



Life after institutional care project: an overview on the first phase of research

According to the country analysis carried out, the first main findings on the on-going research project on care-leavers departing from the placement system in Italy, France, Latvia, Bulgaria and Rumania, put in evidence as lots of work must be done concerning care leaving in order to efficiently face difficulties of young people without parental care, and to promote their complete social inclusion.

What firstly emerged is that there is a lack of data and information. In fact, few are traces on young people once they left public care. There is a lack of statistics about social services provided and results acquired, which causes a high reliance on data available about young people still in care.

Moreover, it appears clear as the social policies concerning leaving care are poor. There is a fragmentary nature of competences in the social protection system and lack of clear procedures for specific actions. The policies addressing care-leavers are minimal and specific initiatives insufficient as well as resources are often insufficient.

Finally, there is a lack of quality programs in care. Understaffing and lack of resources block implementation of legal standards for preparation of young care-leavers. What emerged is the shortage of specific as well as regular training for social care givers and of specific preparation initiatives. It seems not surprising that an out-

of-family child has to become autonomous by himself/herself.

From this first analysis, some clear challenges have thus been underlined. First of all, there is the necessity of developing a real holistic approach to the problem and increasing monitoring analysis. Moreover, it seems urgent to reinforce and implement new specific initiatives to support young people without parental care in their path towards independence, as well as to raise direct young people participation at all levels.



These first results were presented at the annual meeting of the European network Eurochild in November in Budapest, where Amici dei Bambini and other European associations have promoted the birth of a working group at European level on Children without parental care.

The first results have been deepened as well during the Second workshop of the European research group in Milan (14-16th January 2009), where all project's partners have met to discuss about the first year of the project and also to plan 2009 activities.



ChildOut.org is on-line.

A new version of the ChildOut.org (www.childout.org) is on-line.

ChildOut.org is a site dedicated to the discussion, the examination, the studies and research aimed at providing information and instruments for the promoting the rights of Out of Family Children (OFC), a category at high risk of social exclusion.

ChildOut.org derives from a project co-financed by the European Commission "Social inclusion for out of family children and young people in public childcare", within the Community Action Programme to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion 2002-2006". The project, involving 5 European countries, has compared the child protection systems of Italy, France, Rumania and Latvia.

Research activities were extended thanks to the development of a further project supported by the European Commission: "Life after institutional care - Equal opportunities and social inclusion for young people and promotion of best practices". This last project is aimed at checking the situation of young care-leavers, young people discharged from child protection systems and can be considered the natural continuation of the previous one.

Since 2006, activities were extended to a network of foster families and young people in more than 15 countries in the world called The Pomegranate, the aim of which is to spread the culture of family care and overcoming the welfare-based approach in tackling the problem of juvenile abandonment.

Leaving care - Focus on Rumania through the analysis of social actors

In each newsletter, we would like to focus a little more on the country object of our analysis: this number we be focused on Rumania, considering in particular the interviewees made with local social actors at all level. According to the results of specific interviews carried out, the current Rumanian legislation regarding care-leavers seem good. Nevertheless, there is a lack of specific legi-

The Republic of Moldova - Ai.Bi. awarded for its activities in favour of care-leavers

The local staff of the association was awarded for the activity promoted by Ai.Bi. in the field of the protection of human rights, during the International Day of Human Rights, on 10th December 2008, organised by the UNDP United Nations Development Programme Agency for associations operating in the field of the protection of human rights in Moldova. 30 journalists and 42 local NGOs took part in the competition.

Ai.Bi. presented activities aimed at fostering care-leavers, i.e. adolescents who have to leave the child protection system, in favour of their specific support, once they leave residential care centres and the promotion of their greater social and political participation through the creation of a national group of care-leavers that has become part of the international network The Pomegranate (see www.childout.org)

Leaving care is, actually, a delicate topic: to date, there are around 12,100 children in residential care (Transmonee 2007 features) in the Republic of Moldova. And every year between 500-600 adolescents leave institutes. Only 20-25% of these succeed in life, while the rest of the youngsters still have need of support and help (Alliance of Active NGOs in Social Protection of the Child and Family - Moldova figures).

This is an important recognition for Amici dei Bambini, acknowledging the work carried out by the association to help young care-leavers and result of on-going researches into the topic at European and extra-European level.



They are 18 and have to exit the state social protection” (Interview 7, Bucharest).

There are still some problems for institutions in matching the legislation with the state of things. This seems due to lack of resources, as well as to the fact that there are not often clear procedures for specific actions. For instance, the law states that a care-leaver has priority in accessing social apartments. Still, this norm is not consistent with the actual state of facts.

According to Minimal Compulsory Standards (MCS) for Independent Life Skills Development, preparation for care leaving is “a way of non-formal, participative, stimulating for of education.” It does not substitute to youngster’s formal education, but it is complementary to it.

Before turning 18 (or 26 yrs old if he/she is studying), the youngster is thus prepared for independent life, according to his Individualized Protection Plan (IPP), which may have three purposes - adoption, reinsertion in his/her natural family and preparation for independent life. For every youngster from the Protection System, a Specific Intervention Plan (SIP) is established, which may be an integral part either of IPP or the Services Plan.

What has been emerged is that the system as a whole indirectly promotes a sense of agency (everything is provided for the child and after turning 18 all the benefits cease abruptly). Even if preparation (especially in implementing independent life skills) is easier in family houses than in old-style residential places, “because one thing is to take the child and put him in a house, where he/she lives according to the rules of a normal house and where they are almost like family, and a total different thing is to place them in a mammoth-like centre with hundreds of children” (Interview 5, Cluj-Napoca).

Moreover, according to social workers, minimum standards are often maximal ones due to scarce resources, lack of qualified educators, as well as since many actions depend often on the interpretations/good will of the social operators.

It is clear to social actors, as monitoring work put in evidence, that the youngster loses contact with the social protection service almost at once, and all protection measures (financial or other) cease after a short period. In most of the situation, this lack of information on the actual integration of the care-leaver makes it actually impossible to assess the long term results and impact of

all the measures applied to care-leavers. Anyway, it is important to emphasize as the most salient descriptions of the youngster as depicted by the expert witnesses refer to the tendency of youngsters to prolong their permanence in the protection system, lacking a sense of responsibility regarding areas like education and household. Nevertheless, they also underline that care-leavers’ discrimination and stigma are not uncommon.

The main problems that the personnel working with these youngsters faces, are low salaries, lack of specialized persons and personnel turnover, which negatively influence the young people preparation to start an independent life.

Finally, family-type houses and social apartments are considered to be the most adequate for developing independent life-skills, as they comprise few youngsters and are characterized by a family-like atmosphere, as well as the possibility to practice more the skills involved in having an independent life. Special initiatives in this sense are therefore sponsored by social local actors.

What young people without a family say

Leaving the institute: a second abandonment.

After living in many different institutes I arrived in the one that would be my last and where I would celebrate my 18th birthday. It was the only institute, at that time that accepted adolescents due to leave the system. In just a short time, my time to leave the institute and to do my duty towards society as an adult arrived.

I managed to find a job in a company engaged in training in the work laboratories organised by the Institute. When I left the Institute I went to live with my brother, who had also just recently left the Institute and was dealing with the same problems of social inclusion as all us adults without a family experience. Just a little while later, however, I lost my job.

When I lost my job, the world fell down around me. It had been hard enough to survive with a job, what would I do without one? When my contract in this company came to an end they did not renew it and did not stop to think of the difficulties I was going through at that time!

This is where society can help those who have just left an institute to adapt to the community.

After this, finding a job was difficult, not to say impossible. At that time, things became even more difficult because my brother also lost his job.

So, a new phase of survival began. We both tried to find a solution to be able to go on. On my side, I went to live with some friends from the Institute who had just come out and who rented a house with me. We were six living in this house. At the beginning this was a temporary relief, seeing that I had a place to live and then the difficult part was finding a new job.

One day we were robbed of everything. The owner of the house who lived on the floor above: they took everything from him too. The burglars were some house-mates who had come out of the Institute with me. The owner threw us all out. Now, we were again without anything, and worst of all, without anyone. A new emotional crisis began for me. The world caved in again.

Each of us went our own way and I felt I couldn't, that I didn't know where to start.

Three days went by like that, wandering around so that I wouldn't have to face this reality again with the conviction that my path would have been another one.

However, during these night-time wanderings I met a man who offered me something to eat and while I was eating he listened to my story and to my sad situation. He thought about it a bit and then offered me a job. Now my only worry was finding a place to live. It was Wednesday, and I got to Friday and Saturday. I worked. Until I got to Sunday. That day the man said I could stay at his house until I found a place to live so that I could get organised. His wife and the rest of the family gave me a warm welcome. I lived with him for three months and worked with him for four years.

The conclusion of my story is that a person who comes from an institute is never prepared to tackle life alone and also has shortcomings that are so obvious at a psychological and emotional level.

In the midst of all the difficulties I had to experience, I considered myself lucky to have met that person who offered me his home, his family and everything he had, considering that he

had a wife and two small daughters, as well as a stranger to worry about. It isn't everyone who would do that.

This is essential: to be able also to give emotional support, support to a youngster who leaves the institute until he becomes totally independent. In order to achieve this aim, the family must be considered as the main area of socialisation and development of individuals and as the fundamental institution of society.

The intentions and the action of the State must become stronger and must create alternatives of care in the family context for those children and young people in danger and who have been abandoned, promoting environments where they will receive affection and care.

It seems, however, that family placement is not always possible. So, vocational and laboratory activities must be considered as a basic part of the educational and re-socialisation program by an Institute. And these activities must be developed considering that the time a minor spends in these facilities represents a step towards adult life and not towards an artificial environment that establishes a vast contrast with the reality that they will have to experience outside the institute.

This is why the institute must extend its work to orienting its duties and rights, as an integral part of the community. The institute must use community services and maintain constant relations with the community, so as to make it feel that protection of the minor corresponds to a responsibility of society as a whole. And above all, the minor shall learn how to redeem himself in society and to use his own resources.

Open centres must be created that allow self-discipline with rational management of freedom and rapid integration of the minor within the community.

We must work within the community to ensure that there is not too much contrast with the social-economic conditions of the minor and to ensure that his or her integration is easier.

It is by assessing a temporary family life that we make the transition from institutional life to life in the community easier for these youngsters who leave the institutes: in short, by creating a link between the institute and the community to create the skills and abilities necessary for total independence from institutionalised life.

Alfonso

NEXT EVENTS

European meeting of young people leaving residential care

Bucharest (Rumania) will host (28-30th April 2009) a European meeting of young care-leavers, organised by Amici dei Bambini and its local partner Aproapele association. This event is included in the project carried out in other four European countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Italy and France), whose aim is to increase the knowledge and mutual exchange of positive solutions for the social inclusion of young care-leavers in Europe.

The research project, which will end by the end of 2009, deeply involves the interested categories (local social services, social workers, young people) and has been thought of as a place of exchange and comparison completely dedicated to them.

The three-day-meeting will be attended by groups of young people coming from the five European countries, object of the research, as well as from other Eastern European countries. It will be focused on mutual work on the creation of a virtuous circuit of mutual exchange and knowledge.

The groups of young people will present the results of a monitoring process (a kind of study-action) carried out by themselves in the respective country of origin, about the services available for them there, and creating a map of the existing offices and resources for a positive social inclusion after residential care. The purpose is to help them, in the following days, to structure information material to be distributed among their peers. This material may also include a series of useful recommendations to face this fundamental time of discharge; recommendations which will be presented in front of local as well as European authorities.

The event will also represent a good opportunity to present insertion programmes especially designed in cooperation with the labour market and companies, in terms of the widely spread social responsibility of enterprises and aimed at creating solutions of real employment inclusion.

For any further information, please visit ChildOut.org.



Life after Institutional Care



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www.dgaspc-sectorul1.ro

Directia generala de Asistenta Sociala si protectia Copilului, Sector 2, Bucarest.

www.sas.mmssf.ro/servicii_furnitori sas.mmssf.ro/servicii_furnitori

Asociatia Aproapele

www.aproapele.org

Romanian Association of Health Psychology

Bulgaria

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria

www.mlsp.government.bg/en/index.htm

New Bulgarian University

France

Association pour la prévention et la Promotion de la Santé Psychique of France

Conseil Général de Loire-Atlantique

Université de Nantes

Forthcoming Events:

- April 2009 (Bucharest, Romania): international care-leavers meeting
- May 2009 (Sofia, Bulgaria): second round table
- June 2009 (Rome, Italy): first round table
- July 2009 (Brussels, Belgium): third round table
- September 2009 (Cervia, Italy): final international conference

For any further information about the project as well as about activities of Amici dei Bambini's Research Area, please visit the new forthcoming web site

www.childout.org

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Mutual Learning on Social Protection and Social Inclusion

