

**Interreg
Danube Region**



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Danube GeoTour Plus

Common strategy for engagement of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Danube geoparks

Output 1.1

Danube Geo Tour Plus

Boosting opportunities for more inclusive, valuable and balanced
Geopark Communities

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Common strategy for engagement of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Danube geoparks

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I. ABSTRACT

The Danube GeoTour Plus project aims to enhance the sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural richness of geoparks along the Danube region. This strategy for the engagement of vulnerable groups is a critical component of the project, designed to ensure that all members of the community, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are actively included in the geoparks.

Vulnerable groups, including economically disadvantaged individuals, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, isolated seniors, youth at risk of “brain drain” and women in rural areas, often face significant barriers to participation in community development initiatives. These barriers can include lack of access to resources, social exclusion and limited representation in decision-making processes. In the geoparks’ context, defined by the bottom-up approach, the inclusion of local communities, in their entirety, is crucial. The identity created through the dialogue between communities and the Earth represents the geopark’s core values. The way in which these values are captured and expressed towards visitors needs to be a community driven process. The geoparks included in the project work very well in their respective communities, but still, some groups were neglected due to lack of resources and other difficulties. The Danube GeoTour Plus project recognizes these challenges and seeks to address them through a comprehensive and multi-faceted engagement strategy.

The strategy is structured around four core objectives: Clearly Mapped Vulnerable Groups, Well Understood Vulnerable Groups, Inclusive Planning and Policy Development, and Monitoring and Evaluation. Each of these objectives is supported by specific activities aimed at ensuring that vulnerable groups are not only identified and understood but also actively involved in and benefited from the geopark initiatives.

This approach aligns with key principles such as inclusion, transnational collaboration, partnership, and sustainable development. By leveraging the strengths of NGOs, community organisations, and various government agencies, the strategy aims to create a holistic support system that addresses the multifaceted needs of vulnerable groups. The commitment to sustainable development ensures that these efforts contribute to the long-term well-being of the populations and the geoparks.

Moreover, the strategy acknowledges the limitations and threats facing vulnerable groups and the territories they inhabit. It proactively addresses these challenges by creating adaptive policies and flexible engagement strategies that can respond to emerging issues and changing

circumstances. This proactive stance ensures resilience and preparedness, safeguarding the progress made and the well-being of vulnerable populations.

In essence, this strategy sets out to build a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient community within the geoparks of the Danube region. Through continued collaboration, flexibility, and commitment, this strategy lays a strong foundation for the successful engagement and empowerment of vulnerable groups, ensuring their meaningful participation and improved quality of life within the geoparks as well as building innovative geopark experiences for visitors.

II. INTRODUCTION

II.1. Context

The Danube GeoTour Plus project focuses on integrating marginalised communities such as isolated elderly, ethnic minorities, rural women, low-income residents, persons with disabilities and youth at risk of “brain drain” into geopark activities and development initiatives. This approach not only aims to improve the quality of life for these groups but also enriches the cultural and social fabric of the geoparks. The strategy aims to ensure that these groups have a role in shaping the local identity by creating new and improved geopark experiences for visitors.

The project is a continuation of the Danube GeoTour Interreg project, implemented between 2017 and 2019. The main project result was a joint tourism product designed to strengthen cooperation between the regions’ Geoparks and act as an innovation to accelerate visibility and tourist visits in the geoparks. Common strategy for sustainable management of tourism pressures formed the basis for creating innovative geoproducts. Sharing experiences, testing pilot geotourism products and new interpretative approaches increased local inhabitants’ engagement, Geopark management capacities and lowered the quality gap between Danube and other European Geoparks.

This strategy is an output of Specific Objective 1 - Inclusive and engaged geopark communities, specifically Activity 1.1. - Developing a common strategy for engagement of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Danube geoparks. The document has been developed together by all project partners, under the coordination of the University of Bucharest.

II.2. Principles

Inclusion: The strategy emphasises the importance of inclusion by ensuring that project activities are accessible to vulnerable groups. This includes providing necessary support to facilitate their participation in geopark-related events and initiatives.

Transnational Collaboration: This project utilises the strengths of different partners across the Danube region to advance a common vision for sustainable development. Through this collaborative approach, we ensure that good practices and innovative solutions are shared and implemented across borders, thereby magnifying the project's overall impact.

Partnership: Strong partnerships between local communities, geopark management, and other stakeholders are crucial for the success of the strategy. These partnerships ensure that the needs and perspectives of vulnerable groups are considered in decision-making processes and that there is a coordinated effort towards achieving the project's goals. These partnerships are not restricted to the current project, but are long-term creative cooperations between Geoparks and the communities.

Sustainable Development: The project aligns with the principles of sustainable development by promoting environmentally friendly practices, preserving natural and cultural heritage, and fostering economic growth that benefits all community members, including the most vulnerable. Specifically, The Danube GeoTour Plus project's strategy for the engagement of vulnerable groups is closely aligned with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). By addressing the specific needs of marginalised populations, promoting inclusive planning and policy development, and fostering strong and accountable institutions, the strategy contributes to the overarching goals of reducing inequalities, creating sustainable and resilient communities, and building peaceful and inclusive societies.

II.3. Limitations

This strategy faces several limitations:

1. **Specific vision:** The strategy represents the vision of the participating partners and is geographically limited to the participating geoparks. It can be used, however, in any territory as a model for the inclusion of vulnerable groups.
2. **Common vision:** The strategy focuses on objectives that are common to all the partner geoparks. It will be followed, in the next project period, by specific Action Plans, one for each geopark.
3. **Resource Constraints:** Limited financial and human resources can hinder the full implementation of engagement activities for vulnerable groups. Ensuring the appropriate use of the project's funds and staff is critical to the project's success.
4. **Cultural Barriers:** Diverse cultural backgrounds among the target groups can pose challenges in communication and engagement. Tailoring specific Action Plans to respect and incorporate cultural differences is essential.
5. **Geographical Disparities:** The remote and rural nature of many geoparks can make it difficult to reach and engage all targeted vulnerable groups effectively. Overcoming logistical challenges is necessary to ensure inclusive participation.

6. **Resistance to Change:** Local communities and stakeholders might resist new initiatives or changes proposed by the project. Building trust and demonstrating the benefits of inclusion can help mitigate this resistance.

II.4. Territories, threats, trends and needs

Threats:

1. **Depopulation, isolation, “brain drain”, ageing and marginalisation** of geopark communities are primarily dispersed across rural, remote and mountainous regions. An average 6% population decline was observed between 2010 and 2020 (except for the Swabian Alb), escalating to 16% in Djerdap (SRB) and a 23% decline in Papuk (CRO).
2. **Environmental Degradation:** Geoparks face threats from environmental degradation due to unsustainable practices and climate change. This can impact the natural heritage and reduce the attractiveness of geoparks as tourist destinations.
3. **Socio-Economic Disparities:** High levels of socio-economic disparities in rural and remote areas can exacerbate the marginalisation of vulnerable groups, limiting their access to opportunities and resources.

Trends:

1. **Tourism demand** for geoparks as hidden heritage gems is already witnessed in most advanced tourism geopark destinations in Germany, Austria and Slovenia while it remains at initial stages across other participating geoparks. The summer and winter seasons show the trend of mass tourism at points of interest in Geoparks (highlights). Traces of excessive tourism are visible in many places, from overcrowded parking lots to crowds and littering.
2. **Digital Transformation:** The rise of digital technologies offers new avenues for promoting geoparks and engaging with diverse audiences. Utilising digital tools can enhance outreach and participation among vulnerable groups.

Needs:

1. **Capacity Building:** There is a need for capacity-building programs to equip vulnerable groups with the skills and knowledge required to participate effectively in geopark activities. This includes training in sustainable practices, tourism management, and cultural heritage preservation.

2. **Infrastructure Development:** Improving infrastructure within geoparks, such as transportation, accessibility, and visitor facilities, is necessary to support increased engagement from vulnerable groups and enhance their overall experience.
3. **Community Involvement:** Active involvement of local communities, including vulnerable groups, in the planning and decision-making processes is crucial. This ensures that the strategies and activities are aligned with their needs and aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment.

II.5. UNESCO Global Geoparks perspective

The geopark concept emphasises the integration of geological heritage with sustainable development, education, and community involvement, all of which align closely with the objectives and activities of the strategy.

UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. A UNESCO Global Geopark uses its geological heritage, in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage, to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, such as using our earth's resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing natural hazard-related risks.

By raising awareness of the importance of the area's geological heritage in history and society today, UNESCO Global Geoparks give local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthen their identification with the area. The creation of innovative local enterprises, new jobs and high-quality training courses is stimulated as new sources of revenue are generated through geotourism, while the geological resources of the area are protected.¹

The strategy incorporates sustainable development as a horizontal principle, ensuring that all activities contribute to the long-term well-being of both the environment and the community. This alignment with UNESCO Global Geoparks' emphasis on sustainability ensures that the engagement of vulnerable groups is conducted in a way that develops economic opportunities without compromising environmental integrity.

¹ UNESCO - <https://www.unesco.org/en/igpp/geoparks/about>

The strategy's emphasis on communication and outreach helps to disseminate knowledge about the geopark's values and activities, promoting broader community involvement and support.

The strategy's objective of inclusive planning and policy development directly aligns with UNESCO Global Geoparks' focus on community involvement. By involving representatives from vulnerable groups in decision-making processes, the strategy ensures that these populations have a voice in the management of the geopark.

The strategy promotes the creation of economic opportunities for vulnerable groups through training and skill development, enabling them to engage in geotourism-related activities. This supports the UNESCO Global Geoparks' objective of leveraging geological heritage for sustainable economic development.

The strategy's educational components can include training on the importance of geological conservation, fostering a sense of stewardship among vulnerable groups.

III. ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Clearly Mapped Vulnerable Groups

1.1. Clearly defined Vulnerable Groups

Clearly identify which groups are considered vulnerable within the geoparks. This involves understanding their demographic and geographic characteristics.

The European Commission defines vulnerable groups as *groups within our societies that face higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population.*²

Within the Danube GeoTour Plus project six vulnerable groups have been selected: economically disadvantaged individuals, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, isolated seniors, youth at risk of “brain drain” and women in rural areas. Each of the partner geoparks chose three of the six groups as its focus. The aim of this activity is to clearly map the demographic and geographic characteristics of the vulnerable groups. More detailed and tailored guidance will be given by the Action Plan for the engagement of vulnerable groups, which will be created by each geopark.

Expected Results:

- A comprehensive database of vulnerable groups, including their sizes and locations.
- Enhanced understanding of the distribution and characteristics of vulnerable populations within the geoparks.

Tools

- Surveys and Questionnaires: To gather data on demographic characteristics and specific needs of vulnerable groups.
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS): To map the locations and distribution of vulnerable groups, with respect to the General Data Protection Regulation.

² European Commission

https://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/2010againstpoverty/extranet/vulnerable_groups_en.pdf

- Community Consultations: To gain insights from local stakeholders and representatives of vulnerable groups.
- Creating a list of relevant local networks.

1.2. Collaboration with NGOs and Community Organizations

Partner with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local community groups that have established trust and relationships with vulnerable populations. This collaboration aims to leverage their expertise and networks for effective engagement.

Expected Results:

- Strengthened relationships and trust between geopark staff and vulnerable groups.
- Increased capacity to reach and engage vulnerable populations through established networks.

Tools:

- Partnership Agreements: Formal agreements with NGOs and community organisations outlining roles and responsibilities.
- Workshops and Training Sessions: Joint training sessions with NGOs to build capacity and share best practices.
- Networking Platforms: Online and offline platforms for regular communication and coordination with partner organisations.

1.3. Formalised collaboration inside the Vulnerable Groups

Encourage and support the formalisation of collaboration within vulnerable groups. This involves helping them establish formal structures, such as associations or cooperatives, to strengthen their collective voice and capacity. The geoparks should identify potential key persons and informal groups, around whom the formalisation could be achieved.

Expected Results:

- Creation of formal groups or associations representing the interests of vulnerable populations.
- Increased ability of vulnerable groups to advocate for their needs and participate in geopark governance.

Tools:

- Capacity Building Programs: Training and support for vulnerable groups to establish and manage formal organisations.
- Technical Assistance: Providing technical support to help groups formalise their structures.
- Facilitation of Networking Events: Organising events to connect vulnerable groups with potential partners and stakeholders.

Objective 2: Well-understood Vulnerable Groups

2.1. Needs Assessment

Conduct thorough needs assessments to understand the specific challenges and barriers faced by vulnerable groups through surveys, focus groups, and community consultations. Research existing knowledge (studies of municipalities, NGOs and previous projects) about the groups.

Expected Results:

- Detailed understanding of the specific needs, challenges, and barriers faced by vulnerable groups.
- Data-driven insights to inform targeted support and interventions.

Tools:

- Surveys and Questionnaires: To collect quantitative data on the needs and challenges of vulnerable groups.
- Focus Groups: Facilitated discussions with representatives from vulnerable groups to gather qualitative insights.
- Community Consultations: Public meetings and forums to engage with the community and understand their perspectives.
- On-line databases, newsletters from the organisations, newspapers, and social media channels.

2.2. Exploring their World Views and Space and Time Perception

Understand the world views, spatial awareness, and temporal perceptions of vulnerable groups to better integrate their perspectives into geopark management and visitor experiences.

Expected Results:

- Enhanced understanding of the cultural and perceptual differences among vulnerable groups.

- Improved geopark management practices that are inclusive of diverse perspectives.
- Development of new visitor experiences that reflect the unique world views of vulnerable groups.

Tools:

- In-depth research to explore the cultural and perceptual frameworks of vulnerable groups.
- Participatory Workshops: Interactive sessions where vulnerable groups can share their experiences and perspectives.
- Observation and Interaction: Direct engagement with vulnerable groups to observe and understand their world views.

2.3. Communication and Outreach

Build empathetic communication channels and outreach strategies to understand the needs of vulnerable groups and engage them effectively.

Expected Results:

- Stronger relationships and trust between geopark authorities and vulnerable groups.
- Increased participation of vulnerable groups in geopark activities.

Tools:

- Empathetic Communication Training: Training sessions for staff on how to communicate empathetically with vulnerable groups.
- Outreach Programs: Initiatives designed to reach out to vulnerable groups, such as community events and information sessions.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Channels for vulnerable groups to provide feedback and share their concerns.

2.4. Tailored Communication Strategies

Ensure that communication methods are inclusive, using multiple languages, simple language, and various media channels. Identify keywords, tone of voice, and images, and determine the communication channels to be used (such as face-to-face, phone contact, newspapers, municipal newsletters, organisational communications, NGOs, schools/teachers communications, and unemployment services).

Expected Results:

- Improved accessibility of information for vulnerable groups.

- Increased engagement and participation from diverse community members.

Tools:

- **Multilingual Resources:** Information materials translated into multiple languages spoken by vulnerable groups.
- **Simplified Communication:** Use of clear and simple language in all communication materials.
- **Multi-Channel Communication:** Utilising various media channels, including social media, radio, and print, to reach different audiences.

2.5. Regular Engagement

Establish regular communication channels such as community meetings, social media, social media platforms, and newsletters to ensure that vulnerable groups are informed and engaged.

Expected Results:

- Continuous and consistent engagement with vulnerable groups.
- Ongoing feedback loop to adapt and improve strategies based on input from vulnerable groups.

Tools:

- **Community Meetings:** Regularly scheduled meetings to discuss issues, share updates, and gather input from vulnerable groups.
- **Social Media Platforms:** Using social media to maintain ongoing communication and engagement with the community.
- **Newsletters:** Periodic newsletters to provide updates on geopark activities and opportunities for involvement.

Objective 3: Inclusive Planning and Policy Development

3.1. Stakeholder Involvement

Involve representatives from vulnerable groups in the planning process to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

Expected Results:

- Policies and plans that are more reflective of and responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups.
- Enhanced trust and cooperation between vulnerable groups and geopark authorities.

Tools:

- Stakeholder Meetings: Regularly scheduled meetings with representatives from vulnerable groups to discuss their needs and gather input.
- Advisory Committees: Adaptation of geoparks' advisory committees to include members from vulnerable groups to provide ongoing guidance and feedback.
- Participatory Planning Workshops: Workshops that actively involve vulnerable groups in the planning process.

3.2. Policy Framework

Develop policies that are flexible and adaptive to the changing needs of vulnerable groups, ensuring inclusivity in all aspects of policy formulation.

Expected Results:

- A robust policy framework that supports the inclusion and engagement of vulnerable groups.
- Policies that can quickly adapt to emerging needs and challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

Tools:

- Policy Review Sessions: Regular review and update sessions to ensure policies remain relevant and inclusive.
- Inclusive Policy Templates: Templates and guidelines for creating policies that prioritise inclusivity and flexibility.
- Consultative Drafting Processes: Processes that involve consultation with vulnerable groups during the drafting of new policies.

3.3. Long-term Commitment

Ensure that engagement strategies are not one-off but are part of a sustained effort to support vulnerable groups. This includes flexibility in adapting strategies based on changing circumstances and new challenges.

Expected Results:

- Long-term sustainability of engagement strategies and continued support for vulnerable groups.
- Resilient communities that are better able to adapt to changes and challenges.

Tools:

- Long-term Action Plans: Development of action plans that outline long-term strategies for engagement and support of vulnerable groups.
- Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks: Frameworks to regularly assess the effectiveness and impact of engagement strategies.
- Adaptive Management Tools: Tools that allow for the flexible adjustment of strategies in response to new information and changing circumstances.

3.4. Education and Training

Provide education and skills training tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations to empower them economically and socially.

Expected Results:

- Increased economic and social empowerment of vulnerable groups.
- Improved skills and capacity among vulnerable populations, leading to better job opportunities and social integration.

Tools:

- Training Programs: Development and delivery of targeted training programs that address the specific needs of vulnerable groups.
- Educational Workshops: Workshops focused on skills development, literacy, and other educational needs.
- Mentorship and Support Networks: Establishment of mentorship programs and support networks to assist vulnerable individuals in their educational and career pursuits.

Objective 4: Monitoring and Evaluation

4.1. Feedback Mechanisms

Implement systems for continuous feedback from vulnerable groups to understand the effectiveness of the strategies and make necessary adjustments.

Expected Results:

- Real-time insights into the effectiveness of engagement strategies.
- Enhanced ability to make timely adjustments based on feedback from vulnerable groups.

Tools:

- Surveys and Questionnaires: Regularly distributed surveys to gather feedback from vulnerable groups about their experiences and the effectiveness of the strategies.
- Focus Groups: Facilitated discussions with representatives from vulnerable groups to gather in-depth qualitative feedback.
- Feedback Boxes: Physical or digital boxes where community members can leave anonymous feedback and suggestions.
- Community Meetings: Regularly scheduled meetings to discuss issues and gather feedback from the community in an open forum.

4.2. Impact Assessment

Regularly assess the impact of engagement strategies through qualitative and quantitative measures to ensure they are meeting the desired outcomes.

Expected Results:

- Comprehensive understanding of the impact of the engagement strategies on vulnerable groups.
- Data-driven decision-making to refine and improve strategies.

Tools:

- Impact Surveys: Structured surveys to measure the outcomes and impacts of engagement strategies on vulnerable groups.
- Case Studies: Detailed case studies of specific interventions to illustrate their impact and identify best practices.
- Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks: Comprehensive frameworks that include indicators, metrics, and methods for assessing impact.
- Data Analysis Tools: Software and tools for analysing qualitative and quantitative data collected during the impact assessments.

IV. LOGICAL MATRIX

Objective	Activity	Expected Result	Tools
1. Clearly Mapped Vulnerable Groups			
Defined Vulnerable Groups	Identify and classify vulnerable groups.	Clear understanding of who and where the vulnerable groups are.	Surveys, community mapping.
Collaboration with NGOs and Community Organizations	Partner with NGOs and local organisations.	Better reach and trust with vulnerable groups.	MOUs, partnership agreements.
Formalised collaboration inside the vulnerable groups	Facilitate the formation of groups among vulnerable populations.	Stronger internal cohesion and advocacy.	Training workshops, technical support.
2. Well-understood Vulnerable Groups			
Needs Assessment	Conduct surveys and focus groups.	Detailed understanding of needs and challenges.	Surveys, focus groups.
Exploring World Views	Understand perspectives on environment and experiences.	Insights to inform better management and visitor experiences.	Observations, cultural studies.
Communication and Outreach	Build trust through empathetic communication.	Improved relationships and engagement.	Community meetings, social media.
Tailored Communication Strategies	Use accessible and varied communication methods.	Inclusive and effective communication.	Multi-language materials, various media channels.

Regular Engagement	Establish regular communication channels.	Continuous involvement of vulnerable groups.	Newsletters, community forums, social media.
3. Inclusive Planning and Policy Development			
Stakeholder Involvement	Include vulnerable group representatives in planning.	Inclusive and representative policies and plans.	Workshops, consultation meetings.
Policy Framework	Develop flexible and adaptive policies.	Policies that support diverse and changing needs.	Policy guidelines, adaptive plans.
Long-term Commitment	Ensure sustained engagement strategies.	Long-term support and positive outcomes.	Strategic plans, continuous funding.
Education and Training	Provide tailored education and skills training.	Empowered and skilled individuals.	Training programs, workshops.
4. Monitoring and Evaluation			
Feedback Mechanisms	Implement continuous feedback systems.	Real-time insights for timely improvements.	Surveys, suggestion boxes, online forms.
Impact Assessment	Regularly assess impact with qualitative and quantitative measures.	Data-driven decision making and continuous improvement.	Impact surveys, case studies, data analysis tools.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Danube GeoTour Plus project's strategy for the engagement of vulnerable groups is a comprehensive, inclusive, and adaptive approach designed to ensure that these populations are actively involved in the development of Geoparks. By clearly mapping and understanding vulnerable groups, involving them in planning and policy development, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the strategy offers a roadmap for the project partners to follow for the project's implementation, in a sustainable and supportive environment.

This strategy not only enhances the inclusivity and resilience of geopark communities but also contributes to the broader goals of social equity and sustainable development. Through continued collaboration, flexibility, and commitment, the Danube GeoTour Plus project sets a strong foundation for the successful engagement and empowerment of vulnerable groups, ensuring their meaningful participation and improved quality of life within the Geoparks.