



Hi-Ability Piloting Report





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Hi-Ability – Developing social and professional skills through outdoor experiences
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Abstract: This document summarizes the findings related to the implementation of the pilot action in Italy, Croatia and Greece. The results collected at the national level have been systematized in this joint report that also aims to provide EASPD with the key data to elaborate the guidelines and recommendations.



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1. The Hi-Ability project

Very often, social and cultural interventions aimed at the integration of people with disabilities tend to segregate the beneficiaries, as they are provided within protected, "closed" contexts, taking place in a perspective of "assistance" and isolation, with negative consequences on the perception of disability towards society and a misreading of the real needs of people with disabilities.

The Hi-Ability project wants to "open the doors to new spaces of education", promoting an education for autonomy, independent and inclusive life for adults with intellectual disabilities (ID), in a context still not very accessible such as hiking and eco-tourism.

Hi-Ability puts the natural environment at the centre of the activities, becoming the theatre of an original methodological approach of a therapeutic-rehabilitation programme based on the socio-educational value of the natural environment. The project's general objective will be to promote the empowerment and the social inclusion of people with cognitive disabilities, by enhancing their abilities in the field of outdoor touring and trekking in all its connotations.

Specific objectives of the project will be:



Figure 1. Hi-Ability Specific objectives

In order to reach the above-mentioned objectives, the project will set up a multi-step approach, based on:

- 1) Training the trainers: development of educational materials and training courses for professionals working with people with disabilities to improve their skills in outdoor education activities;



- 2) Training people with disabilities as “assistants” to professional guides for outdoor/nature tours: beneficiaries will acquire personal and professional skills through a specific training course and will be able to test their acquired skills by a pilot experimentation in all involved countries;
- 3) Creation of an app to facilitate the participation of people with DI in outdoor activities;
- 4) Development of policy recommendations and guidelines to facilitate the transferability of the model to all EU countries.



2. The Hi-Ability pilot action

The Hi-Ability pilot actions have been implemented in three partner countries: Croatia (by Health Life Academy), Italy (by Controvento) and Greece (by Epioni- Greek Carers Network).

A total of 30 participants and 9 educators took part (20 participants with intellectual disabilities and 10 with mental health disorders).

The beneficiaries have been trained and supported by the educators previously trained in C1. This training has been distributed over 3 months, with approx. one meeting per week (3 hours of training per week - tot 36 hours).

The main topics of the training have been:

- environmental education, natural
- cultural heritage, specific skills related to hiking
- public speaking
- working in groups.

During the pilot action, project partners have been also asked to organize basic level excursions to test the skills acquired during this phase (see section 2.4).

Most of the pilot action sessions were implemented face-to-face (Catania, Italy and Koprivnica, Croatia) while only in Greece many sessions have been organized online.

Furthermore, in Italy besides the outdoor training, at the end of the lesson, a small English lesson has been designed as a moment to give participants the linguistic tools to be able to dialogue with the other participants during the mobility in Croatia. In the pilot action in Croatia, the main activities were walking and bicycle riding with few educational activities indoor.

In order to collect valuable insights related to the effectiveness of the project training methodology, EPIONI defined the method and objectives of the research in agreement with the partners providing timeline and template (Annex 1) useful to collect the information in a structured way.

The results collected at the national level have been systematized in this report that summarizes the findings of the pilot actions conducted at national level.

The results of this joint report will also provide EASPD with the key data to elaborate the guidelines and recommendations.

2.1 Selection and involvement of the target group

Most of the participants have already been members of Controvento, Health Life Academy, Epioni-Greek Carers Network or Epos Fylis, for many years and had already participating in the activities. They first have been contacted through emails or phone calls during January. Before starting the actual training, a preliminary meeting was organized to inform them about the aims of the project, some technical details, the trip in Croatia and GDPR. After their consent we started implementing the training.

Participants were selected according to the definition of intellectual disability agreed between partner organizations. Participants were selected by their possibility to walk alone and socialized within the group (Mild Intellectual Disability). They are all members of the organizations involved and these activities are an added motivation for them and an opportunity for them to be part of the society.

Furthermore, in Greece there was not a real selection process, so the participants diagnosed with mental health disorders and showing an interest in outdoor activities were welcomed in the piloting. Furthermore, another inclusion criterium was the capacity to participate in a weekly training for 3 months.

There were no dropouts to any of the organization participating in the pilot actions so no further selection took place.

There were not big challenges to identify and select the target group. In most of the cases, the participants had already been active in other activities of the organizations. In most cases, they were very sociable and have regular activities together so implementing pilot activities is something that was very easy for them. It was maybe a bit challenging to find participants able to commit to a weekly 3hours training for 3 months. Especially because many participants in the Greek team were working.

It was challenging to engage the target group only in the initial phase because some of them did not know each other and some of the educators. However, meeting after meeting, the atmosphere became more and more relaxed and friendly. Furthermore, sometimes challenges emerged mainly because many of the participants were not familiar with the use of platforms such as Zoom nor with outdoor activities (for the pilot action implemented in Greece). Such target group of adults with mental health disorders sometimes was hard keeping involved/engaged in activities as designed in the Toolkit since they found some of them not very suitable for their interests. It was not an easy audience to keep them for 3 hours per week, so trainers had to find effective ways to attract their attention. Also, the online interaction made it less attractive and interactive.

The table below presents the figures of the piloting:

Socio-demographic variables	Number of trainees
1. Gender	
<i>Male</i>	22
<i>Female</i>	8
Total:	30
2. Age	
<i>25-34 years old</i>	16
<i>35-44 years old</i>	7
<i>45-54 years</i>	4
<i>55-74 years old</i>	3
<i>75 years and older</i>	-

Total:	30
3. Current employment status	
<i>Self-employed</i>	4
<i>Employed</i>	9
<i>Unemployed</i>	17
<i>Student</i>	–
<i>Housewife</i>	–
<i>Retired</i>	–
Total:	30
5. Highest level of education	
<i>Less than primary</i>	–
<i>Primary education</i>	10
<i>Secondary education</i>	10
<i>Bachelor level or equivalent</i>	8
<i>Masters level or equivalent</i>	2
<i>Doctoral level or equivalent</i>	–
6. Diagnosis	
<i>Severe /Moderate Intellectual Disability</i>	–
<i>Mild Intellectual Disability</i>	13
<i>Mental Health Disorder</i>	10
<i>Down Syndrome</i>	5
<i>ASD</i>	1

Total:	30
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The implementation of the pilot action has in general very positive outcome. Through this pilot action was tested the effectiveness of the modules and how and to what extent they could be improved according to the needs/difficulties of the training participants. Participants showed satisfaction and they all shared that it helped them gain more knowledge about outdoor activities. Almost all of them are more willing to participate from now on to do more hiking and be more active in their everyday life. All 30 participants completed a training that lasted more than 3 months, with no drop-outs.

2.2 Technical preparation of the pilot action

Concerning the training sites, in Croatia were selected by professional educators based on their experience. There were several different sites used where participants could exploit additional activities with the main ones planned by the schedule. Each site with its capacity has ensured ease of access to the specific of the group and it is used by partner organizations which is beneficial in case of joint activities.

For Italy, the following were important: educators' knowledge of the sites, collaboration with the scouts and their experiences, collaboration with trekking experts, ease of reaching the site, accessibility of the route, variety of educational opportunities that this site offers (e.g., fauna and flora), variety of landscapes. The training took place a Controvento's premises while the outdoor activities were implemented in several areas around Catania as described below.

As mentioned, in Greece the preparatory training took place online due to covid restrictions and the fact that many of the participants work during the day and it was not possible for them to travel to Athens every week.

2.3 Testing of the Hi-Ability Toolkit

In the first part of the training, piloting partners were asked to test the Hi-Ability Toolkit and the 8 modules designed by the Consortium in the previous months:

- MODULE 1 How to design outdoor training activities to develop PWID's skills & competencies
- MODULE 2 The power of outdoor learning with vulnerable learners
- MODULE 3 Environmental education for social inclusion
- MODULE 4 How to manage outdoor rock climbing and bouldering with PWID
- MODULE 5 Trekking-related skills
- MODULE 6 Risk management in the outdoors
- MODULE 7 Collaboration in the outdoor
- MODULE 8 How to assess the outdoor experience

For the pilot activities educators used modules 1,2,3,5,7 and only briefly covered modules 4,6,8 as the educators thought more attention should be focused on the other modules.

The most preferred Modules by participants in Greece were the 4-5-6 (How to manage outdoor rock climbing and bouldering with PWID/ Trekking-related skills/ Risk management in the outdoors). To their opinion these modules were more practical and less theoretical. They were very interested about bouldering, because it was a very new activity for them.

Also, the Module preferred was the seventh. The proposed team-building activities help to strengthen and consolidate the group, making it more cohesive. The positive climate thus established predisposes participants to the new things they learned.

On the other hand, module 1 was very interesting as it shows the basic and most important information about environmental education. Educators describe this module as ground base for the entire pilot action as it points out the importance, principles and benefits of environmental education. Modules 2 and 3 focus more deeply on the environment itself and how to organize an outdoor activity. Modules 2 and 3 were interesting as the environment and organization are specific and lot of aspects need to be taken into consideration. That is what makes the difference and what educators consider most important.

During the hikes, Controvento noticed the difficulty of some of our participants (mainly some of the adults with Down Syndrome) at the gross-motor level, slight coordination difficulties, balance difficulties and for some dizziness. This led them not to include in our course activities based on module 4, which would probably have required our participants to undergo more focused preparation over a longer period of time.

Furthermore, the module 4 was the least covered and it was briefly explained. In comparison to other modules, “Module 4 – How to manage outdoor rock climbing and bouldering with PWID” is considered as more of an added activity because walking is considered the main activity for hiking when the target group are PWID. This doesn’t mean that rock climbing and bouldering is not recommended for PWID, rather it is a rarer occasion of conducting such activity and it requires more special equipment.

In general, all the learning modules overall worked well regarding the length, content, adequacy, effectiveness, structure. Anyway, the piloting partners shared valuable feedback that could be helpful for the transferability of results and the improvement of the outputs:

- Some modules are short and do not seem to cover the subject matter in a functional manner (for example Module 5, Session 1 and 2). For an educator not involved in the Hi-Ability project since the beginning this could represent a limit.
- The structure of the modules is clear and also visually well laid out as it is possible to find the information easily.
- The weekly 3hour meetings that lasted 3 months was enough months to go through all the modules but also to prepare the participants for the training mobility in Croatia.
- It would be more effective to include more outdoor activities instead of online meetings.
- The content proposed was quite good and proved to be adequate for the participants.
- Some activities though were too simple for adults with mental health disorders as they were not very suitable for their interests (for example the puzzle game).
- On the other hand, it was sometimes difficult for learners to understand the activities due to complicated instructions (for example Module 6, the activity with the 6 hats had many instructions that complicated and had to be implement in an easier and more simple way).
- The D-Lot platform of ESPD, was a good way for participants to interact with the platform and get more skills on using online content.
- Modules are well arranged and follow the sequence in a logical order.
- The modules are designed to be applicable to a wide range of target groups which is very effective.
- Annexes are adequate for the target groups and are an excellent addition to modules.

2.4 Testing the accessible trails

For all three organizations participating in the Pilot actions, in order to select the trails, it was important:

- the level of difficulty
- the possibility of having a shelter nearby
- the diversity of the landscape, the interest shown by the participants in the destinations after a few moments of discussion together.

Furthermore, in many cases since the targeted group had already had similar activities, educators know about their capabilities and potential. Therefore, they picked tracks that are up to 10km long with an average of 5-7km. Trails are mostly mixed forest and meadow and also promenades.

In Italy the participants visited Etna Park and the Simeto Oasis, while in Croatia there had been organized hikings in Koprivnica-Križevci and Šijana/Siana Forest. Moreover, in Greece there had been organized two hikings in Kaisariani which is in Mount Hymettus.

All three organizations had been advised by experienced guides.

The educator leading the pilot activities in Croatia has years of experience in walking and hiking so she is well aware about the procedures of preparing the group for the activity. The educator was also in communication with local partners instructors about the specifics of the trails if needed.

The Italian Partner Controvento has been advised by the directors of both Etna Park and the Simeto Oasis. The participants followed a first introductory part run by those who work there, as they always do it at the oasis. For the trip to Etna, they were joined by the other Italian partner Trekkify. On both occasions, during the lesson prior to the outing, the participants discussed what they would need to bring, what possible dangers/difficulties they might encounter and what we would do during the trial.

Moreover, for Greece the trails have been suggested by experienced guides of Epos Fylis. They recommended hiking on these trails since they are very accessible from Athen's city center but also easy for participants with no previous experience in hiking and moderate physical state.

3. Hi-Ability future exploitation opportunities

3.1 *Transferability of the training*

There are some challenges in transferring these models to other countries as they have been mentioned from all partners of the pilot action. More specifically, the different levels of local awareness on this topic of outdoor education and disabilities could be a barrier, as well as different types of approaches to adults with ID. Furthermore, there might be some cultural and geographical challenges.

But overall, this model could easily be transferred to other countries of Europe since they don't include many cultural elements. Moreover, the educational model has been written in a simple and universal way.

3.2 *Transferability to other organizations working in the field of outdoor education and/or social inclusion*

Regarding the transferability to other organizations, the resources developed could be useful for outdoor education centers, schools and youth organizations, hiking associations, NGOs supporting people with mental disorders, outdoor activity clubs. Also, the content could be shared through social media and newsletters, but also could be shared through dissemination events. For successful transferability it is important to point out multiple benefits of outdoor education and social inclusion with the possibility of learning something new and create new ideas.

Furthermore, what should be added to the toolkit are specific sessions highlighting strategies to be used for different disabilities. It is useful to know, for example, that people with Down Syndrome frequently suffer from vertigo and it is therefore good to calibrate activities and approaches according to their characteristics.

3.3 *Transferability to other fields of education*

Regarding the transferability to other fields of education, the resources developed can be useful for the training of students in schools/universities across Europe in outdoor activities. Furthermore, it could be a great chance for Erasmus+ Youth trainings. Additionally, it would be used to train elderly in outdoor activities. Moreover, could be a great change to educate youth in leadership skills but also could be used for other fields of education like environment, culture. Finally, it could be promoted to educate youth in professional skills (such becoming educator of outdoor activities). Thanks to the toolkit, it is possible to provide skills that can also be spent in the youth sector, providing youth leadership skills, capable of leading a group.

4. General conclusion and recommendations

Evaluation of the Pilot Action:

- Overall participants enjoyed the training as shown by the low drop-out rate but also their active participation the whole training. It was for them a great opportunity to learn more about outdoor activities and get involved in hiking. Besides that, it was an opportunity for social participation but also a way to upgrade their skills on using technology. The training in Croatia was very beneficial for most of them and they learned a lot. Most of them express the will to take part in future training. Perhaps online learning was not the best and more effective way of implementing this training, but it was a new way of being involved more actively in outdoor activities. Participants shared their satisfaction about the training and consequently we can say that their needs and expectations were fulfilled.
- Participants liked the atmosphere and working in group, especially when outdoor in nature. During the hiking they often discussed and talked to each other which benefited greatly to the aspect of socialization. They also liked a lot activities and quizzes from annexes as it has a bit of competitiveness. As far as trainees' needs, walking, hiking and bike riding was certainly stimulating for their general health and well-being. Aside many benefits of outdoor activities, group collaborated in the activities and had lot of opportunities to communicate and socialize.
- The skills they learnt they took to groups and passed on by working alongside educators in an outdoor project in a primary school.

Evaluation of the Hi-Ability Toolkit:

- In general, the Toolkit was easy to use. Furthermore, the activities were very interesting and well organized. But not all participants were familiar with the use of e-learning platforms so they needed assistance many times. Moreover, even though the toolkit used was shared internally via e-mail, educator did use the EASPD e-learning platform.
- The toolkit is well displayed on the site and it is well conceived how each module has its overview, topic break down in sessions with the quickfire quiz, and the bibliography and training materials at the end. In addition, Controvento, for some of the modules, which they considered to be more theoretical, they decided to make simpler explanatory Power Point slides.
- The combination of theoretical and practical activities seems to be effective and engaging. The theoretical lessons - especially the one preceding the hike - are used to provide information on what to bring, why, and what to wear. Participants have been involved during the entire part of the organizations, enhancing their autonomy in choosing and scheduling activities.
- The training of the modules also allows to study the route together with the participants, and with the use of pictures for instance, to understand what they are going to see, identifying together the possible challenges. Theoretical learning that is later reinforced and deepened by practical activities gives the best results. Depending on the topic, the ratio of theoretical and practical approach is always different. In particular, hiking intended for PWID requires both theoretical and practical approach and methods should be represented with a slight edge on the practical part. Although hiking and walking in the nature could have different training approaches, we think that actual spending time in the nature is the basis and the best method. The participants were more enthusiastic to be part of an active process instead of learning theoretical knowledge. For most of them was the first experience in outdoor activities or hiking which had also a very big impact in their social life and skills.

Some challenges that have been mentioned from all partners of the pilot action are mainly some fears and concern about health and safety of people with ID in outdoor activities. Another issue is that still little appreciation of this type of learning and the potential benefits both for individuals and people with ID. Moreover, it's not generally recognized the importance and benefits of everyday training. This is also might be a result of the lack of outdoor learning on schools/universities. Furthermore, there is no support from local government and stakeholders. Some participants report a feeling of not being capable. Sometimes also the lack of motivation, money, group of friends as well as shortages of time, resources and support are reasons to not participate in outdoor activities. At last, the stigma surrounding people with mental disorders, often makes them feel uncomfortable to be in public spaces because of the real or perceived judgment.

Some changes that have been mentioned from all partners of the pilot action are first and foremost, to raise awareness for stigma in mental health and also awareness about outdoor activities. This could be achieved with education - in general- and informal education programs are placed considerable focus on improving environmental awareness, while an associated change in participatory action- such as outdoor education- has failed to materialize, and also educational trainings in schools/universities. All these educational programs and training have to be long standing. In addition, continuous and secure funding will certainly ensure better quality of training programs and make it happen more often as well as founding for outdoor activities. Moreover, there is a need for more parks in the neighborhoods, accessible for all citizens and promotion of outdoor activity clubs in local and national level. Also, NGOs could be organizing groups for outdoor learning for people with mental health disorders and PWID and raising awareness should contribute to greater response and more sensitivity from community.

Impact on PA participants:

During the training participants from all partners mentioned that outdoor learning helped them in social interaction, in bonding and social skills. It gave them the opportunity to learn about the benefits of outdoor learning, increasing their empowerment especially in terms of taking responsibility and in having an active and proactive role in the group. Furthermore, they reported that they learned new skills, such as risk management, created new hobbies such as hiking and general it helped them broaden horizons.

All of them got involved in physical exercise. Physical wellbeing is also transformed into psychological wellbeing, having an impact on the participants' daily lives. It helped them to have better psychological feeling, be more confident and helped them to reduce anxiety. Moreover, they reported better sleep and improvement in cognitive functions such as attention.

The outdoor leaning increased their environmental education and awareness of sustainable practices. Lastly, it is also worth mentioning the economic benefits for local small businesses from outdoor activities as well as tourism possibilities that occur.

Piloting process gave valuable insights for Toolkit and methodology development for further exploitation. During the testing a lot of feedback has been received from several involved parties – trainers, training organization, end-users, and stakeholders. All recommendations and feedback have been analyzed and several important aspects for further development have been crystallized.

Recommendations for methodology and content improvements:

- Simplify the descriptions of the activities
- Include less theoretical and more practical information
- Include more outdoor activities and less theoretical training
- some activities (e.x Module 6 and the 6 hats exercise) maybe were a bit complicated for the specific target group to implement



- a section be added to the Toolkit reminding those who want to implement outdoor learning with people with ID of the importance of repeating the concepts learnt several times during the months of training. (e.g., before each lesson briefly review of what has been done previously until the learning objectives are assessed).
- organizing the training activities according to a similar age, diagnosis and interests on outdoor activities (maybe also level of experience) in order to have a better homogeneity.
- Selection should also be made by considering: participants' levels of functioning; participants' motivation for activities in nature; participants' openness to other people; participants' enjoyment of sharing with other people.



Annexes

Annex I: National report template

Annex II: Pictures



Annex 1: National report template

[National report template](#)



Annex 2: Photos

Participants from Italy (Controvento)



Participants from Croatia (Health Life Academy)



Participants from Greece (Epioni- Greek Carers Network)

