the participants. This possibility was missed by the facilitators.

During the preparation phase it became evident that both stakeholders groups needed a certain amount of time to get familiar with this new approach the UPLIFT project is proposing. Youngsters needed security and a safe space where they can develop, emancipate and find their voice. Institutional representatives also needed a safe space where they could express the difficulties they face but more importantly, they needed time to adjust to a new working method in contrast to their workflow consisting of a task list that should be resolved by a deadline, presented in a given format and only concerning data they have access to. A working method that focuses on their personal experiences as professionals and on their ideas and initiatives that may have had no room to evolve in their institutional organisational culture was perceived as novelty with some degree of scepticism. This approach seemed to be confusing at first because the everyday work of this stakeholder group is based upon a different methodology so the preparation phase served as a learning process of the co-creation principle.

7.2.2 Setting up a Youth Board

Recruitment
The recruitment of the youth group was quite a long process, trying to reach out for a group with a diverse vulnerability background. Due to the limited resources of the project, it was clear that we could not approach the most vulnerable groups in the municipality as identified in WP3: members of the segregated Roma settlement who were not enrolled in school or dropped out early, youth from the social housing units who are in the same situation. However, youth from the child protection system were invited to take part (one of these youngsters joined the group later, two others only joined the youth camp and participated in the co-creation work with the institutions).

Heterogeneity, inclusiveness, gender sensitivity of the group
Handling heterogeneity of the group was a constant issue and awareness paid to inclusiveness inside of the group (attention to differences and similarities of experiences and interests) led to a good cohesion. The topic of inclusiveness also appeared as a transversal theme of the problem analysis and goal setting of the RPA. So, while successfully addressing heterogeneity and inclusiveness inside of the group, this topic also became an important feature of the material the group created, emerging from the personal experience of the group members.

Gender sensitivity was part of the same process and as a result, some gender specific problems were identified by the group.

7.2.3 Defining a research approach

Capacity building of the institutional stakeholders was more an implicit process and not an openly assumed goal. The reason for this was the position of the facilitators, who were not supposed to operate with surplus power in the group. Facilitator and trainer are two distinct roles and it was considered better not to have them overlap.

Capacity building and enhancing creativity of the youth board took place through the methods used. Playing group~~personal~~ development games, encouraging self-expression and proactivity, sharing, and reflecting on each other were at the basis of the group work with the youth.

Interactions between the Youth Board and the institutions were well prepared on both sides: enhancing the listening capacity of the institutional stakeholders and enhancing the capacity to raise their voice for the youth.

More meetings would have been beneficial for both of the groups, but particularly so for the institutional group. Processing the experiences of the common meetings, and drawing conclusions, was not a distinct part of the process of the institutional group, contrary to the youth group. The role of the youth board in policy implementation and evaluation is not clear yet, as the process is not in this phase yet.

7.2.4 Towards a Reflexive Policy Agenda

The elaboration of the RPA process had three units when we focus on the content:

- Problem analysis in parallel with the two groups;
- Formulating solutions in parallel;
- Finally formulating solutions jointly (co-creation).

Problem analysis was the main topic during the preparatory phase of the process. As in Romania system analysis is not part of the normal practice of either policy formulation or policy evaluation (it is usually done in a superficial way), but professionals have a great insight into their own field, carrying out this process in a cross-sectoral context has been of great benefit to the whole group of stakeholders.

As the youth group had more intensive work, the needs of vulnerable young people and their difficulties (represented or not represented in the group) in different areas was prepared and presented to the institutional group first. At the next institutional meeting a problem map was elaborated and transformed into a problem tree and a solution tree but without reflecting on the youth group's work. At this stage informal meetings would have been useful, to strengthen relationships between the two groups.

In the next phase, during the joint co-creation meeting the work was focused on the youth group's problem map, and the institutional group engaged itself to transform this into solutions together with the youth. As the power balance was not equal between the two stakeholder groups: institutional representatives functioned more like supporters for the youngsters in developing their ideas than to actively participate in elaborating actions that represent both groups' agenda. The perspectives of the groups were very different: institutional representatives have a broader perspective on structural problems but have little knowledge about the youngsters' everyday experiences, the young group have a keen knowledge of specific problems but have little understanding of the bigger picture and of the structural shortcomings of the system.

The problem areas of the two groups overlapped significantly, but more work would be needed to explicitly integrate the two perspectives into a common agenda. Due to time constraints, this work has been done by the implementing partner and the integrated document was presented and discussed at the next joint group meeting in February 2023.

8 A Reflexive Policy Agenda

8.1 Towards a Reflexive Policy Agenda

The co-creation process started in 2020 on three different levels: creating the youth group, enrolling the institutional representatives and conducting the research. In spite of the fact that all three target groups were informed about the objectives and purposes of the project, it was only by mid-2021 that each participant showed evidence of truly understanding the process they are engaged in. This wasn't unexpected taking into consideration both the complexity of the project and the innovative approach of identifying problems and solutions.

As seen in Chapter 6, for 17 months, the two stakeholder groups worked in parallel. This was important because the organisers need to create a safe space for both groups in which they can honestly reflect upon their experiences in the field of education. Another important issue was that in the first phase both groups, but especially the institutional group, operated only on "safe terms", meaning that they presented and told only those opinions they wouldn't mind seeing in the printed press. A general problem identified by the implementation team at the beginning of the stakeholder meetings was that the representatives of institutions, schools and NGOs have little or no faith in this project and they cannot tell the difference between the UPLIFT initiative and any other EU funded project they have participated in. It was obvious that they considered this project as one just another document-making project that will lead to no change in their working environment.

This was the second important finding of the co-creation process: all parties interested at any level in the Romanian public education system, are very disappointed in this system and expect a solution from someone else, some distant power. Therefore, one of the biggest achievements of the co-creation process is that by the end of it, the institutional group members started to think about their own role in changing the system. A great boost in this sense was the first meeting with the youth group where they witnessed the seriousness of the work done by those who are their job's primary beneficiaries.

8.2 Reflexive Policy Agenda for the field of education

Vision: Desegregation of education: deconstructing quality differences between schools

The main objective of the Sfântu Gheorghe Reflexive Policy Agenda is to enhance the access of vulnerable children and youngsters to quality education. This objective is based upon two parallel sets of actions: first, reducing the differences between schools (at any level) in the city and second, assuring that all children from Sfântu Gheorghe are enrolled and kept in the educational system until at least 10th grade. This objective is a long term vision as it needs at least two generations of parents changing attitudes and mentality and a pool of very engaged policy makers in the local public administration.

The Sfântu Gheorghe Reflexive Policy Agenda (RPA) (see also Figure 9.1) outlines the frame of this long term vision by formulating a set of priorities and concrete actions that can represent the foundation of this vision. The RPA is based upon the findings of the UPLIFT project and especially upon the work of the two stakeholders ' groups work throughout 18 months, strengthened by the findings of the urban and case study reports, realised in the framework of the WP2 and WP3 activities of the same project.

Figure 8.1. Key areas of the Reflexive Policy Agenda
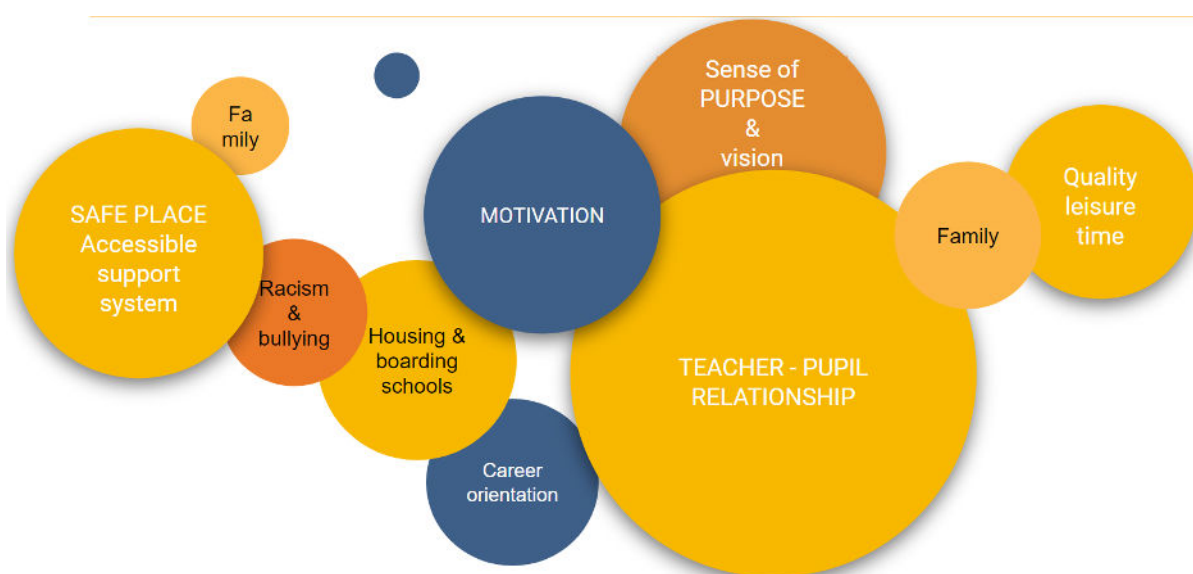
Specific objectives and action plan

Priority no. 1: Development of auxiliary school infrastructure: dormitories, cafeteria, transportation

What: Renovation and/or building of kindergartens and schools all over the city with the following minimum requirements: access for people with impaired mobility, cafeteria, or harmonising the cafetrias' programme if not in the same school as the dormitory, free or subsidised meals, dormitory with constant hot water running, large classrooms with enough space for all pupils and with natural light   gym and outer sport facilities, including green spaces, laboratories where needed, teachers' common room, proper IT equipment in all (class)rooms of the schools, creating spaces inside the school for afterschool activities. Development of local public transportation focusing on the school programme of those pupils who travel on a daily basis from a nearby village to Sfântu Gheorghe and back, initiating a

special transportation pass for pupils or other alternative methods like online network of families that come from the same villages to Sfântu Gheorghe every day

Why: The infrastructural equipment of schools and kindergartens in the city varies on a large scale so, among many other reasons, this is one of those issues that influences the (resourceful) parents' decision when picking a school for their child. Bringing all educational institutions on the same level of equipment, may open the parents' interest towards other schools than the three best rated ones in the city.

Who: The Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, the County-level School Inspectorate, the headmasters of the schools and the pupils' organisations with special reference to the UPLIFT Youth Board.

How: Initialising on Municipality level a 5-year school rehabilitation programme targeting in the first phase the most neglected schools. Partners in planning: schools, County-   level School Inspectorate, Youth Board, pupils' organisations, NGOs.

When: 2023-2028

Priority no. 2: Strengthening the triangle of cooperation: school-parent-pupil

What: Moving towards a partnership-like relationship between teachers and pupils. Joint activities outside the classroom, setting up visiting hours for form masters and teachers. This can be done by organising different types of activities like:

- Trainings for teachers (sensitivity and methodology);
- "Get to know your teacher" Day;
- Learning by playing programme;
- Reversed role day - Be a teacher for a day.
- Special exercises in the classroom that the children can play with their parents at home (Strengthening relationship between pupils and parents)

What: Moving towards a partnership-like relationship between teachers and parents in order to better involve the parents into the educational programme of their children   .

- Creating a closer relationship with family support services, like social services (e.g. involving the Child Protection Service in extracurricular group activities for supporting school staff and families);
- Training for teachers in the field of children's rights, with special focus on abuse and neglect, developing the local institutional framework   (referral, secondary and tertiary prevention)   ;
- Family visits;
- Organising school days together with the families around certain topics for building positive relationships.
- Creating a constructive relationship with parents where they get advice from professionals regarding handling situations with their children.

- Bringing in an outsider professional team which supports the school in community development and providing quality education based on an assessment and development plan. (e.g. setting up the value set of the school which is commonly shared by all teachers and equally transmitted to pupils and parents, creating integrated and interdisciplinary weeks or modules where all teachers harmonise their subject matters in order to help pupils get a holistic view of what they learn)
- Involving parents in school life, supporting volunteering (e.g. supervising activities during afterschool programmes)

Why: Important feedback received mostly from the institutional stakeholder group but also sustained by the youngsters' group was that pupils live parallel lives in their homes and in the school. In high-schools, the regularity of parent meetings are up to the form master's own decision   and the most common topic of these   meetings are the pupils' grades. Family visits - mandatory 30 years ago in elementary schools - have vanished from the system, and it is not uncommon for low rated schools that the educators don't know their pupils' parents or legal guardians. On behalf of the teachers, one of the biggest problems is that they cannot outreach to parents whose children have disciplinary problems, or when the school should strongly cooperate with the parent to solve a situation. Therefore, it is proposed to implement a systematic change in the teacher-parent-pupil relationship that serves for a long term the benefit of all three parties, but mostly that of the children.

Who: Initiatives should come on behalf of the schools, helped by the Inspectorate and the Municipality and also from the Pupils' Councils and the Youth Board. Activities that aim the strengthening of the teacher-pupil relationship by introducing elements that may fall outside the framework of the classroom may be initiated by the youngsters with the support of the school staff.

How: These interventions will be carried out mostly by the schools and the pupils themselves. The Youth Board can take on actions regarding the involvement of pupils' councils or any other organisations that are created on the pupils' level in the schools, starting from the 7th grade up to the 12th grade. For pupils younger than this, initiatives must come from the school staff based upon a consultation with the pupils. In terms of support there is some money needed, however not that much, and much advice from different stakeholders. A city-level programme, sustained by the C   ounty-level School Inspectorate may also be considered as a support as many teachers see clearly the problem and the need, but they are so burdened with other requirements of the system that they won't initiate extra work for themselves. The implication of the Directorate of Social Services and the Child protection service is also important as they can offer professional assistance in handling those cases and families which go beyond the teachers' expertise.

When: These activities should start immediately until they become a general working method of the schools. Activities initiated by the pupils can be regular events with 3-4 occurrences in one school year.

Priority no. 3: Getting the schools ready for handling violence in school

What: Training programmes for teachers on how to handle violence in schools, especially with the help of the social service providers, including the Child Protection Service. Setting up of self-awareness groups in schools. Assuring wide access to psychological counselling in every school. Building restorative schools (using restorative practices for community development and conflict resolution). At the same time, a powerful campaign is proposed that deconstructs the prejudices people have against psychologists and social services and those pupils who visit them. Other concrete proposals:

- Sensitivity trainings for teachers, including methods of teaching acceptance in the framework of their subject matter.
- Sensitivity trainings for teachers addressing racism and creating safe environment.
- Enroling schools in the "Hero school programme", based upon a Hungarian modell that encourages cooperation,empathy, listening to each other and working together by developing a personalised activity portfolio with the guidance of an independent mentor.
- Creating brochures, flyers and other information materials for schools regarding handling violence and otherness in schools.
- Inspirational talks by recovered drug addicts, anti-bullying, anti-racism advocates.

Why: The problem of bullying and the feeling of being let alone was the leading topic of the Youth Board's research, conducted among 80 fellow pupils all across the city. Results show that being bullied or being helpless in the face of a violent action or scene in the school is a commonly shared experience of pupils regardless of the "rating" or reputation of their school. When presenting these results to the institutional stakeholders' group, it became clear that teachers and other staff of the educational system were not conscious about the extent of this problem or the effect it has upon children. Therefore, the Reflexive Policy Agenda urges schools and the Municipality to take this issue seriously and initiate a city-wide training programme for all teachers regarding the methods of handling violence and bullying in schools, bringing up also the topic of racism in schools. The RPA also urges schools to set up self-awareness groups and supporting groups for all students regardless of their status as perpetrators or victims.

Who: Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, County -level School Inspectorate, schools, Child Protection Services, Directorate of Social Services, Youth Board, Educational Resource Center.

How: Training for teachers should start in the 2023-2024 school year in the framework of a city programme where the municipality covers the expenses of the courses. In a rotation system, all teachers of the city shall participate in at least one of these courses. Meanwhile schools set up supporting groups with the help of their school psychologists, if there are any. In those schools where there is a lack of support professionals, the Inspectorate and the Resource Cent er shall ask for more positions from the Ministry of Education and if it's not

possible then the Municipality shall find the resources to cover these activities. The Youth Board, throughout its network, with the help of the Youth Bureau shall work with pupils' eventual reserve in participating in such groups. With the help of external professionals, schools shall organise self-awareness groups open to everyone interested but not mandatory.

When: In the 2023-2024 school year with a preparation period between February - September 2023.

Priority no. 4: Assuring aiding personal in education (supporting teacher, school mediators, developing teachers, logopedists, school counsellor)

What: This is a policy proposal on the national level based upon the fact that most of the schools at country-level lack auxiliary professionals, those experts in education that don't teach a given subject but help pupils and teachers as well to improve the act of teaching. On city level the action that is proposed by the Reflexive Policy Agenda is to create a pool of educational experts that can be externalised to the schools in the city.

Other indirect, complementary initiatives:

- Capacity development of individual schools by provinding external support for the board of educators in developing a common instututional vision, values and a methodological threshold .
- Promoting access and informing pupils and their parents about available support provided by existing personnel (e.g. School Cunsellor's Day).
- Extending the network of professional practice schools for future educators to also include schools attended by pupils with special education needs or attention deficit.

Why: The Romanian school system is constructed upon a frontal teaching method with a lexical knowledge-based approach, which is evaluated two times in the pupils' lives. These evaluations, and in particular the one at the end of the 8th grade, has a major impact on the children's lives, that is how it is decided where they continue their education. The taught subject matter is bigger than a pupil can learn without family support or otherwise. As a consequence, children coming from families with low education or working in two or three shifts have almost no chance of learning the whole material needed for the exams and for their benefit in life. Auxiliary professionals have the role of helping children to get along with the material but there is a lack of such professionals and teachers of classes of 25-30 pupils each don't have the possibility to pay the necessary attention to all children.

At the same time, as proposed in Priority nr. 3, teachers should be prepared to handle sensitive information about their pupils in the terms of trust and confidence. Young people expressed their need of being taken seriously by those whose responsibility is to listen to them and to help them, even if the help means that they send the advice-seekers to another expert.

Who: Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, County-level School Inspectorate, Educational Resource Center, local branch of Romanian Psychologists' Collegium, universities.

How: This initiative may go beyond the framework of the present RPA in the sense that ensuring missing auxiliary personnel in schools is based upon the Ministry's decision, on the request of the County School Inspectorate. However, as this method rarely ends with satisfactory results, the Municipality together with other relevant institutions must find local solutions to this urgent problem. The RPA proposes the creation of an expert pool of all the auxiliary professionals that are needed in school in order to assure coverage of the assessed needs of the pupils in their learning activities.

When: Being a long term intervention, it should start in the 2023-2024 school year with a preparation period in the year of 2023.

Priority no. 5: Creating a supporting environment in all schools

What*:* Initiating actions that help both pupils and teachers feel better in school and thus enhances the learning and teaching process.

- Strengthening the motivation of pupils and eventually of teachers in the school, by:
  - Engaging new methods in education;
  - Promoting a learning by doing approach;
  - Access to a safe learning environment;
  - Promoting the practice of appreciation and self-empowerment;
  - Access to career counselling and information.
- Giving purpose to the act of learning and of teaching, by:
  - Special interest clubs;
  - Mentoring program;
  - Life skill courses: financial education   ;
  - Thematic activities for pupils and adapted classes on specific topics (e.g. national celebration days, global warming).
- Creating supportive communities in schools, by:
  - Recurrent community building actions;
  - Activities combining work and fun;
  - Creating of green spaces around the school together with the pupils;
  - Conflict management courses and trainings for teachers;
  - Creating the proper, pleasant environment for keeping the pupils (youth from more disadvantaged family backgrounds) in the school for as long as possible;
  - Elaborating common methods of teaching, organising interdisciplinary thematic teaching weeks within a school.

Why: During the first and most comprehensive common workshop between the two stakeholders' group, it turned out that one major and not easily recognised problem on the pupils' level is that they lose interest in school, education, teachers and adults in general by the age of 13. By the time they get into high-school, they forget what are the benefits of learning, and what is the meaning of being in school. School can sometimes represent a hostile

environment for them where they question even the role of teachers besides making them feel stupid or worthless. The workshop also brought to the surface that the Youth Board sees its role mostly in this priority where they have ideas of how to engage youngsters into the school life and into learning. Their clearly formulated need was for schools to be safe spaces where children are encouraged to gain knowledge and experience with the help of the teachers.

Who: Youth Board, Pupils' Council, schools

How: These interventions mainly consist of specific actions that serve the increase of engagement of pupils in the school's life. Club activities, practical classes, useful knowledge for everyday life, especially in vocational schools, and organising events for pupils are those ideas that came up during the workshop on behalf of the Youth Board. These activities should be organised on a regular basis, every month or in every teaching module (5/school year) with the help of the teachers and other school personnel.

When: These interventions should take place starting with the current school year and last for more years, assuring in the same time knowledge transfer from one generation to the next.

Priority no. 6: Enhancing inter-institutional cooperation/networking
This priority is also a larger one that serves the local reform of the education system and contributes to a better access of vulnerable children to quality education. It aims for better cooperation between all those institutions that are directly or indirectly connected to education and youngsters in order to get a better picture of the current status and of the possible development of education in Sfântu Gheorghe.

What: It is proposed to set up an educational working group on city level that contains representatives of schools, the Municipality, social services, representatives of the Youth Board, County-level School Inspectorate, Educational Resource Cent   er, legal councillors, Youth Bureau, NGOs, labour force agency. The working group shall have meetings at least once in every month in order to discuss the most urgent problems of the local educational system and to elaborate an intervention strategy for the upcoming years. The most important role of this group is to find local and alternative answers to some of the problems that are nationwide but which can be solved locally if there is enough political engagement. Some of the problems have no local solution as they are strongly connected to the national educational policy (or the lack of it), but there are also issues that should be the responsibility of the ministry but in the lack of nationwide solutions, we should seek for local alternatives. The Youth Board may also have an important role in making promotion materials on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook about the benefits of such a co-creation and also to recruit new members in the upcoming processes.

Why: As stated in the problem statements of the institutional stakeholders' group, there is very little to no relationship or cooperation between educational institutions and other stakeholders that are indirectly involved in the educational process. These are parallel universes that rarely meet although they have the same target group. Schools are burdened

with a large variety of administrative work so they don't want to start another new project. NGOs think they understand the educational system and come up with projects but don't have a proper understanding of how schools work. County level institutions are in direct relationship with the Ministry, therefore they are interested in making everyone respect another new regulation. Youth Boards, Youth Bureau see only a certain slice of the big picture and want everyone to change in order to make the children feel better. The Municipality wants to be able to have a positive image of how they organise the school system in the city and spends a certain amount of money on education but they expect schools to keep their problems inside and solve them there. Parents want their children to get good results on national evaluations and teachers want parents to help their children to learn and to get good results on national evaluations.

The co-creation process proved that these parallel universes don't understand each other's working method, don't understand the system they work in, don't know the relevant laws and regulations and are so disappointed that they wait for someone else to solve all the problems.

Therefore, the RPA proposes a follow-up of the co-creation process as a method extended to all relevant local actors in order to empower these actors to act for their and for the children's benefit.

Who: Municipality, social services, representatives of the Youth Board, County-level School Inspectorate, Educational Resource Cent er, legal councillors, Youth Bureau, NGOs, Labour Force Agency.

How: the initiative should come on behalf of the Municipality, in accordance with its objective regarding the desegregation of education on city level, also stated in the new Local Development Plan, Priority no. 13 "Equality of opportunity". The educational working group has regular meetings once in each month and it has two major objectives: 1. to plan the implementation of the objectives formulated in the Local Development Strategy regarding equality of opportunities in schools, and 2. to initiate programmes and activities that enhance the better access of vulnerable children and youngsters to quality education.

When: 2023 - 2030

8.3 Policy agenda to give the youth a permanent voice in policy-making

The continuation of the Youth Board and the process of reflexive policy making can be achieved by integrating the process, the participants and the findings of the UPLIFT project into the youth and educational policy making process of the city. The Youth Bureau of Sfântu Gheorghe, initiated and run by the vice-mayor, has a major role in this process, supported by LAG Sepsi. On the request of the Youth Bureau, a group of external experts is working now on the city's Youth Development Strategy, while the Local Development Plan is on public consultation. Both documents pay special attention to education and the involvement of

youngsters in the policy making process with special regards to those young people who come from vulnerable environments and have lower access to public resources.

In order to give the Youth Board a sustainable future, the following actions are proposed.

1. What: involving the Youth Board into the Youth Bureau's work.

Why: the UPLIFT Youth Board has been created and developed in a safe space with little connection to processes and groups outside the project. This has been an intentional and necessary decision from the beginning as it served the empowerment of the participating youngsters . However, at the end of the process their work cannot be continued or developed if it is not integrated into a larger network and framework.

Who: the vice-mayor, the Youth Bureau and the LAG Sepsi association

How: organising regular meetings with the Youth Board and the Youth Bureau, enhancing volunteerships and scholarships for the Youth Board members and for the youngsters represented by them, involving them into strategic decision making processes regarding the youth work in the city, enhancing their participation in trainings, programmes and opportunities organised on city level.

When: 2023, ongoing.

2. What: conducting the know-how transfer of the Youth Board to new members, assuring continuity in their work.

Why: the core team of the UPLIFT Youth Board is made up of youngsters in their final year in secondary school or older. Many of the team members got employed or started university, the organised framework for their regular meetings and work is about to vanish. It is getting harder and harder to bring them together, especially if a clear goal (vision) or a concrete action plan is missing. Therefore, it is crucial that the new generation of Youth Board is recruited, trained and involved from this point on.

Who: the Youth Board, the Youth Bureau, the vice-mayor, the LAG Sepsi association

How: the vice-mayor, through the Youth Bureau has already taken up the task of organising meetings with the Youth Board and to help them recruit new members. Training of the new members will be conducted by the LAG Sepsi association and the involvement of these youngsters into activities, actions and policy making processes will be done by the Youth Bureau.

When: 2023, ongoing.

3. What: implementation of the actions formulated by the Youth Board in the co-creation process.

Why: most of the RPA's objectives are strategic objectives aimed for a longer term. However, a certain part of the co-creation process reflected upon very concrete actions that were

formulated by the youngsters and based upon their clearly expressed needs for a change in their schools. These actions are: setting up a self-awareness group in schools, organising "reversed days' (when pupils are the teachers and vice versa), organising monthly group activities on different topics (organising events in the school, watching movies and discussing them, bringing up hot topics and discussing them etc.). These actions are already planned to a certain degree and they need to be clarified and set to be held.

Who: Youth Board with pupils councils from their school, LAG Sepsi association.

How: The Youth Board meets and discusses with the pupils' organisation in order to involve them in the implementation. The Youth Board together with the LAG Sepsi meets with the school administration in order to get their approval and support for the activities. The Youth Board and the pupils' council make a timeline for the 2022-2023 and the 2023-2024 school year, run it through the administration, involve some teachers and start organising the events.

When: 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school year.

9 Implementation and follow-up of the co-creation process

In the short term, at least two pilot projects directly linked to the Reflexive Policy Agenda will be carried out during the first semester of 2023 (i.e. sensitivity workshops for educators working with vulnerable youth and youth community building activities within a school). These short-term interventions will be selected and planned in a co-creative manner. During the selection process the youth and institutional group will each choose a number of objectives and linked activities that they consider priorities for the present. In the case of overlaps, it is considered that a consensus was reached, and the Youth Board proceeds to the project planning phase. In case of diverging priorities, a negotiation phase begins in which the selected priorities of both groups are ranked based on their importance, and the mixed groups will develop action plans for interventions linked to the first two priorities. The pilot initiative's implementation relies on Youth Board members and the Institutional Stakeholder Group. The LAG Sepsi team will provide project management support and guidance during this process. The main objective of these pilot activities is to test on a small scale the effectiveness of some proposals of the Reflexive Policy Agenda that could be extended to local multiannual programmes. The first pilot will be carried out during the UPLIFT project, and in terms of funding and coordination the follow-up projects will be taken over gradually by the Youth Bureau of the Municipality.

In the medium and long term future, we aim to incorporate the Reflexive Policy Agenda in as many existing local policy instruments as possible. Also, we plan to recreate the Youth Board and merge it into the city's Youth Parliament. As a first step towards this, the findings of the UPLIFT project will be presented to the Local Council during their monthly meeting in March 2023 after being validated by the institutional partners and the youth board. During February the Sepsi LAG submitted to the Municipality a set of amendments for the city's annual Youth Initiative Small Grants in order to incorporate key focus areas and objectives of the Reflexive Policy Agenda and to increase funding of youth education initiatives within the Grant. The suggestions made based on the co-creation process were included in the modified version of the Youth Initiative Small Grants programme and were accepted by the Local Council. Furthermore, on the level of the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, most of the RPA will be included in the Youth Development Strategy 2023-2027, and the annual activity plan of the Youth Bureau starting from 2024. The political engagement for making these changes was expressed both by the mayor and vice-mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe.

Parallel to the UPLIFT project but not independently from it, in 2022 the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe initiated a Youth Bureau under the command of the vice-mayor. The Youth Bureau conducted an online, form-based research among the youngsters aged 14-25 from the city and has started organising programmes as a solution for some of the problems identified by

their research. This activity will be extended to the actionable youth community aspects of the RPA.

In 2022 the Youth Bureau initiated the elaboration of the Youth Development Strategy of the city which has not been finalised yet but which will include the proposals of the present Reflexive Policy Agenda.

Also related to the Youth Bureau, there will be a Youth Parliament created in the upcoming period in which the UPLIFT Youth Board shall be represented and in time merged into. However, we must notice that the know-how transfer of the local Youth Board is not yet resolved because the original young stakeholders of the UPLIFT project finished high school and started either university or working.

In terms of creating the continuity within the Youth Board, the vice mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe has expressed her commitment to conduct the transition period and the know-how transfer of the UPLIFT Youth Board and the new team which will be formed in 2023. As mentioned before, the core team of the current Youth Board has finished high-school and their interests may have evolved in various directions. Therefore, it is clearly expressed that the work of the UPLIFT project must be transferred and new ownership of the ideas must be created. The Youth Bureau of the Municipality, led by the vice mayor is the most suitable structure to implement the transition project and to incorporate the most important suggestions of the RPA in their activity. The renewed Youth Board will participate in a preparatory youth camp with the main objectives of personal development, knowledge transfer from the previous generation and generating a relatable action plan from the Reflexive Policy Agenda.

Another long term durable institutional objective that the local UPLIFT team aims for is based upon two principles: firstly, desegregating (Roma) education in the city, secondly, transforming two local marginalised schools into pilot schools where innovative education methods and management will be tried out. The upcoming European financial mechanism will have calls regarding pilot schools and the LAG Sepsi team intends to partner up with two segregated schools in order to apply for these specific funds and implement parts of the reflexive policy agenda as a pilot project.

10 Recommendations for a successful co-creation process with young people

Based on the preceding chapters, this chapter provides a number of recommendations for setting up a successful co-creation process with young people in other locations.

10.1. Preparation of the co-creation process

Involving young people in policy development requires, first of all, preparing the receptiveness of policy makers. This means that the responsible institutions are interested and prepared to bring about policy changes, are open to work in a participatory way, own the process and are willing to build in the results in its operations. This requires some preparatory steps, which are essential for the success of the policy development process, such as:

- Mapping the relevant stakeholders, assessing motivation and interest and identifying gatekeeper organisations
- Establishing the stakeholder group
- Setting clear goals for the process
- Clarifying roles, identifying leading organisations, considering legal responsibilities, existing capacities, motivation for change and relations with the target group
- Assigning the facilitators who fulfil the role of leaders of the co-creation process

In this phase, there are some details that should be clarified with the main stakeholders.

- Composition of the stakeholder group: involving both managerial and technical level is beneficial and the question is whether it should be separated or mixed? In many institutions the hierarchy is so strongly rooted that even if the management perspective differs from the technical one, the management perspective can seriously dominate the executive perspective. There is a reluctance to speak up in front of the chiefs of institutions in fear of retribution in some cases, or because of the lack of decision making power.
- Besides the core group special experts can be invited for thematic sessions from the same institutions that are represented at managerial level.
- Institutional position of the facilitator: should they be part of the stakeholder group by legal responsibility or be an "outsider", technical expert with no institutional affiliation?
- Who should mandate the facilitator with this leadership role? The group itself or an external and powerful entity like the municipality?

We believe that there are many good solutions, but the decision should be made in consultation with stakeholders, to strengthen relationships within the group as the power balance and the development of relationships affect the whole process.

The task of the facilitator is crucial and complex. It needs to fulfil the following roles:

- Building trust in the group and in the process (also linked to the facilitator's position).
- Modelling the participatory process, building horizontal relationships in the group, empowering the group in order to actively take part in the process and be engaged towards the findings and the follow-up work of the co-creation process.
- Sharing knowledge, including transferring inputs from relevant research and previous experiences. The facilitators could also bring in a theoretical framework for the process in the relevant field.

While planning the process we should be aware of some practical issues:

- The more widely participative (bottom-up) the process is, the more time and energy consuming it is. Methodological planning has to take into consideration the time and finance available as well as the "nature" of local relationships. In smaller communities the same institutions and NGOs are invited to participate in all projects and processes running in the municipality, therefore, their availability to participate in new processes is reduced. Participatory co-creation processes assume a constant and active participation in group meetings, as well as an increased engagement to perform other tasks than the usual daily duties.
- Deep and transformative processes need more time and resources. Quicker and less resourced processes should be more structured with more input from the facilitators. When conflictual relationships are present, a more structured approach is needed. A longer timeframe and more resources allow the creation of good relationships and leave larger space to the group for experimentation.

10.2. Setting up a Youth Board

Setting up the youth group also requires careful preparation. As the scale of vulnerability is very large, the more heterogeneous the group is, the more facilitation it requires. Youngsters should be prepared for making their voice heard, especially in conditions where many of them have never experienced in their lives that their opinion matters. Preparing the youth group for taking up an active role in the co-creation process assumes getting them ready to formulate their needs and lacks, at first and to articulate solutions in pre given circumstances (the framework of schools, public spaces, institutions, financial support etc.) later. The following steps and considerations should be taken into account when setting up the youth group for a co-creation process:

- Identifying the relevant groups with the involvement of the gatekeeper organisations is important and the composition of the group should be decided considering several factors, like availability of time and resources and the specific goals of the RPA.
- At the recruitment phase, all means of contacting youth groups are useful: gatekeeper organisations (NGOs, schools, informal groups) can facilitate contact, but the more direct contact with the target group, the better. Peer recruitment is also a great possibility.
- Identifying supportive school staff (class teachers, school counsellors) can sustain the recruitment process but also enhance participation along the process.
- Homogeneity in the group supports participation in the first phase, but in terms of gains of the process, diversity consists of a great opportunity for the group. However, it needs a great deal of resources and time to process difficult issues (e.g. experiences of abuse, racism, homophobia etc.) that can arise in a secure environment.
- The position of the facilitator(s) is crucial in working with the group, as they are the containers of the process. Flexibility, ability of setting clear limits, playfulness, stability, capacity of modelling healthy and accepting relationships and the capacity to mobilise the group's energy are basic qualities of the facilitators.
- Flexibility in representation enhances engagement of the whole group, by taking turns in representation activities. Assuming the responsibility in presenting the group's work (creating videos, written materials) not by only a few but in turns enhance engagement.
- Usually there is no need for material incentives (unless we target youth in advanced social and economic marginality), but ensuring a welcoming and caring environment and meals for meetings contributes to the stability of the process. Offering extra leisure activities (i.e. youth camps, travels) is an important incentive. The regularity of the meetings is important, they should be relatively frequent and adapted to the availability of the group members. Good group cohesion is the engine of the group.
- The more complex needs the youth have (in terms of vulnerability background) the more time and resource is needed for the process. Transportation to the venue, field visits, ensuring meals, more frequent meetings, peer facilitation should be considered.

10.3. Managing the co-creation process

The preparatory phase should be long enough for both of the groups to be able to build relationships, clarify visions, goals, roles and analyse problems they face or institutional mechanisms that are unsatisfactory or hindering progress.

For this, longer (2 days for institutions, 3 days for youth) working retreats are beneficial, accelerating the process.

Co-creation processes can be prepared also with mutual visits and exchanges between the two groups and informal meetings in order to develop relationships between the actors.

After the preparatory phase comes the actual co-creation work. Informal meetings and prepared institutional visits can precede the joint workshops to prepare relationships for the

common work. Presenting the visions, problem maps and solution maps on both sides and working on common solutions is a creative process for all parties. As feedback from the target group is generally not flattering, the institutions responsible need to provide time and a framework for processing feedback, mutual understanding (or at least understanding the target group's point of view) and, finally, cooperation.

Inviting local experts for thematic meetings can increase engagement for the implementation phase and showcase existing resources.

Validating the complexity and richness of the work in both directions and offering extra safety for the youth group during the whole process is important.

Checking content elaborated in the preparatory (parallel work) phase in the co-creation phase is important because sensitive topics could be skipped by participants in the joint meetings - in order to "protect" the collaboration in the group.

Maintaining the feedback loop between institutional stakeholders and the youth group, transparency in decision making regarding the institutionally assumed policy recommendations is crucial for retaining the participation of the youth in further processes.

Building in the participatory process in small scale institutional functioning (i.e. co-decision making processes in schools) contributes to the promotion of participatory processes also the larger scale (local policy making).

However, unprepared and un-resourced processes could easily fall into the fault of tokenism.

10.4. Towards a Reflexive Policy Agenda and follow-up of reflexive policy-making

The implementation needs an intensive facilitation to preserve engagement and strengthen ownership over the process.

Preparing implementation needs time and resources (facilitation).

If there is no strong ownership, during the reflexive policy-making process, but even if there is, in the implementation phase some of the steps need to be taken all over again and a new framework has to be set.

An extension of the participatory approach and institutional reflexivity should be considered, as well as developing partnerships and collaboration for implementation between youth and institution, which requires a new process as a continuation of the old one.

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