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# Let's Make Education a Way Out of Poverty!

17<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty

7-8 November 2018



## INTRODUCTION

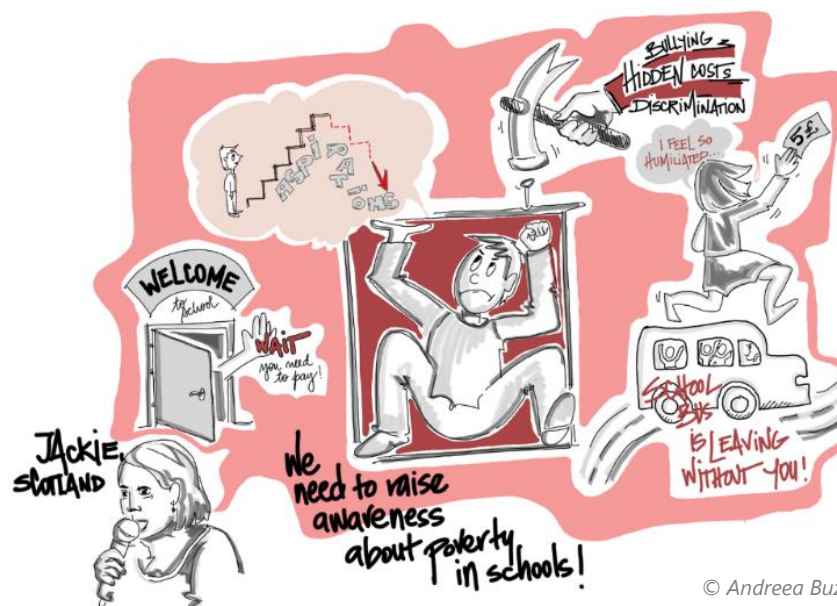
The theme for the 17<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP Meeting) was **Poverty and Access to Education**. The event was organised in Brussels, on 7-8 November, by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) with support from the European Commission, the Austrian Presidency of the European Council, and the EAPN Fund.

Among the 120 participants were national delegations of EAPN members, representatives from civil society and trade unions, and volunteer groups from 28 countries. As in previous years, the PEP Meeting was a unique opportunity to share their stories of hardship and hope with one another, and with EU decision-makers.

They were joined by decision-makers from the European Commission, including a virtual appearance by Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), and Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Affairs (DG EMPL). Member States were represented by Florian Pecenka from Austria's Department for Education, Science and Research at Austria's Permanent Representation to the EU, on behalf of the Council Presidency, as well as Guy Vanhengel from the Brussels Region Ministry of Finance and Budget.

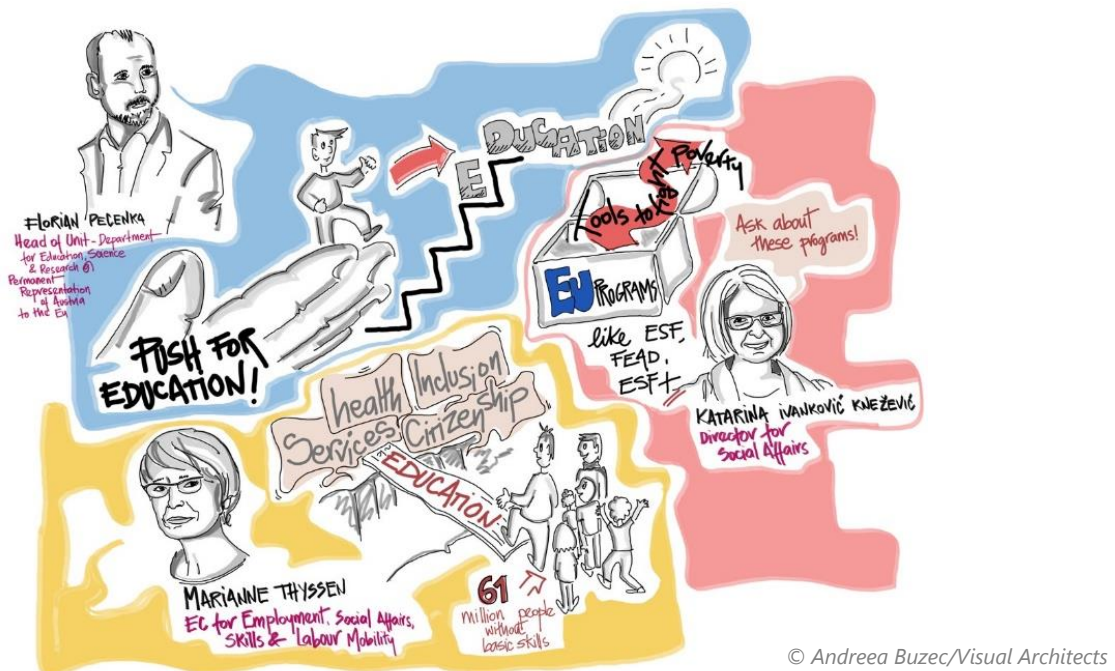
Hosted at the MCE Conference Centre, in Brussels, delegates entered through a 'market place' of stands and exhibits with clusters of national delegations mingling and sharing stories. Upstairs in the main auditorium the plenaries and closing statements took place. Open discussion was promoted throughout the one-and-a-half day event.

The opening plenary set the scene, with moving testimony from British and Spanish national delegates, set in the context of key EU strategic and political directions (MFF, European Pillar of Social Rights, Europe 2020 and the European Semester, the Skills Agenda, European Social Fund, FEAD), and global initiatives, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.





With the new EU Budget for the Future, the political push for education is gaining momentum, and a big emphasis has been put on social inclusion, according to Florian Pecenka. Commissioner Thyssen confirmed the European Commission's ongoing commitment to the European Meeting of People experiencing Poverty and education in particular, saying that early childhood education and care is a high priority, especially for those growing up in poverty, to break the cycle; something addressed in the Social Pillar and Skills Agenda.



The world café formula, combined with interactive, high-level panel discussions involving leading national and EU policy-makers, provided a rich canvas from which tangible decisions can be made to reconfigure how wealth generation is framed in modern 'social' economies, with education as a powerful lever to pull more people out of the poverty cycle.

The 'freeze flashmob' action at Brussels' Central Station on day two was an eye-catching way to draw attention to major issues and open questions concerning access to education as a way out of poverty. Commuters took photos, asked questions and were handed leaflets as they made their way through the 'frozen' maze of PEP Meeting delegates draped in national and EU flags.



## SUMMARY OF TABLE TALKS

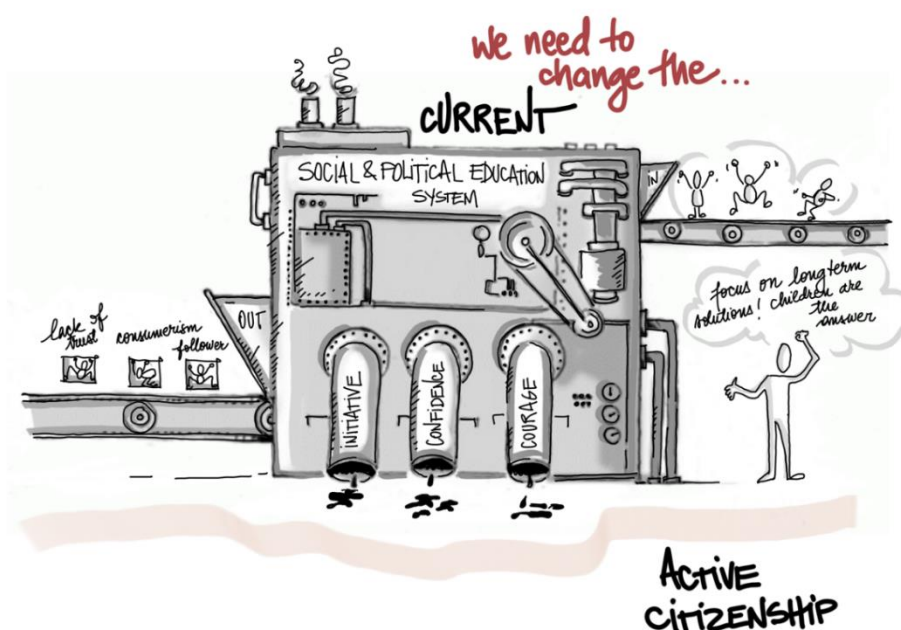
### 1. Why do children and young people leave the education system early?

Between the three rounds, participants from Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, and Slovenia discussed potential reasons for the rate of drop-out. Each round built off the previous, with participants sharing personal experience of their time in school and the attributes of the current education system that fail to prevent children and young people from leaving the education system early.

***“Education could be a way out of poverty, but people don’t believe in it!”***

#### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Contributing factors to early school leaving: cost of education, lack of qualified teachers, corruption; lack of additional resources (psychologists), pressure on pupils, teachers, schools; discrimination and segregation; irrelevance of curriculum to the labour market; irrelevance of education for social mobility; and no guarantees education leads to better income
- Early school leaving is a complex issue needing integrated measures targeting the child, the family, the school, the community, and society
- Teachers (their skills/qualifications and contact with the children) are key to education, motivating pupils; ‘quality’ education is a way out of poverty, but ‘poor’ education is not



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## 2. Do adults experiencing poverty have access to learning opportunities later in life?

*“They feel trapped and abandoned, resulting in emotional barriers to further education.”*

Analytical and thoughtful discussions on this topic were had by all 3 rounds, each one providing a piece of the answer as well as potential solutions. Groups explored the effect of a poor education system and work environment on the motivation to continue education as well as the tendency for life-skills to be undervalued.

### *Take-homes from the rounds...*

- Financial insecurity (having to work leaves little time to improve skills and take part in training) and a mismatch between training/skills and labour market needs are barriers to education for the older workforce
- Discrimination against older workers/job-seekers is a problem, but also against women, people with disabilities, and different social groups
- Heavy focus on numbers not people dehumanises and demotivates older workers/job-seekers who see their life skills as undervalued in the digital age

## 3. How can vocational education and adult learning opportunities be tailored to support people who are unemployed to access the job market?

*“The problem is you do all these studies and when you finish there’s no job.”*

Those of whom participated in this table gave ideas on how vocational education and adult learning can be tailored to support people in getting access to the job market. In addition, they shared the status of vocational education and adult learning opportunities in their respective country; each found that what a country provides isn’t conducive to what people need.

### *Take-homes from the rounds...*

- There is a gap between training and available jobs; it needs to be tailored to individual profiles
- Wrong assumptions about unemployment mean vocational education and adult learning are not well tailored to job-seekers’ needs
- Compulsion and ‘threats’ of sanctions versus respecting people’s choices, and offering free vocational education to empower people

## 4. How can we support low-income families and children to access education and training?

*“Today, you need a masters, a PHD to get a job...”*

Well informed participants engaged in these discussions by first analysing factors that block access to education and training. These include unnoticed financial costs such as uniforms, meals, and school supplies. The impact of unmet nutrition needs on one’s education and the effect of a child’s homelife on their education was looked at through several different lenses in order to find ways to combat these issues and help families tackle these struggles effectively.

### *Take-homes from the rounds...*

- Limited financial support from national governments (social security) puts families at risk; calls for a minimum income, educational benefits and investment in long-term solutions
- The effects of nutrition (especially ‘holiday hunger’), domestic violence and integration on education were discussed, as well as free and inclusive education (i.e. progressive taxes)
- Access to technology, community building initiatives for low-income families, homelessness education problems, and other ways to empower poor people

## 5. What are the non-financial obstacles preventing people in poverty from accessing education and training?

This table provided a backdrop to the vast number of hurdles people experiencing poverty go through in order to get access to education and training. It’s important to note that it’s not just money that will solve the problem to education; the high rate of stigmatization that people in poverty are forced to face and lack of available tools and resources cause many difficulties to get quality education and training.

*“Making educational information easily accessible should be part of the fabric of access to education for all.”*

### *Take-homes from the rounds...*

- Issues like ill-health (mental and physical), childcare support networks, digital exclusion and poorer children not fitting in were all raised
- Busy lives, long distances between schools and extra-curricular activities, and overcoming prejudices about people in poverty’s ability or motivation to learn need addressing
- Poor and expensive transport, socio-economic divisions in school, and the importance of making sure children are well fed in order to learn and engage were all discussed



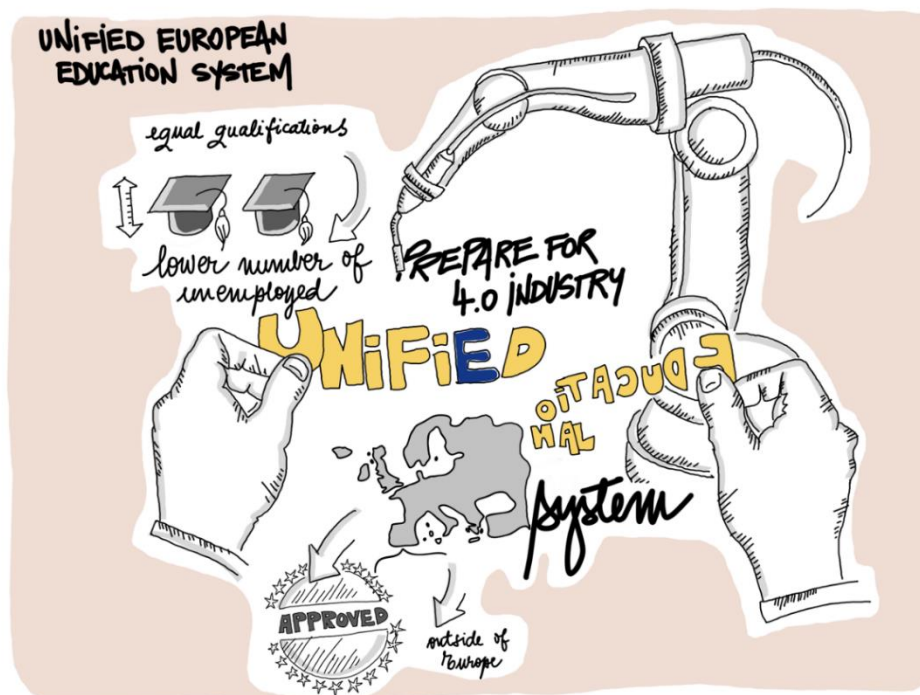
## 6. What prevents migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees to successfully integrate the education system of the receiving country?

*“Education systems are failing children and parents, and migrants are often excluded altogether. Politicians don’t seem to empathise.”*

With lots of personal experience and interaction with migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, this table was able to give true insight and thought on the failures of the education system in regard to integration and providing migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees with the tools needed to live a happy and successful life in a new place.

### **Take-homes from the rounds...**

- Political failures, lack of empathy, training and social assistance, institutional racism, language barriers, uncertain legal status and poor awareness of migrants’ entitlements in the receiving country
- Solutions to discrimination include a fast-track for qualification recognition, more accessible and better language studies, cultural awareness campaigns for host countries (education on the positives of diversity), removal of institutional and religious barriers to integration
- Additional support for language acquisition is a priority, and cultural connections through hobbies, mediators, mentors and professional match-ups were all ideas to foster ‘native friendships’





## **7. How to ensure equal access to education for children and students with a physical or mental disability?**

*“Non-formal education is important to fill the gap and help children transition into independent working lives.”*

This engaged table covered a lot of ground, including the lack of mental and emotional support that children and students with physical or mental disabilities are given, the tendency for schools to segregate children, the lack of investment, and the rocky transition that is faced when looking towards the labor market.

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Children with physical or mental disabilities need positive and inclusive transitions into the work force and mainstream society, with unique talents identified, developed and recognised
- Mental/physical disabled people are not seen as productive and capable by the education and labour systems (not a good investment), so their opportunities are fewer
- Schools need more flexibility to bring down barriers for all students, starting with greater awareness of inclusion, disabilities, and accessibility issues, and the role that everyone can play in productive societies

## **8. What forms of segregation and discrimination do children and young people living in poverty experience when participating in schools and other educational institutions?**

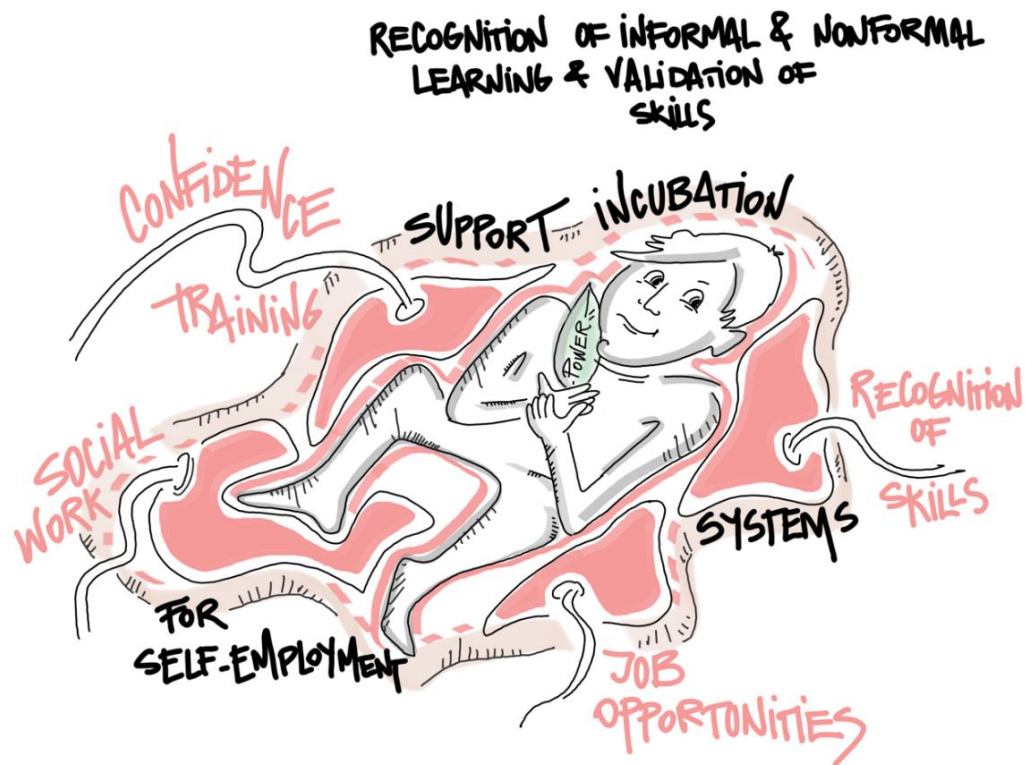
Vulnerable and honest participants shared and discussed the reality of bullying that children face in schooling. They noted sometimes it's not only children, but parents and teachers can sometimes part of the problem, but more importantly parents and teachers can work to be part of the solution. The very first solution to this issue is through teaching children from a younger age the importance of respecting differences and that diversity means a spectrum rather than a scale.

*“Courses about diversity, being open to different things and not judging by appearance, are needed.”*

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Children from poor families stop school too early – it is vital to keep them in school, so they have the tools to get out of the cycle of poverty

- Better teacher training on bullying and discrimination is needed to create a better environment for educating children and stop alienation in schools
- Diverse forms of discrimination (digital, social, economic, racial, etc.) are evident, and political leaders not fully aware/supportive



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## 9. What role for teachers in ensuring quality and inclusive education for all?

*“Teachers should be asking: How can we make it work for you, do you need a mentor or extra help?”*

With participants from various countries, a representative from the European Commission, and young people from PICUM, this table was able to tackle the question from a variety of different ways. While each came from a different background and has had different experiences, each agreed that before teachers can ensure quality and inclusive education, teachers must be ensured quality training, resources, and environment.

### **Take-homes from the rounds...**

- The role of good teachers is to help students discover who they are and what they want to become, not to push them towards a ‘desirable’ career path; more reflection is needed on the role and stature of teaching in society, and greater effort (information,

remuneration) is needed to encourage young people to take up the profession (good teachers are critical to good education; it is a cycle).

- Students, parents and society should understand the role of teachers better, to manage expectation. Better training and appreciation (financial and societal) of the role of teachers in the education of future generations would help to attract highly qualified candidates to the profession who are properly trained for 'inclusive' classroom needs.
- Teachers need a wider set of skills, but often lack the tools to help students facing certain problems or those struggling in the middle. Learning to listen should be part of the training process.

## **10. What prevents parents experiencing poverty from actively engaging with their children's school and supporting their children in accessing educational opportunities?**

Groups of sincere participants addressed the feelings that many parents have, when facing participating in their children's school; parents often feel unwelcomed or embarrassed due to a fear of being judged. Building from this, the focus was shifted to the role of teachers and schools in creating an environment that combats any anxiety a parent might face. It was agreed upon by all groups that there must be more cooperation between parents and schools.

***"More effort by schools/teachers to make parents feel welcome through open and inclusive communication is needed."***

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Fear, embarrassment, time constraints and an unwelcome environment are major barriers to more and better teach-parent communication, focused on the genuine needs of the child
- Participants called for the retraining of teachers to focus on the child, the family and the community, and to engage children more in decision-making
- New systems and service models are needed to prevent poverty being perpetuated through a failing education system; families/parents need sustained support to be part of this change

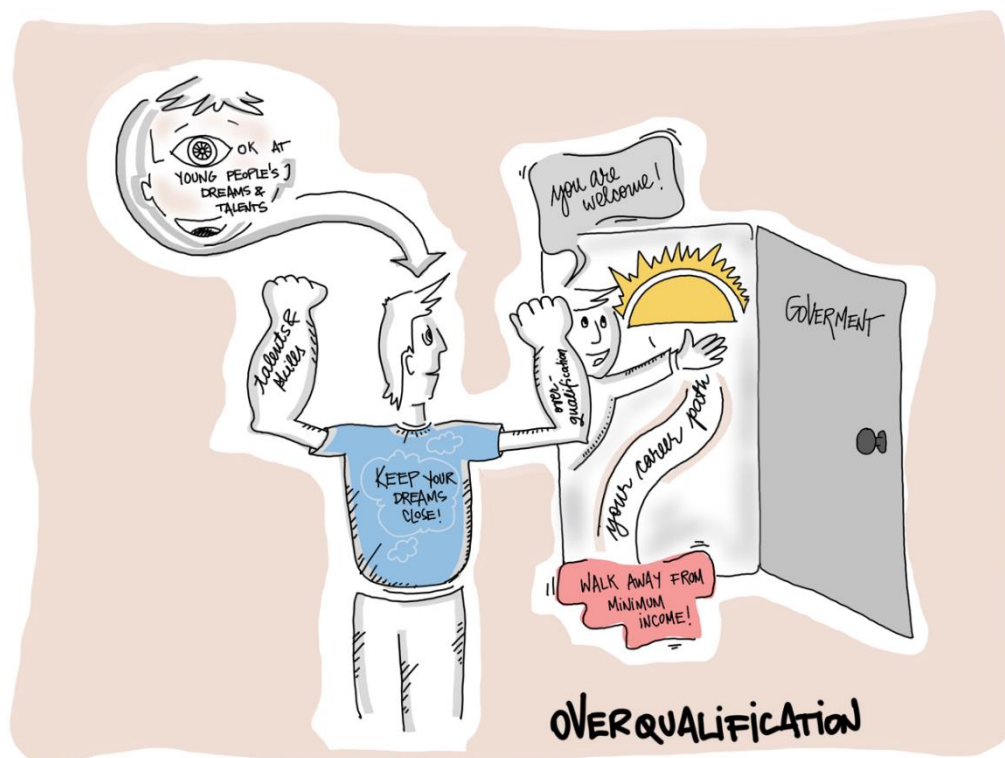
## 11. What role and responsibility for employers to invest in on-the-job training and to support the continuous up-skilling of their staff?

*“Life skills for older job-seekers and demonstrated motivation in younger, less experienced workers are as important as academic qualifications.”*

This focus group established that the emphasis on money making by companies, stops them from accurately valuing workers. Academic qualifications have become the only measure of a person’s ability and quality training isn’t offered; companies don’t invest in their staff. By investing in workers, both the workers and the company would benefit, though to do this effectively there needs to be a shared responsibility to ensure that it happens.

### **Take-homes from the rounds...**

- Employers need to recognise that providing in-work training is an investment in their staff and business not a cost
- Training is more than task or job-specific; it is also an opportunity to promote creativity and networking; very low-skilled workers or candidates may need additional state- and NGO-backed support
- Commitments to training need to be mutually beneficial for employees, employers and governments, with NGOs involved to tailor support for those most in need



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## **12. How to best validate informal and non-formal education and recognise the skills acquired outside of the formal education system?**

*“I didn’t realise that I could do these sorts of things, to care about other people, advocacy, public speaking, and taking action together.”*

In tackling this question, participants shared their own personal experiences and testimonies. Doing this shed light on the vast potential that is disregarded by employers; employers don’t value skills or an education outside of mainstream degrees. Discussions branched off to focus on the barriers that are created when not having a degree, the struggles to finish mainstream schooling, and the benefit in having an informal education.

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Lack of papers is a barrier to education, inclusion, job prospects and poverty reduction; real skills, people-centred learning, alternative/creative approaches are not well recognised or funded
- Rigid and bureaucratic formal education systems lead to drop-outs and a cycle of problems; more open and receptive labour markets to ‘skills not qualifications’ is the key (e.g. the Finnish schools model)
- Calls for a holistic approach to social and economic needs (housing, services, adequate income) combined with formal/non-formal education, including volunteering, that leads to accreditation; but there are major problems of underfunding in the education system and for relevant NGOs

## **13. How does education strengthen active citizenship, empowerment, and participation?**

This table established that the current education system fails to provide the tools and resources to strengthen active citizenship. Education systems often disregard the thoughts and opinions of students rather than empower them and accurately teach them the power of being an active citizen. Participants discussed the poor effects of this and emphasized the importance of teaching young children the power of their voice.

*“Children are able to think. We don’t give them enough credit.”*

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Schools have to let kids experience democracy (by making the school process democratic) allowing them to challenge inequalities (based on gender, race and social class)
- Social, political, cultural education (the essence of 'citizenship') should be part of the curriculum; and historical events taught honestly to promote inquisitive, critical thought, and counter the influence of populism and fake news; schools have to be open (to NGOs and other community actors)
- Active citizenship comes from people feeling their voices are being heard, that they are welcome to participate in classrooms, public debates, elections, or society in general; free and balanced media is an important channel for tackling misinformation about poverty, migration, etc.

## **14. Are education systems focused on personal abilities and individual talents of all children?**

***"Talent is lost because government schools lack resources to promote them."***

Passionate discussions were had on the unfortunate decline in nurturing many talents and abilities children have. Not only do schools not nurture them, often they don't even give space for children to fully recognize them. Perpetuated by the competitive nature of the labor force and the negative view of non-conventional profession, individual talents and abilities are lost.

### ***Take-homes from the rounds...***

- Inclusive schools (mixing children with different abilities) are good if well resourced to deal with the different needs of the students (i.e. smaller classes, more assistants, social workers)
- Children need more guidance from both parents and schools, in collaboration, to nurture their talents
- Extra curricular activities are essential to develop children's abilities, but there are not enough on offer, they cost too much and they are often too far away; parents need to rely on social programmes (NGOs, ESF, etc.) but these are hard to track down (lack of information)

## 15. How to better value skills and fight underemployment (people working in jobs that are below their level of qualifications) and over-qualification?

*“There are too many lawyers, but it’s a problem to find a plumber.”*

Examining the relationship between underemployment, over-qualification, training and education, this table recognized the severe difficulty to find stability. Discussions noted the tough circle of being “too qualified” for one job but not having the correct degree for another; too much education leads to making a poor salary, but to get the better salary its necessary to pay for more schooling. Participants recognized this vicious cycle as a massive barrier in earning a decent wage.

### **Take-homes from the rounds...**

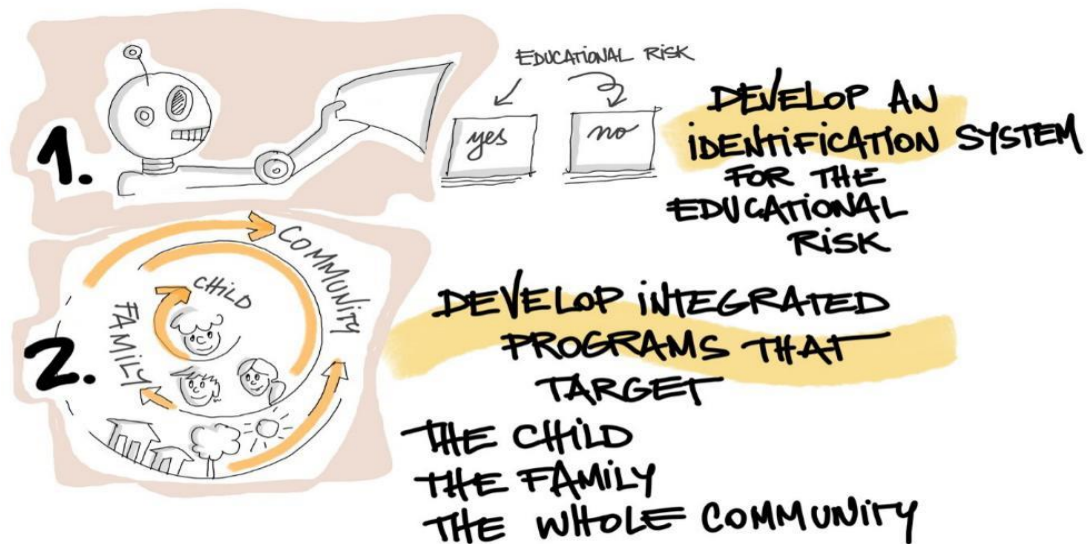
- More information and mentorships are needed for (young) people to make decisions about their future, including work experience incorporated into their studies, and opportunities to explore how to make a living from their dreams and talents
- Moving to another country is hard if you are forced to wait years for qualifications to be recognised, or need to retake studies (borrow more money or do low-skilled work), in addition to having to wait ages for a work permit
- Lack of good jobs is leading to extended studying and skills mismatches; which for older people can translate into over-qualification for some jobs; people should mean more than markets and statistics (human dignity and access to rights means people can contribute in their own way)



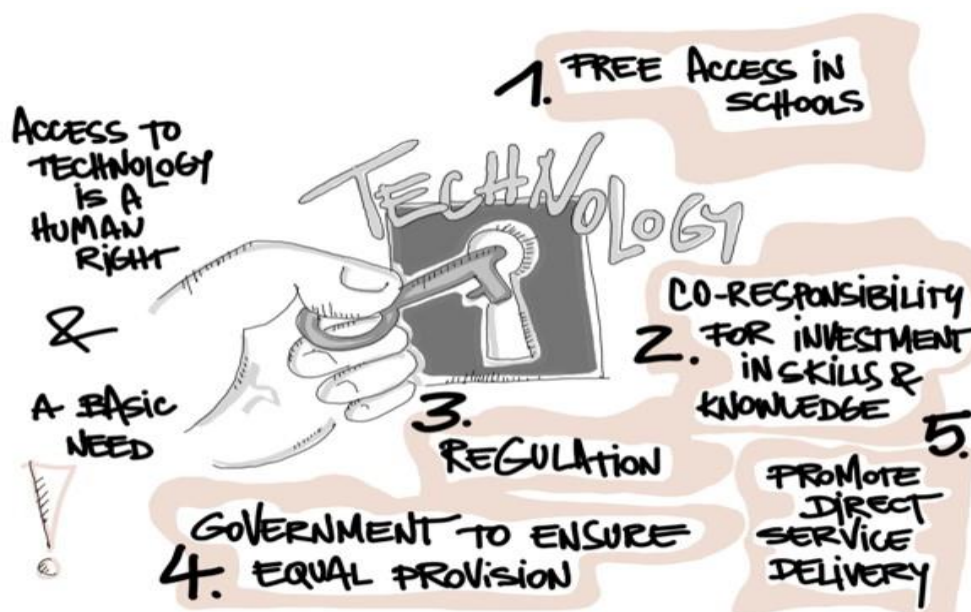
# RECOMMENDATIONS

The rich discussions from the World Café session were continued during workshops, which participants chose to organise on the following topics: **early school leaving, digital divide, inclusive education, migration and refugees, active citizenship, over-qualification and under-employment, recognition of non-formal skills** and **unified European education**. Following on from the discussions and deliberations during the workshops, the group decided to present to the decision-makers on day two, four recommendations on the first four topics and put forward questions on the last four.

## Early school-leaving (delivered by Laura Greta Marin, EAPN RO)

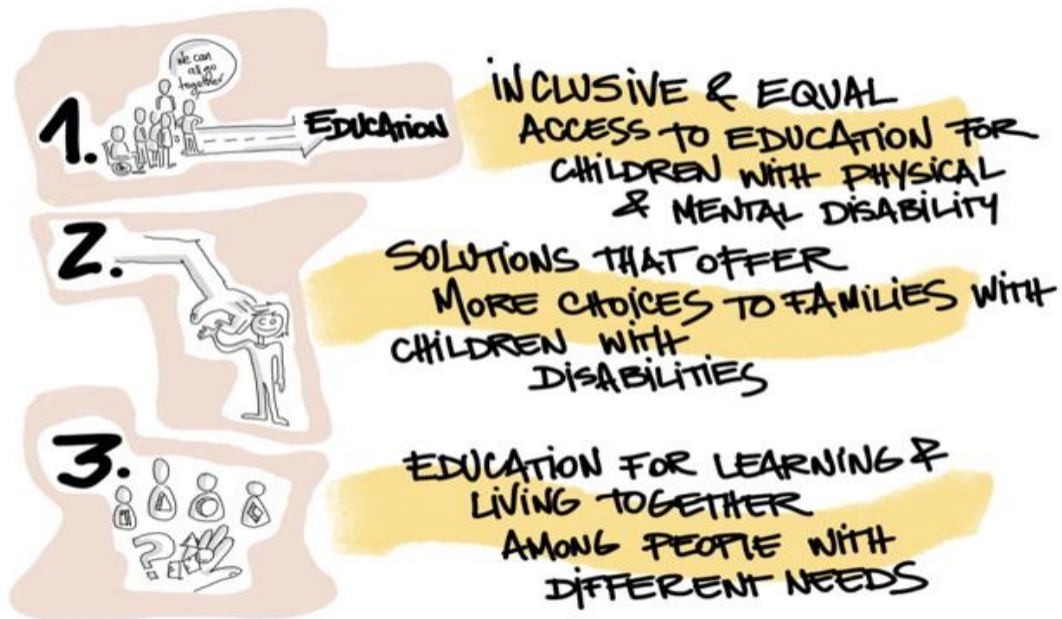


## Digital divide (delivered by Twymukye Mushaka, EAPN UK)





## Disability (delivered by Marianne Bon, EAPN NL)



## Migration (delivered by Ray Oyetunji, PICUM)



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\*More detailed notes on the 15 table talks and eight workshops at PEP 2018 are available on request: [magda.tancau@eapn.eu](mailto:magda.tancau@eapn.eu)

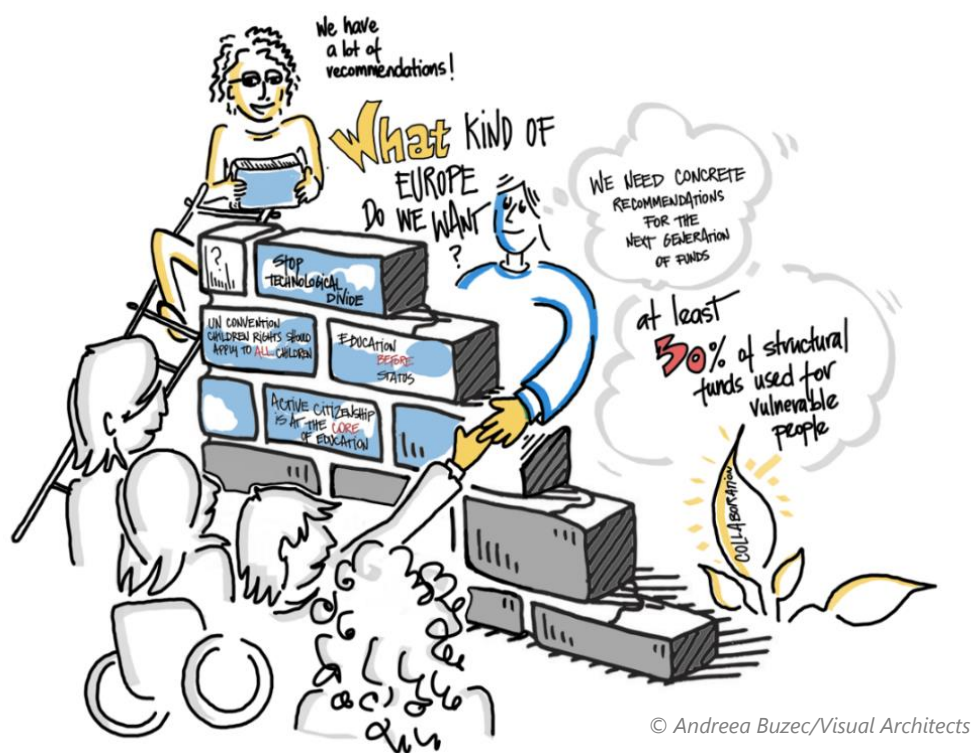
## Over to you...

**Active citizen group question:** What role does education play to ensure school-leavers are equipped for the societal challenges ahead, and to ensure that education is a way out of poverty?

**Over-qualification-underemployment:** How can EAPN help you build a strong education base on which dreams of a good career can be achieved without falling into the trap of constant re-education?

**Recognising life skills (adult learning):** How many countries, except Portugal, have applied European Commission requirements on formal education; what pressure is there on Member States to implement them?

**Unified education systems:** There is a great education gap in Europe; we believe in a single education system for everyone to have the same opportunities; how can this be achieved in practice?





## INFORMATION AND CONTACT

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See all EAPN publications and activities on [www.eapn.eu](http://www.eapn.eu)

**The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) is an independent network of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union, established in 1990.**



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