Speak Up!
National Report
Focus Group I
3/10/17/24 October 2011

Roots Research Centre
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FOCUS GROUP ONE
SUPPORT CENTRE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first focus group, consisting of ‘vulnerable’ children, comprised of a group of between ten and twelve children. The ages of the children varied between nine years old and reaching up to twelve years of age. These children frequent a local support centre within Athens, namely the ‘Support Centre for Children and Family’. The centre offers support with the children’s studies and assistance with the Greek language. The centre also offers social support in obtaining government allowances, personal documents and family and individual psychotherapeutic counselling. With regards to gender, more young females were present in the focus group in relation to young males. These children are members of the local Roma community, a minority group within Athens, Greece. Approximately 90% of the children within the focus group are Greek citizens, born in Greece. The children born in Greece were all born in the city of Xanthi, the capital city of Thrace, situated in north-eastern Greece – located near the border of Turkey. The remaining children were born in Turkey, Albania and Egypt. However, most of the children who were born within Greece are of Albanian, Egyptian and Turkish decent. The Roma community, and in particular the children within the focus group, live in the lower socioeconomic areas within Athens. Roma families are found near the central district of Athens, Metaxourgheio and Kolonos – two highly built up, polluted and urbanised areas. These two areas comprise largely of non-Greek communities. These areas are also commonly viewed as areas of high crime occurrence and have high rates of drug distribution and usage. Some families are also found on the outskirts of Athens, in a more rural setting. However, all of the participants of the focus group resided within the above mentioned urban areas within Athens. Approximately half of the children resided either in rented apartments, or were squatting illegally with their families (under constant threat of eviction), within derelict buildings. The remaining children sleep either in the family’s motor vehicle or on the street.

The Roma children have a native language, known as the Romani Language. However, all of the children are fluent in Greek and those not born in Greece are fluent in either Arabic or Albanian.
The children in the focus group are all members of the Orthodox Christian religion. Some members of the Roma community, living in Western Thrace, are Muslim. The Roma community, in particular the women and girls, have an apparently unique style of dress. The women and young females wear long skirts, elaborate jewellery and long plaited hair. The younger girls, however, may wear a more western style and ‘fashionable’ clothing. Young girls often have pierced noses and painted nails. The Roma culture is also renowned for a particular style of dance similar to belly-dancing, as well as a style of music with influences from Izmir. The cultural identity is strong and remains intact and separate from Greek culture. The only instance of an overlap in culture is in that the children of Roma families are able to speak Greek, due to having been born and attended school in Greece.

These children are particularly vulnerable in that the Roma community, to date, remains to be viewed as the ‘other’ and are often socially excluded. Within Greece, there is a clear distinction between the ‘Roma’ and ‘Greek’ communities. Stigmatised perceptions infiltrate society within Greece, and the Roma community faces discrimination and a lack of educational, employment and economic opportunities. The discrimination and stigma may be internalised, where the Roma community act out a self-fulfilling prophecy of the negative views held about them. There is an incredibly high rate of non-participation of Roma children in mainstream education.

Young males tend to stay away from education and spend most days with their fathers, either working in menial labour positions or staying at home. Young females work from a very young age, selling flowers during the night within the city centre and then staying at home during the day to care for their younger siblings. The children within the focus group did attend school, however, some more sporadically than others. An unstable home environment and the responsibility of bringing in an income for the family sometimes placed a strain on their ability to attend school on a regular basis.

The lack of gender balance within the focus group was partly due to the fact that young females tend to frequent the ‘Centre for children and family’ more often, as girls tend to stay in school as opposed to working during the day, contrasting to their male counterparts.

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The Roma community have specific cultural practices which differ largely from the Greek culture. Young females may get married as early as thirteen years of age, and become mothers soon after this. In many discourses, and within Greece, these practices are not viewed as normative practices and this in turn leads to negative perceptions of the Roma community – continuing the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide – perpetuating the social exclusion of the Roma community.

1.1 PREPARATION OF THE CHILDREN

The children’s daily program is not very structured and this affects their attendance at the centre. This may be due to reasons mentioned earlier, with regards to family commitments and their work schedules. The sometimes sporadic attendance at the centre as well as the children’s family commitments did pose some difficulty in two areas in regards to the focus group meetings, namely (1) the same group of children were not always available to take part in the focus group consultations and (2) the children who did attend the focus group consultations would often have to bring their younger siblings into the consultations (which sometimes caused a slight disturbance as the younger children became disruptive) as they were responsible for the care of their younger siblings. The constant changing of children made advanced preparation of the children difficult as different children would enter the consultation process at different periods. However, all of the children at the centre were aware of the general nature of the consultations, in that the consultations would be a discussion of children’s rights. Prior to the commencement of the project, the children would often ask staff members at the centre about the Speak Up! Project and then go on to discuss the project amongst one another.

In terms of the structure of the program and the times of each consultation period, the facilitators chose to divide the entire consultation into a series of shorter periods. This arrangement suited the children’s daily schedules. The focus group meetings were split up into four shorter sessions. The entire consultation process ended with a ‘party’ whereby children were thanked and given a small token to thank them for their efforts in attending the consultation groups.
Two of the facilitators are known to the children in that they are permanent staff members employed at the ‘Centre for children and family’. All of the children, who frequent the centre, including the children who attended the focus group consultations, are well known to each other and to these two facilitators. This was helpful in that we were able to move quickly into discussion with all children partaking in the focus group consultations. The third facilitator spent a brief time period at the centre prior to the commencement of the focus group sessions and met all of the children who were present at the centre on that specific day. Most of the children who took part in the first focus group session had met the third facilitator on at least one occasion.

The children were asked if they were aware of human rights and if they had ever received children’s rights education at their schools. They had not.

### 1.2 METHODOLOGY

All children who took part in the focus group consultations were introduced to the objectives and expected outcomes of the project at the beginning of each session, and this had to be repeated through all of the sessions as new children would replace the other children who were not able to attend. The facilitators ensured that the children were aware that if at any point during the focus group consultation they would prefer to leave, that this was okay and that they were free to exclude themselves if they wished. The facilitators explained the roles of all adults present as well as that all discussions were private that if at any point the children needed to speak with an adult present about any issue that they should do so freely.

All of the children were able to speak in whichever language they preferred. The facilitators did inform the children that the focus group consultations were a place where they should feel at ease to express their feelings and thoughts, and asked that all present in the consultation respected each others right to do so.

The Speak Up! ‘Activities’ and ‘Step by Step’ process (Speak Up! Toolkit pages 4-5) were used as a general guide in the focus group consultations.
The Roma children present in the consultations were not all literate and due to this, the facilitators decided to focus on activities and a programme centred on the narrative expression of their thoughts and ideas. The second rationale for this ‘oral’ style of consultation is that this group of children are a highly sociable group of children and are very comfortable when they are able to talk and discuss their feelings with each other, in the open for all to hear. They often encouraged one another to speak up about their own thoughts regarding a certain topic.

The introductory game allowed all present to discuss ourselves and the children enjoyed being able to talk about themselves. Some participants shared more information than others, and most participants were very interested to learn more about any ‘outsiders’ within. One of the facilitators was from South Africa, and the children were interested in learning more about her and her country.

Background information was provided about the project and all participants were made aware of why it was important and necessary that we learn from their perspectives concerning children’s rights. The EU and Eurochild and the concept of children’s rights were introduced to the group, asking about what the children know about the EU and also explaining Eurochild’s role in the project. All of the participants were given the Speak Up! Badges, which all of the children were excited to receive something new.

Following on from the introductory game, the consultation process used the ‘World Cafe’ activity as a means of discussing children’s rights and about their own lives in relation to children’s rights. Discussions about children’s rights were balanced with creative activities that involved drawing, and they seemed to really enjoy the opportunity to be ‘children’ and colour in pictures that they had drawn, taking great effort in their drawings.

Dance and music play an enormous role in the Roma culture, and the children thoroughly enjoyed the chance to ‘show off’ their dancing skills by performing songs and dance routines for the facilitators and each other. Some of the children are not used to spending long periods sitting in a ‘class room’ environment and for this reason, the mix between a more structured programme varied with playful activities maintained a balance within the sessions where the children did not feel overwhelmed with the discussion of children’s rights.
The information from the consultations was recorded in two ways. Videos were taken of the children answering certain questions pertaining to the issue of children’s rights, as well as detailed minutes of each session which were recorded by one of the facilitators. After each consultation, all of the facilitators scheduled a meeting where they reflected on each session, both the information gathered from the children’s contributions and also a reflection on their (the facilitators) contribution within the consultation. The facilitators used these meetings to consolidate the children’s information and interpret it from three different perspectives, bringing a well rounded analysis of each consultation. These meetings proved very useful as a way to analyse consultations, looking at what worked and what didn’t work and adapting strategies to be used in the next session.

The focus group meetings took place in a familiar environment to the children. The room was a large class room within the Support Centre for Children and Family. The class room was very simple with a few posters on the wall and a few bookshelves filled with books. The space was well lit and aired and was adequate for the purpose of the focus group consultation. The children were seated in a ‘horse shoe’ seating arrangement, so that they were all able to see each other, maximising easy interaction between each other and the facilitators. Seating did alternate between sessions as the same children were not always present. The facilitators allowed the children to choose their own seats so that they felt comfortable and not restrained in any way. During the creative activities of singing and dancing, the children were encouraged to move around freely, were allowed stand on up on their chairs and not confined or constricted in any way.

2. KEY FINDINGS

The children showed a keen sense of what is right and wrong behaviour within society. They were very vocal in expressing their ideas about the importance of children’s rights in ensuring the protection and development of children in society, showing a clear distinction between adults and children and the need for children’s rights. The four rights chosen by the children were rights that are very reflective and telling of their own life experiences and situations.
The facilitators noted that the four rights selected by the children were the most basic of the children’s rights, such as the right to play. This was seen as evidence of the need that these children feel to be able and ‘allowed’ to experience even the most basic experiences of childhood, such as the freedom to play and learn. From these children’s perspective, the most basic of rights were not available, a given or guaranteed and there needed to be legislation in place as a guarantee.

Although all of the children were aware of what is right and wrong regarding the treatment of children, they seemed to distance their personal experiences and did not seem to want to discuss their own lives in relation to the children’s rights discussed within the consultations. For example, when discussing the right to health and health care (Article 24 UNCRC), one of the participants expressed strongly that “all children need a warm bed, a roof and to eat healthily to be well”. When asked about her own daily experiences, with regards to this right, she did not mention that she sleeps on the street amongst rubbish. Here, she did not link her own harsh reality to what she expressed as important for children’s wellbeing. When asked if she felt that her right to health was respected, she replied yes. In instances such as this, facilitators felt that the children were able to repeat the rights and grasp their importance, but not quite comprehend their impact of children’s rights within their own lives.

Most of the participants were unaware of what the EU is as well as not knowing that children’s rights have been compiled in a list together with steps for government’s to follow, namely the Convention on the Rights of the child. One child did comment that the EU “is the people that fight with each other all the time.”

3. CHILDREN’S AWARENESS OF RIGHTS

The children’s rights game was introduced during the second focus group consultation. Following the programme provided within the toolkit, the facilitators showed all twenty five cards to the children, alternating the real and fake rights. Each right was shown and then read out aloud. Most of the children were able to distinguish between which was a real and a fake right, and were particularly expressive about the fake rights concerning not having to clean or do dishes.
They all commented that children have to help within the household and that it is their duty. Some children had difficulty in fully grasping the more difficultly worded rights or rights that were a new concept to them, such as the right to information and the media’s role in society.

3.1 FOUR SELECTED RIGHTS

The children were shown the twelve rights three times, so that they may become familiar with them. Following this, the facilitators asked that children to think about which four rights are most important to their own situations and experiences. The children discussed the rights amongst one another and with the facilitators, and stated which rights they thought were the most important. The children gave the following four rights as their answer. The rights listed below are in order of importance, as felt by the children.

3.1.1 All Children have the Right to Education (Articles 28,29 UNCRC)

All of the participants were aware of the right of all children to be educated and go to school. The Support Centre for Children and Family strongly focus on the importance of attending school and the importance of education. The staff members at the centre often talk with parent’s and ‘convince’ them to let their children attend school, and to support their child’s education. Prior to attending the Support Centre for Children and Family, many of the children were not attending school, as they were involved in supporting their family financially by working illegally or caring for siblings while parents worked or socialised. The children were asked throughout the consultation process and on specific focus group consultation days whether or not they had attended school that day.

All of the children said that they had, although facilitators who were staff members at the centre where the sessions were held were aware that the children had not. The individuals who were not attending school or who had skipped a day of school reported being too tired to go to school. This is often due to working throughout the night, selling flowers and other trinkets.

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The young female participants generally seemed more interested in attending school, expressing the importance of education to the facilitators.

3.1.2 All Children have the Right to Play (Article 31 UNCRC)

The children were not aware of the fact that there was a specific right targeted at ensuring that children have a right to play and other leisure activities. However, they did feel that it is very important that children have the freedom to express themselves during play sessions and leisure activities. The children commented that playing with other children may lead them to be influenced in a negative way by older children and may be hurt or get lost while playing. Here, facilitators noted that in some instances, the children associated play with negative incidents and as an unsafe activity. This is in part due to the unavailability of safe play areas within the vicinity of where the children live.

3.1.3 Refugee Children have the Right to Special Assistance (Article 22 UNCRC)

Although the children had chosen this right as one of the most important rights of the child, they did have a little difficulty expressing themselves as to why they felt this way. The children were not able to define what a refugee is, nor were they aware that refugee children or children seeking asylum have a right to special protection. The facilitators defined for the children what a refugee is. The children were then able to identify with the concept of the right and explained to the facilitators that refugees are people who sleep on the street and are not able to survive on their own and therefore need assistance from those around them.

3.1.4 Children have the Right to Information (Article 17 UNCRC)

In discussing this right with the children, facilitators became aware that the children had chosen this particular right due to the earphones icon depicted within the right’s card. The children were encouraged to offer any insight they might have about a child’s right to information.
Most of the participants were not able to contribute to this question except for saying that this right allowed children to sing songs and listen to music; again, the identification of the earphones dominated their understanding of the right.

4. CHILDREN’S NEEDS IN RELATION TO THE FOUR SELECTED RIGHTS

Discussions were held and questions were posed about the children’s daily lives and experiences in regards to the four selected rights and their own experiences of how these rights directly affect their own lives. Facilitators asked the children how the rights affect them, and if so, is it a positive effect or not.

4.1 All Children have the Right to Education (Articles 28,29 UNCRC)

As mentioned above, the role that children play within the Roma community are quite adult roles. They are expected to look after children, have children of their own, marry at a young age, and work to bring in money for the family. There is little room left then for them to experience a normative childhood, where they are sent to school to learn and develop socially, educationally and emotionally by means of the education system. In their daily lives, education and school attendance is not viewed as a priority and often falls to the wayside. Parents of the Roma children are also to blame for the lack of school attendance as they often remove their children from school in order to go and work. The education system within Greece has faced criticism in the past and continues to do so with regards to providing equal education for children from the Roma community. The reason for this is that many government schools within Greece do not openly welcome children from the Roma community, and once enrolled within a school, Roma children may face verbal abuse and prejudice from Greek children. Whether or not the children face abuse of any sort was not offered freely by the children during discussions.

Some of the children reported that they “really like their teachers at school.” When asked to elaborate on this, the children told the facilitators that their teachers did not ask them to hand in any homework (ever), always gave them a pass grade for all tests and exams and allowed them to go outside and ‘play’ during most lessons.
It is believed that in some cases, teachers are not dedicated to educating the Roma children due to either personal prejudice, or due to the fact that the Roma children’s attendance in school is so poor that it is almost not ‘worth it’ to invest in educating the child.

Within the consultation process, the children identified the following as reasons for needing a good education. They particularly identified with the need to be literate, a basic need. The children said that knowing how to read was important so that they could teach their siblings and parents how to read. Often, the parents of the children are not literate and the responsibility of reading, for example, letters from the state, fall on the children. Another child noted the importance of reading so that when trading he could read the prices of goods. Being able to read was also seen as important to avoid being mocked by other children. For the Roma children, the most fundamental and basic of educational skills is perceived as key to providing the skills necessary for survival in their world.

4.2 All Children have the Right to Play (Article 31 UNCRC)

The daily lives of the children in the focus group consist of taking responsibility for finding food and bringing in money for the family. For the children who do not attend school, they will stay at home and care for their younger siblings and help their parents in whatever is needed. The parents of the children do suffer from alcohol and drug addiction in some cases, leaving the children having to be independent for their own welfare. The children who frequent the centre are able to take part in extra lessons as well as leisure activities, which is not a regular part of their daily experiences. They are able to take part in group singing and music lessons, playing with puzzles and generally are able to be ‘kids’ — and have fun. Apart from this time at the centre, the children are not involved in any extra curricular leisure activities.

When asked about the role of play in their daily lives, the children did express that play time should ideally involve the whole family, and that they would like to take part in activities which involved their parents, such as playing football together as a family.

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None of the children had experienced being consulted about playgrounds in their neighbourhood.

4.3 Refugee Children have the Right to Special Assistance (Article 22 UNCRC)

The Roma community are one of the minority populations present within Greece, and often face social exclusion – similar to what illegal immigrants and refugees are faced with who are living in Athens. By social exclusion, it is meant that they are subject to exclusion from employment, financial and social opportunities within society. The children who took part in the focus group consultations are all Greek citizens and are not refugees. However, most of the children are living in areas in Athens where there are high populations of refugees and illegal immigrants. After initial difficulty in identifying what a refugee is, and after an explanation from the facilitators, the children identified individuals from Pakistan and Albania as refugees. After identifying the refugees, the children were then able to comprehend the situation faced by refugees and in most cases, they felt that it was their duty and that of the state to provide food, a home and special care to those living in Greece as a refugee. The children recalled seeing refugees sleeping on the street and were concerned as to how they would survive.

One of the children felt differently and was adamant that all people from Pakistan and Albania should be forcefully removed from Greece. She commented that “Greece belonged to the Greek and Roma people only... and the Turkish”.

4.4 Children have the Right to Information (Article 17 UNCRC)

This right caused confusion amongst the children as they had chosen the right purely on the basis of the picture. They were attracted to the icon of the earphones and thought that this right insured the right to listen to music and sing songs in school. None of the children were able to answer the question when asked what sorts of information are useful to children and from where this information might come, apart from two exceptions.

One exception was where one of the children commented that information such as warning labels and posters about the dangers of alcohol and tobacco could aid children in not drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes when they grow up.
The second instance is where a child commented that watching pornography on television was useful in that it provided useful ‘tips’ practicing sexual acts.

5. PROPOSALS FOR POLICIES OR ACTIONS FOR CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

When asked what they would change to improve a better implementation of their rights, the children were not able to answer. They were also not aware of the meanings of ‘local, regional, national and institutional level’ and what policies are. The children struggled with these concepts and were not able to provide and answers in this context.

The facilitators then asked the children if they new who the Prime Minister is and most of the children were able to answer correctly. The children were then given the opportunity to answer the final question: What would they change for children if they were the Prime Minister? A puppet was handed around the class room and each child was then able to respond to the question. The children answered as follows. Most of the children would ensure that all children and families would have their water and gas bills paid for and that all adults should be provided with employment to avoid them ‘sitting around’. The children all commented that they would ensure that their siblings and parents would receive free dentist and doctors visits to improve their health. Another point raised by most of the children was that everybody in Greece should be given food and that children should be forced to go to school. The children felt that the president should help more people and assure that all people living in Greece have a home and a safe place to sleep at night.

6. EVALUATION OF THE FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

In evaluating the consultation process, the children were given the opportunity to tell the facilitators about how they felt about the consultation process and the issues that had been raised within the focus group sessions. This evaluation took place in a discussion setting, as this process had proven successful throughout the consultation process. The children were able to freely express their feelings and thoughts about the project. All of the children provided positive feedback and expressed that they had found the experience very interesting and fun.

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The children also expressed their positive feelings held about all three of the facilitators. During the consultations, the facilitators developed and nurtured a relationship of respect and mutual understanding of each others roles.

The general atmosphere within the group, throughout the consultation process, was highly energetic and a continuous effort on the part of the children to be active in the process, lead to a range of issues being discussed and a deep exploration of their own understandings of children’s rights. Children were encouraged, but not forced, to engage in the process.

The initial focus group consultation was slightly disruptive in that the children were not comfortable in sitting in a class room environment for long periods of time. They became agitated and bored. The facilitators noted this and in the next consultation, the children were given the opportunity to do something that they wanted to do, such as singing and dancing, which helped in maintaining a balance and effective working environment. The children reported enjoying the activities of drawing very much.

Within the focus group, the fact that the children were going to receive a present was a huge draw card in them attending, and what the facilitators believed to be the sole reason for many of them attending. However, as the consultations came to an end, the majority of the children had stopped asking whether or not they would receive a present and seemed genuinely excited to attend the focus groups. They seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their opinions and to be listened to by their peers, the facilitators and that their ideas were going to contribute to tackling issues regarding children’s rights.