***VISAL, a key to civic engagement for the visually impaired in older age***

**Bratislava - SLOVAKIA**

**2nd-3rd October 2014**

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**REPORT**

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**Thursday 2nd October**

# Welcome and opening remarks

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/U3A2FN>.

65 persons from 24 different European countries, most of them representing visual impairment (VI) organisations, participated in the conference to know more on the VISAL project.

Participants were welcomed by the president of the Slovak Blind and partially Sighted Union, Branislav Mamojka. The project is important for national visual impairment organisations considering their age structure[[1]](#footnote-1). The VISAL toolkit is therefore a very good material for VI organisations to easily adapt and make benefit their elderly members.

Slovak MEP Miroslav Mikolasik highlighted the importance of making lifelong learning accessible to elderly persons, in particular through intergenerational exchanges[[2]](#footnote-2). He was happy that the VISAL project provides a helping hand to elderly VI persons so that they take an active role in society. Such objective is shared by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, who representative, Mr Ján Gabura, reaffirmed the ministry’s commitment to active ageing through the development of a National Programme of Active Ageing 2014-2020, which provides public support policies, including in the area of lifelong learning, so that citizens can enjoy a decent old age.

Renata Mezeiova explained that the VISAL project meets two priorities of the Slovak Erasmus+ agency she represented as it supports education for both disabled persons and seniors. The project’s rationale and outcomes are clearly a call for society to create new educational programmes for disabled persons. This was complemented by Mokrane Boussaïd, Executive Director of the European Blind Union (EBU), who encouraged VI organisations and society at large rethink their strategies and devise new ones to adequately address the needs of seniors who are becoming the majority of the blind and partially sighted population. The VISAL team has achieved this.

The session was closed by a musical tribute to the VISAL project’s initiator, Alan Suttie, who recently passed away.

# Round table - ‘VI persons in older age: lifelong learning towards increased civic engagement’

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/cgoFqN>.

Peter Verstraten, member of the EBU Network of Elderly Blind and Partially Sighted People, moderated the session and explained that VISAL project’s initial acronym was VOICE, standing for Visually Older Impaired Citizens Empowered. For him, every day adds something to your life’s experience and “*a day without learning is a day wasted*”. He also emphasized on the importance of listening to VI elderly persons so as to clearly identify their needs.

David Giles, is a 83-years old former VISAL participant. He considers that confidence is a big factor when you lose sight. VISAL sessions gave him confidence and the simple fact of travelling from Birmingham to Bratislava is the perfect example. For him, “*everybody needs people and support*” but you have to go and find peer or professional support.

For Marjan Sedmak, President of Age Platform Europe, problems are transversal and age and visual impairment are increasingly interrelated. Every elderly “*has the right but also the duty to participate in all the areas of society*”. To do so, their representative organisations and themselves have to connect with others, in particular to continue learning informally. Of course, NGOs acting at any level should open the possibility for people to participate and “*let the voice be heard*”.

Janka Sňahničanová represented the Association of Universities of the Third Age (ASUTV) of Slovakia which aims to prepare informed citizens, not train them. Although up to now there is no specific programme on VI and for VI senior students, natural help is provided to them by other students and the administration. A participant recommended that instead of creating specific programmes, it would perhaps be more realistic and easier to promote inclusive courses which make VI seniors active in the group, thanks to volunteers’ support.

Powerpoint presentation available at <http://goo.gl/JTpAcC>.

Peter ended with reading a checklist on how to efficiently teach to elderly VI persons available at <http://goo.gl/CqIJq7>.

# Overview of VISAL Project

Powerpoint presentation available at <http://goo.gl/Zu2uOn>.

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/zz5st1>.

As the VISAL coordinator, Romain Ferretti explained that the project aimed at empowering elderly VI persons through an informal 7-session course. The sessions are led by facilitators trained to use a toolkit especially developed. During the project 169 elderly VI persons participated in 126 VISAL sessions which were split into two rounds so as to improve the toolkit, currently available in Croatian, Dutch, English, German and Slovak. National conferences were also held at the end of the project so that former VISAL participants could exploit their new confidence and social skills by organising an event.

The VISAL website ([www.visal-project.eu](http://www.visal-project.eu)) gathers all the project information: resources (toolkit, additional exercises and additional evaluation forms, train-the-trainer manual), media (videos, pictures, audio broadcasts), testimonials and stories from VISAL participants, as well as a section on VI and ageing. It will be operational for at least 5 years and organisations holding VISAL courses are invited to send news and any additional exercises they might devise using the template available at <http://goo.gl/X0LvMj>.

Conference participants are the future of VISAL and the project team will be happy to share experience and knowledge to help VI organisations, elderly organisations and retirement homes implement new courses in their country.

# VISAL toolkit

Simone Balkenende, Royal Dutch Visio, VISAL expert

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/GnT0FI>.

An expert team, of which Simone was a member together with Kate Adams from Age UK and Alan Suttie from RNIB, designed the VISAL sessions and set up a toolkit for both facilitators to deliver the sessions properly and for coordinators to prepare them (e.g. recruitment of participants, logistics, evaluation, etc.).

The objective for VISAL sessions is to provide a positive experience to elderly VI learners and increase their motivation to participate by expanding their influence and by understanding, reducing and accepting their barriers to participate. To this end, several academic researches were considered such as the ICF theory, which recommends to look for disabled persons’ possibilities of participation based on their health condition, rather than looking on their impossibilities, or Dr. J.W Atkinsons’ formula on individual motivation which states that if you want to increase motivation, you have to lower barriers to reach it. VISAL sessions were therefore designed to maximize motivation, perception and value while minimizing barriers.

The seven VSAL sessions were built upon the principle of the circles of influence, starting from the learner himself to his surrounding (family, relatives, service providers, civil society). Each session focuses on one circle.

VISAL sessions can be adapted to every group and cultural context, but they always need to include the following components:

* good news introduction
* description of the topic of the session
* exercises
* appointment for the next session

Although the toolkit gives a few examples of exercises, additional ones are available on the VISAL website.

To conclude, the VISAL toolkit provides methodology for coordinating the sessions, preparing them, facilitating them and evaluating them.

The toolkit is available at <http://goo.gl/Ft8VO3>.

# WORKSHOP 1 - VISAL session 5

Leaders: Claudia Unger, Austrian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted, and Ana Vrbanić, Croatian Association of the Blind, VISAL facilitators

Partly-reproduced VISAL session 5 “*Influencing professionals and service providers*” started with the introduction of participants and the topic – who are the professionals and services that we can challenge and how to challenge them? Open dialogue about what makes a bad or good service followed. Participants later divided into smaller groups to choose one particular example of bad service and exchange ideas for challenging and changing service for the better. Each example was presented by a “spokesperson” to receive feedback from the entire group. In the end, assertiveness was discussed as a skill which helps us to negotiate better situation and make the change happen.

# WORKSHOP 2 - VISAL session 2

Leaders: Lovorka Horvačić, Croatian Association of the Blind, and Tímea Hóková, Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union, VISAL facilitators.

The main purpose of this workshop was to partly reproduce VISAL session number two. The central topic related to the circles of influence which indirectly represents the network of our relationships. All participants had the opportunity to join the exercise during which the main task was using either the black print or tactile hand-out with the circles of influence to think about people around us – beginning with the closest relatives and ending up with persons easing our everyday life. The main methods used were brainstorming and group discussion during which participants could share their experience about the strength of their relationships and the mutual influence upon each other.

Of course since participants did not know each other it was important to include also some getting-to-know (saying names and countries) and ice-breaking activities (massage).

The main questions arising from participants were: 1) the duration of the circles of influence activity when working with VI seniors; 2) the willingness of elderly people to talk about their human networks and 3) about the ways and possibilities to improve the circles of influence of lonely people.

# WORKSHOP 3 - Adapting the toolkit to different organisations and different countries

Leaders: Simone Balkenende, Royal Dutch Visio, and Kate Adams, ex-Age UK, VISAL experts

Audio recordings available at 1. <http://goo.gl/C3yd1G>, 2. <http://goo.gl/q31yLt> and 3. <http://goo.gl/2Nx4ai>.

The workshop looked at the key elements of the VISAL course which are fixed and those areas which can be altered and developed to meet the cultural and social needs of VI people in later life in different EU countries. The discussion focused on the timing and length of sessions, the numbers of course participants and recruitment methods and different exercises to deliver key learning outcomes. The workshop looked at wider barriers to delivering the program, where different funding models were discussed, the issue of training suitable facilitators and the skills and expertise they would require and finally the translation of materials into a range of languages.



FOCUS ON TOPICS COVERED DURING WORKSHOP 3

***Funding opportunities***

* Retirement homes so as to save staff, travel, room rental and refreshment costs.
* Company CSR manager (Corporate Social Responsibility).
* Insurance companies. It will be the case for VISAL courses to be held in the Netherlands.
* Supermarket community rooms as they are well benefit from good transport connections.
* When approaching funders, you can use the project evaluation report and other dissemination tools (powerpoint presentation, video, leaflets, etc.) available at <http://goo.gl/qq2cXQ>.

***Recruitment of participants***

Easier when you…

* organise it together with elderly organisations
* base courses in places where VI elderly people live
* secure participants (picking them up for instance)
* organise the course in universities, e.g. a third age university
* merge sessions (morning and afternoon) although this is tiring
* resort to former VISAL participants’ network

More information is available on page 79 of the toolkit.

***Facilitators training***

* A train-the-trainer manual and its complementary powerpoint presentation are available on-line at <http://goo.gl/f8WG1m>.
* Organisations willing to organise their own training should look for support from experienced VISAL facilitators beforehand.
* EBU is exploring the possibility to hold regional trainings.
* The training course can be adapted based on future facilitators’ experience and background.
* Facilitators trainings can also be held jointly with elderly organisations and/or training organisations.

***Number of participants and minimal age***

The VISAL course was developed to meet the specific learning needs of VI persons aged over 60. Although the ideal number of participants is 8-9, coordinators are encouraged to recruit more participants to ensure regular attendance.

Any person/organisation willing to know more about and exchange on VISAL can subscribe to the VISAL discussion list by contacting Romain Ferretti at ebuprojects@euroblind.org.

Day 1 finished with a show by the Závodzan folk group.

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**Friday 3rd October**

# VISAL stories

Powerpoint presentation available at <http://goo.gl/34e9S4>.

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/0xyg4a>.

Rebecca Sheehy presented her story as a VISAL facilitator and introduced former VISAL participants from Austria, Slovakia and the UK.

For Rebecca, the development of a group dynamic was made possible by “*the VISAL journey*”, a 7-session course with connexions from one session to the other, which offers more possibilities than traditional befriending programmes. The concept of good news was particularly appreciated as participants felt encouraged by their peers, whom they learn from a lot too. Participants understood that they have a voice and start “*rethink their life*”. Some of them even started complaining on issues they face in their daily life (e.g. preventing moving a bus stop away from their retirement home). This has made them feel more connected with society and heard. Also, the course had positive impact on retirement homes’ staff, now more aware of issues faced by their VI clients.

David Giles explained that RNIB came to propose talks to elderly VI persons in his retirement village. The sessions have been very beneficial to him, and even more for other participants, in particular older ones. Indeed, his declining sight had a negative effect on his confidence and generated frustration, while he renewed self-confidence thanks to the course. As he said, “*once the ice is broken, it is wonderful*”.

Helmut Dolezal (74 years old) and Reinhold Zinterhof (61 years old) are Austrian former VISAL participants. For them, the more difficult it is to live your daily lives, the more you have to work so as not to be excluded and the more you have to keep on learning and being active. This is why, after the VISAL course, Reinhold started to give history lectures within BSVÖ, the Austrian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted. The sessions and the conference were the opportunity for them to compensate their sight loss by exercising their brain and their memory. They eventually thanked the consortium and audience for listening to the needs of elderly VI persons and for having trained them to stand up and voice such needs. Claudia Unger, facilitator in Austria, pointed out that VISAL participants can recruit themselves new participants within their own network.

As a former VISAL participant in Slovakia, Peter Kovac (57-years old) explained he enjoyed the whole course which enabled him to broaden his network of friends. He has been applying what he learnt in his daily life, especially communication skills. Timea Hokova, Slovak VISAL facilitator, also explained that the national conference was a new experience for all the working group members, and, as a facilitator, was impressed by their level of activity.

An audio recording of Mladen Smud, former 70-years old VISAL participant in Croatia, was broadcast. For him, the course has a double impact as it makes both visually impaired persons and elderly persons feel less isolated, in particular as he could recognize himself in other participants’ words. He concluded saying that “*when you lose your sight, you do not lose your life, you have other resources to draw upon*”. Ana Vrbanić emphasized on mutual learning as, in addition to peer learning, facilitators and participants also learn from each other.

Following a question from the audience on which session participants enjoyed the most, Ana replied that in Croatia it was session 3 “*Choices within the close circle*” as everyday aids where presented to them so that they can access information to make decisions. Peter, from Slovakia, replied that he especially enjoyed the final session “*Reflecting, evaluating and taking things forward”* as participants could review what they had learnt together. He also liked the general VISAL pedagogical approach with groups, games, role plays, etc.

Finally, Antony Smith, representing Age UK, emphasized on the importance for VI organisations and non-VI organisations to link and collaborate more, not only to organise courses but also to address the double issue of ageing and visual impairment together.

Media were played during this session:

* The VISAL audio broadcast available at <http://goo.gl/UO0bLc>.
* VISAL presentations video in English and German are available at <http://goo.gl/9EQu9i>.

# Final Project Evaluation ‘VISAL, the way forward’

Dominique Danau, SAGO Research,VISAL evaluator

Audio recording available at <http://goo.gl/uNMvAU>.

Evaluation findings and statistics are available in the powerpoint presentation (<http://goo.gl/np6Aol>) as well as in the VISAL evaluation report (<http://goo.gl/mxWvjt>).

The conference was closed by Mokrane Boussaid who encouraged participants to come back home with information and resources to share with colleagues and implement VISAL courses using or adapting the toolkit. He finally thanked the consortium for having implemented the project in such a dynamic and enthusiastic way.

With the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union

1. For instance, in the case of UNSS, 78% of members are aged over 50 as follows: 50-65: 34%, 65-75: 26%, and 75 and more: 18%. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more information, please visit the INTERGEN project’s website at [www.intergenerations.eu](http://www.intergenerations.eu). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)