



[EXPERIMENTATION REPORT]

Outcomes from the pilot testing of ABACO tools in Greece, Italy,
Portugal, Spain and Switzerland

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INDEX

Aims of ABACO project and a presentation of the course tools (handbooks and Teacher's guide)	4
Short presentation of the testing carried out in each Country: Italy, Portugal, Greece and Spain.	6
Testing outputs: differences and similarities among the countries involved in the project	10
Positive feedbacks and criticalities.....	13
First conclusions.....	17

AIMS OF ABACO PROJECT AND A PRESENTATION OF THE COURSE TOOLS (HANDBOOKS AND TEACHER'S GUIDE)

ABACO, a European funded project, aims to perform a strategy to face the problem of lack of financial education for vulnerable adults and migrants in Southern Europe.

Among the methodologies and the tools developed by the Nibud Foundation, in this phase of the project the ABACO partners associations have tested the adaptation of the following manuals: "Where does the money go?", "Managing your money course" (composed by an exercise book and a teacher manual) and "Money Book for Micro-Entrepreneurs".

The first tool is an handbook addressed to vulnerable people who wants to learn useful strategies and methods to better manage their family budget. It contains 5 chapters about household budget management: Chapter one is about the idea that spending money means making a choice,

ABACO tools are two handbooks and a training course (made of an exercise book and a teacher's guide)

Chapter two is about keeping track of expenditures documents and organizing and planning them, chapter three is about insurances and financial loans, chapter four is about Money and relationship and the last one is about debts. There is also an appendix with the main information of Abaco's project purposes and activities.

The second tool is composed by:

A teacher manual for the managing money course: it contains 21 sections illustrating the general purposes of the course and the single chapters that will be explained to the students. Each module (both basic and supplementary) has several parts to support teacher in its explanation: general content of the chapter, main aims to achieve, exercises, websites to get more information, useful examples and suggestions.

An exercise book: it contains exercises for each module of the teacher manual, suggestions for discussions and dynamics.

The third tool is a guide thought to support people who would like to start their own enterprise and it gives information about specific aspects related to: the monthly budget elaboration, incomings and expenditures, the taxation system (National Insurance Contributions, etc.), the legal and economic aspects of financial problems, etc. It counts seven chapters: six of them containing

detailed information on different entrepreneurial topics, the last one is a list of links of related websites.

Each project partner before using these instruments had to adapt the contents taking into account the linguistic, social and economic peculiar aspects of their corresponding Countries. In order to elaborate the final version, partners were demanded to do a hard job on content adaptation. In fact, specific aspects like insurances and financial loans access procedures and demanded guarantees, are regulated at national level and partners had to study all the details of the financial

The books had been read by pilot readers and the course had been pilot tested with end users

and administrative national policies and laws. Moreover, because of the selected target – people with a low scholarship level or with linguistic barriers in the case of immigrants – partners had to translate all the new contents in a simple language in order to give everybody

the possibility to understand the basic concepts of the handbooks.

Once the adaptation had been completed each partners started the testing in order to assess the tool and see if it could be a valid instrument for its country.

On one hand, pilot readers (in some case they were possible users, in other cases they were members of the partner associations) gave their opinions and suggestions about the written material, on the other hand through pilot courses partners had the opportunity to verify several aspects, such as: teaching difficulties and methodologies (calibrated to a specific target group and in a particular context –financial crisis-), feedbacks from both perspectives of trainees and teachers about the effectiveness of the ABACO course and a more objective evaluation from the external observers who took part to the whole process.

The main aim of this report is to present an overview of the experimentations carried out in the involved countries, to gather the received feedbacks and to underline the similarities and differences coming up from the testing. In that way it will be possible to understand aspects perceived as positive and effective and those ones considered as critical factors needed be improved. In that way partners can be able to achieve a common training course on financial household management with higher standards level that can be applied in the four countries involved in the project: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

SHORT PRESENTATION OF THE TESTING CARRIED OUT IN EACH COUNTRY: ITALY, PORTUGAL, GREECE AND SPAIN.

ITALY

In Italy the Abaco course organized by ANS – Anziani e Non Solo soc.coop. consisted of 6 meetings of 1.5 hour each (9 hours in total). The treated modules were: "Incomings and outgoings", "Account book", "Administration in order", "Estimating" (annual overview), "Avoid debts", "Saving – Smart saving suggestions", "Insuring, saving, taking a loan". Moreover teachers, taking into account the target group characteristics and needs, chose the following supplementary modules,: "Children and their money", "Varying incomes", "Plusses and minuses". In fact all the participants had children and they were very interested in learning strategies to involve their own children in the financial household management, in addition some participants where in the situation of having varying incomes and therefore had difficulties to manage a annual family budget as it is illustrated in the handbook, this was the reason why teachers chose those supplementary chapters.



Participants to ABACO course - Italy

The number of enrolled participants was 14 but those who constantly attended the course were 5. Among them just one was a man and two of them were from foreign countries (Tunisia and Pakistan). The majority of attendees has been selected with the support of the local social services who, being responsible for public social benefits provision, know very well the social and economic problems of vulnerable people belonging to the local community. One of the most critical aspect registered by the ANS staff was the high level of participant's drop out. Although the course took place on Saturdays (to give all workers the possibility to attend it) among the initial participants just about one third kept following the classes. Regarding the pilot readers, they were a good sample to test this tool. In fact among the seven readers the majority (six out of seven) were female, aged around 49, with at least a secondary school diploma. Moreover three of them were foreigners and they were employed in different sectors, such as: elderly care, catering and factory sectors.

PORTUGAL

In Portugal the course treated almost the same modules covered by the Italian partner and even in this case teachers selected as supplementary sections those most requested by participants, like: "Money and relationship" and "Your child and his money".

The training experimentations involved 20 participants who were already engaged in two on-going local projects of Programa Escolhas, (Acidi organization): "+XL" project and "Escolhas Saudáveis" project. In order to better manage the target group, Programa Escolhas (ACIDI) carried out two separated courses in the same period. It is important to mention that there were no drop-outs during these courses.

The attendees average age was around 34 years, the majority were unemployed women with a low level of scholarship, and very different mother tongues. It was a target at risk of social exclusion.



Testing within the +XL project - Portugal

The general level of participation was very high and active.

GREECE

In Greece the course organized by HRDC - Hellenic Regional Development Center lasted 20 hours, the treated modules were: "Administration in Order", "Estimating", "Avoid Debts", "Saving – Smart saving suggestions", "Resist the temptation", "Insuring, saving, taking a loan", "Get your profit". Beyond the basis modules teachers decided to explain even the following supplementary sections: "Remain independent", "Your child and his money", "Money and relationship", in that way they answered to the requests of participants.

The attendees were six, four of them were women aged between 25 and 50 years and with an intermediate level of scholarship, just one of them was an immigrant from Colombia. In general, the experimentation was perceived as very positive from teachers, observer and trainees' point of view, especially because it was considered very useful and effective in the Greek financial crisis context. The only negative aspect remarked was the high rate of drop out (4 people out of 6) due to professional reasons.

SPAIN

In Spain the course was organized by Transformando s.coop.mad. in 6 meetings of 2.5 hours each. The basis treated sections were the same explained by the Italian partner while the supplementary sections chosen were: "Your child and his money" and "Money and relationship". Transformando disseminated the leaflet of the Abaco course through the support of the Immigration Office located in Madrid and through NGO's working with people at risk of social exclusion.

The title of the course caused a misunderstanding: some people thought it was a course about investments

The idea of Spanish partner was to create a target group homogenous formed by migrant women, because of the role they usually play within the family (children and elderly care, household management, etc.), they were considered as the most adequate participants for this

kind of training. During the recruitment phase, a critical aspect related to a misunderstanding about course contents has been registered. According to Transformando the course title "Where the money go?", led some people to believe that the training was about investment strategies and specific economics issues, so among the trainees, one lawyer and one students with master degree had their expectations not fulfilled...

In Spain, as in Italy, the level of drop out was very high (six out of eleven participants). Moreover, teachers found very hard to keep the trainees commitment during the whole class process. A 6 weeks training is often interrupted by personal issues of participants (new employment, new training, other extras activities). In general the Spanish partner, although it recognizes the importance of this tool, underlined several critical aspects that make it very difficult to carry out the testing process in an effective way, such as: the unsuitable English translation of the handbooks, the lack of pedagogical tool for teachers, the need to improve the teaching dynamics in order to keep the participant's attention (and to avoid the too high rate of drop out).

SWITZERLAND

In Switzerland participants were selected with the support of a local workers union. The participants ended up being just four women: all of them were from Switzerland or Italy and aged between 25 and 55 years old. The course was structured in four meetings, one per week (it lasted one month), two lessons of one hour (depending on discussion) each with a 15 minutes break.

The treated modules were: "Incomings and outgoings", "Account book", "Administration in order", "Estimating" (annual overview), "Avoid debts", "Saving – Smart saving suggestions", "Insuring, saving, taking a loan", "Resist the temptation" and "Get your profit". During the last lesson the "Abaco game" was also tested.

Most participants, being wives and mothers, already had a good knowledge of budgeting

Most of the participants were women with families, consequently the knowledge of budget was already quite high, they were mainly looking for tips and tools to better administrate their household: they

appreciated the account book and a simple excel tool that we created to compare the annual budget with the monthly expenses.

Only one out of four participants gave a negative feedback about the course: she would have added contents. The others found it very interesting. Among the feedbacks they registered: relaxed atmosphere, enough time to discuss the modules and good tips easily useful in everyday life.

A further testing is foreseen in Summer 2011 with women of the local Muslim community.

TESTING OUTPUTS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES AMONG THE COUNTRIES INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

DIFFERENCES

Although the tools used were the same and all partners were committed to test them with vulnerable people, each organization was left free to select its own target group, according to its mission and to local contexts.

So, for examples, differences were registered concerning the recruitment process.

The Italian partner partly had the support of the local social services who better know people for whom this training could be an useful tool to enhance skills in managing family budget and it also disseminated the brochure of the course in several places and offices of Carpi (the town where testing took place).

Spanish partner chose the participants through the Immigration Office located in Madrid and from some NGOs working with vulnerable people. The Greek partner, as the Spanish one, was supported by local NGOs working with vulnerable people.

Portuguese partner decided to select the same people already involved in two on-going projects of Programa Escolhas (ACIDI organization), because they were considered an adequate target group for this kind of course.

Finally, Swiss partners recruited the participants through local Worker Unions.

Some groups were only made of migrants or of locals, while others were mixed.

The differences in recruitment turned out to be differences in the involved target group as well. While Spain and Portugal exclusively involved migrants, Italy had a mixed group while Greece and Switzerland mainly involved locals (in Greece, only one person came from abroad). As a consequence, Swiss and Greek participants had a higher level of scholarship and a less problematic economic situation, compared to others.

Generally speaking, no group registered the arising of gender issues, except Portugal. In fact, ACIDI's observer detected some debates about women discrimination at work. According to the participants (the majority of whom was female) women incomings are usually lower than men

ones because in several sectors women have less chances to become managers and their salaries are less paid compared to men salaries working in the same job position.

Gender and cultural issues did not raised significantly

Although almost all target groups had foreign people, just Transformando underlined some relevant issues related to culture differences. In particular they remarked that the majority of migrant participants coming from South America had a “peculiar mentality”: they found very difficult to understand the saving money logic and the possibility of using those financial tools mentioned by the handbook (i.g.: financial loans, etc.). This difficulty, according to Spanish partners, is due both to the economic situation they had in their country of origin (they did not have money to be saved) and to the fact that the sector of the “interest financial loans” in their homelands was almost an illegal sector managed by unscrupulous people.

SIMILARITIES

Apart from the mentioned differences, the testing of ABACO tools also showed interesting similarities in results, thus endorsing the idea that a common South European approach in financial education of vulnerable targets can be found.

Participants are everywhere predominantly women

For instance, in all countries involved in the testing the majority of the target group was female, so we can say that ABACO testing has had a strong gender orientation. In the case of the Spanish partner, working exclusively with a group of immigrant woman was a specific choice, motivated by the belief that woman and more specifically migrant woman from south American countries are the one in charge of family budget management. This aspect was confirmed during the training. The second reason for that choice was to facilitate communication among participants to the trainee. Actually one of the benefit of the trainee has been the network that has been generated among women, the possibility to identify themselves to other participants problems. This is done more easily when women are not mixed with men. In other cases, even though the training was not for women only, the majority of participants turned out to be female. Reasons can be different: the role played by women in money management (especially when lower class families are concerned – as shown by NIBUD’s researches and as proved for example by the Italian case) or the fact that the lower rate of employment registered among women in South European Countries could justify more free time to

dedicate to training or more simply the fact that partner organizations meet more frequently women than men in their activities.

Migrants are most vulnerable to economic problems

As already mentioned, another common aspect about the target group was the origin of the participants; the testing involved in fact predominantly migrant trainees, aged between 26 and 50. We can say that in South Europe migrant are perceived as the most vulnerable people among the population so they need support in financial education. Several reasons can be found for this: they can't rely on family network support (because their families live abroad), their academic qualification are not recognized so they are most often employed in low skilled jobs which have been more affected by the current economic crisis.

In several testing, observers and participants realized that the suggestions received by teachers to avoid water and electricity waste not only are good strategies to save money but they also represent an important way to save the environmental resources. Therefore, indirectly, we can say that the course was able to communicate an ecological message too.

Finally, while no particular ethical issue arose, it is interesting to mention that some observers underlined the fact that teachers informed trainees that all kind of personal information and/or experiences which came out during the lessons would have been treated in a confidential way. This principle was very useful to encourage people to take part to debates and to share with others their own personal situations.

A confidentiality assurance was important to encourage participation

POSITIVE FEEDBACKS AND CRITICAL ASPECTS

One of the main aims of the testing was to put into practice with real users the adapted tools, in order to check if the adaptation work was successful and to find out what else should have been changed from the original books to make them usable in new contexts and , with different kind of users than the ones they were designed for. From this point of view, as one could have expected, the pilot testing registered both positive and negative feedbacks – from the end-users themselves and from teachers and observers.

POSITIVE FEEDBACKS

The general feedbacks received by the course participants as well as by ABACO handbooks pilot readers, in all the involved countries, have been very positive. Moreover in this period of financial crisis this kind of course was perceived to be a very useful tool for the economic problems that families have to deal within Europe.

It is interesting to mention that in the majority of the experimentations, the feedback received from the observers highlighted the cooperation and open dialogue developed among teachers and attendees and the simple and clear language used by teachers in all testing, that helped participants to better understand the basic treated concepts.

The course was a cohesion factor for people of different origins

Observers also remarked the positive aspect related to the ethnic element. In all experimentations (except Switzerland) at least one participant was from a foreign country and it was seen as a cohesion factor. In Italy

for example Italians and women from other countries (Tunisia and Pakistan) overcame the initial mistrust and learned a lot from each other experiences and traditions. ABACO course, addressed to a mixed target (from the ethnic point of view), can be seen as an important tool to foster integration among people who, although coming from different cultures, have the same economic problems to face.

CRITICAL ASPECTS

A solution to the high level of drop out should be found

As far as the training course is concerned, one of the main critical aspect was the high level of drop out, registered everywhere but in Portugal.

Spanish partner expressed some possible solutions to this negative aspect such as: introducing a registration fee and create homogenous groups with the support of local NGOs. In effect the testing carried out in Portugal can confirm that when the group is already involved in a previous collective experience/project, participant's interest level is higher as well as the their participation and the effectiveness of the course final result. Therefore, it can be said that Abaco course can more easily be offered as part of a broader programme for social inclusion of vulnerable people than as a self-standing course.

Concerning the duration of lessons, most project partners realized that lessons should have lasted more than planned in order to give the teachers the opportunity to treat subjects in a more complete and detailed way. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that in some cases (such as Italy and Switzerland) the duration of each class was shorter then that suggested by Nibud (respectively, 1 hour and 1,5 hour instead of 2,5 hour).

14

Concerning, in detail, the contents of the course, some matters were arisen by the majority of participants and, therefore, require further analysis and adaptation.

The use of mock characters as examples was not effective

First of all, in NIBUD's course, exercises and examples of each module refer to mock characters / households.

The majority of the partners agreed that this strategy is not pedagogically effective, since learners have difficulties to identify themselves with households different to their own, especially since – in most of the cases - learners have bigger financial difficulties than characters. Essentially, partners believe that the situations used as examples should be more adapted to the national socio-economic and political context of the country where the course will be tested or – even – that examples should be taken directly from lives of participants, their problems and the solution they found for them. In fact, as reported by Italy, this has been an excellent way to make participants really feeling involved in the lesson. They turn out at the same time observer and observed. They better focalize their problem and they are stimulated to find, share and exchange possible solution. Solutions which, in fact, when coming from peers are seen to be more reliable. In fact, seeing that someone like them has been able to

implement some of the recommendation made participants felt more confident that they will also be able to do it.

Some sections need to be simplified to be understandable by vulnerable people

Some sections of the course were considered to be too complicated compared to capacities of the target groups. For instance, in Portugal both observers and teacher considered the operational calculations demanded by the exercises too difficult for the selected target group who had showed serious problems with mathematics and basic calculation operations. On the other hand, Italian teachers found problematic the module related to insurance and financial loans. In fact, although the interest of students on the issue was very high, they had problems to understand all the details of this issue.

Finally, Transformando underlined some structural problems. In fact, a lack of coherence between the content of the teacher book and the student one was registered. In connection with this, Spanish partners also reported that the English translation¹ of the course was not always clear and that there were errors in the translation of key words. Also, concerning the teaching methodology, Transformando underlined that the dynamics presented were sometimes too poor or not clear enough.

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

According to the mentioned feedbacks, some changes are required to improve the original tools and to make them effective for a broader public.

The teacher's manual should contain pedagogical strategies

First of all, as mentioned by the Spanish partner the teacher manual should include a special section on pedagogical teaching strategies in order to give the teachers the adequate tools enabling them to better explain the concepts contained in the handbook and in order to keep participants attention during the whole duration of the process. For instance, a suggestion to this regard coming from the Italian experience could be that to take out the topic of the lesson asking questions to the participants, in order to conduct them from their experience to the subject of the lesson and to make them think that they have realized the

¹ All NIBUD's books were translated from Dutch to English, in order to allow all partners to understand them and adapt them before writing them in their own language.

problems and found out possible solutions on how to deal with them. This in order to convince them that if they were able to think about the solutions, then they are probably also able to enact them.

Transformando also underlines the lack of assessment tools, i.e. a specific set of questions or tests through which teachers can evaluate the learning level of participants. In fact, during the pilot testing all partners assessed the training only through questions and interaction with participants.

Moreover, as already mentioned in previous paragraphs: some sections should be simplified in order to make them accessible to people with lower level of education; mock characters should be avoid and the plan of lessons should take in account that 2,5 hours is actually the minimum duration each class should have.

FIRST CONCLUSIONS

In order to carry out the testing process, partners were asked to do a previous hard job concerning: the translation of the handbooks, the contents adaptation and a detailed research on social, economic, political aspects related to the money management of each involved Country.

These experimentations allowed to better understand the weaknesses and the strengths of the tools elaborated by Nibud Foundation and they gave each partner the possibility to realize the aspects which worked well in their own countries and those elements that did not fit and had to be modified on the basis of the selected target group and the socio-economic context.

Generally speaking, teachers and participants appreciated a lot the tested tools (handbooks and training course), especially because they considered that learning/teaching issues about family money management has become fundamental, especially considering the serious economic crisis that is currently affecting the whole Europe.

Under this general consideration we can positively read several elements mentioned above, such as: the cooperation and the open dialogue between trainers and trainees, the participatory approach developed by the teachers to involve people in the lessons, the active participation of the attendees who used this training moment as a space to talk about their financial problems and as an opportunity to share/learn strategies to overcome these difficulties.

Moreover, the testing gave partners the opportunity to share with each other doubts and suggestions which will give them the possibility to elaborate new versions of ABACO tools that will maintain a common general content and, at the same time, will present different sections according to peculiarities coming out not only in each Country, but also in each target group.

