



Life after institutional care project
Equal opportunities and social inclusion for young people: identification and promotion of best practices

What is the real situation of young care-leavers in Europe? What is being done to fight their social exclusion? How effective are these actions? Which synergies and innovative projects are possible to help them in their difficult integration into society?

To answer these questions, thanks to co-financing from the European Commission, the Italian association Amici dei Bambini has sponsored a two-year transnational research project in five European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, France and Latvia) – symbols of the new and old Europe – with the intention of studying existing actions aimed to helping the social inclusion of young people without a family.

The objective is to diffuse greater awareness of the social reality of these young people, as well as promote appropriate innovative policies in order to improve the efficiency of existing actions.

The project was developed in a first phase of quantitative and qualitative research to obtain the existing data on young people without families, analyse the initiatives addressed to them at present and study their limitations and costs.

Subsequently, through a second phase of exchange, the data thus collected will be examined and pooled in the transnational research group and all interested players, so that they can diffuse – in a third phase of the project – the best practices identified and the recommendations of use in supporting the social inclusion of the most disadvantaged young Europeans.



The partnership is formed by four main categories of partners: qualified University or Research Institutes, Civil Society Organisations, Local Public Authorities and Central Public Authorities.

The composition of the partnership has been conceived with the aim of guaranteeing a multidisciplinary approach to the whole project development and increasing the capability of the consortium in managing the three main activity areas included in the project proposal: research, exchanges and the areas of diffusion.

Social exclusion and vulnerability of young people without a family

According to the European Commission, social exclusion is «a process which pushes some individuals to the margin of society and excludes them from a full participation in it due to poverty, lack of basic competences, of opportunities for permanent training or, consequently, due to discrimination. The exclusion process moves individuals away from working opportunities, earning and education chances, as well as from social and community networks and activities. Having just a scarce access to authorities and decisional institutions, they often feel weak and incapable of taking part in the decisions about their daily life»¹.

According to this definition, young care-leavers who have experienced a protective measure outside their birth-family for a long time represent a target-group of persons at great risk of poverty and social exclusion.

In fact, as the Working Group on Children at Risk and in Care set up by the European Council has perfectly underlined², *“large residential institutions (...) are likely to alienate children and prevent them from an active participation in society during childhood as well as adulthood. Residential care as a long-term environment for children may deprive them of emotional nourishment and of the development of social skills, as well as being associated with a greater risk both during and after care. It may hamper intellectual and cognitive development, as well as limit the children’s ability to bond and form long-term relationships with other persons.”*

Negative consequences which can be further highlighted due to the presence of violence during institutional care. *“The estimated one million children in residential institutions throughout the region are desperately vulnerable to violence, because they live in a closed environment, i.e. they are separated from society. And the more closed the environment, the greater the risk of violence and the less chance of its being reported”³.*

Too often, young care-leavers are therefore de-sociali-

sed, have no family relationship, no daily autonomy, no sufficient skills, less chances for an employment than peers and no housing opportunities. They are also exposed to different kinds of abuse, such as child trafficking, prostitution, criminal activities, begging, i.e. at risk of social and psychological disease and deviance. Social isolation of young people is also made clear by their fear for the future outside the institution which has been their home. State protection is experienced by them with great ambivalence; on the one hand, the institute is recognized as the place where they have grown up, but it also represents the image of discrimination and of all that they have not had⁴.

A study carried out in the United Kingdom⁵ on about 300 care-leavers confirms their risk of marginalisation in Europe. It has highlighted the following:

- The majority of young care-leavers of the sample was not in regular contact with their families and, consequently, did not consider them for any financial help, preferring friends for small loans;
- Over half of the sample was unemployed, with males more likely to be unemployed, while females to work part-time;
- The job income was not the main source of income for 80% of young care-leavers: state benefits were the main source of income, followed by social services. Usually, the people in this conditions had no self-confidence and felt powerless;
- The lack of adequate qualification was a major obstacle for many young people to get a job able to guarantee an adequate income;
- Very few appeared to have well integrated into their local communities;
- Over half of the young people, who have lived alone in the sample, considered the experience as difficult and frightening;
- Over a third of the young people interviewed had experienced homelessness since leaving care, some of them for several months;

¹ European Commission, 2003, “Common report on social inclusion with an analysis of the results of the national actions plans for social inclusion (2003-2005)”, Brussels, Dec. 12th, COM (2003) 773

² In its final report of May 2004 entitled “Children in Institutions. Prevention and Alternative Care”.

³ Statement by Maria Calivis, UNICEF Regional Director for Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Baltic States, Regional Consultation on Children and Violence in

Europe and Central Asia, quoted in “What about us? Children’s Rights in the European Union. Next steps” November 2005.

⁴ See: Amici dei Bambini (edited by), “2008 Report Child abandonment: an emergency”, Franco Angeli 2008.

⁵ Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew and Nadia Mantovani: “Life after care. The experiences of young people from different ethnic groups”, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London 2005.

- 48% of the sample was engaged in some criminal activity, such as affray, armed robbery, assault, criminal damage, etc.

These results point out what the specialised literature writes about this category. In fact, young people leaving care are generally expected to commence their independent living at a younger age compared to their peers. Fa-

mily network and support are often absent, because lost during the long period spent in residential care, or very poor. Physical and mental health is below average, and young care-leavers used to collective upbringing during their childhood often experience loneliness and social exclusion after leaving care. These results show high rates of unemployment, homelessness, early pregnancies, substance abuse and criminality among care-leavers.

EVENTS

Riga, 19th February 2008: a conference to talk about care-leavers

Riga hosted the first phase of the research project with the International Conference sponsored by the association Amici dei Bambini in collaboration with the Latvian Ministry for Children and the Family, entitled "Life after institutional care": a first opportunity for discussion between European institutions and experts on the reality of care-leavers, i.e. young people (indicatively between 18 and 29) who, when they reach adulthood or after finishing their studies, have to leave state care.

Social exclusion is the first risk facing these young people. This was the main topic of this international meeting and privileged venue for a preliminary exchange of data and opinions. On the one hand, the condition in which young care-leavers in Europe live was illustrated, first of all in Latvia, and on the other hand the social policies promoted by European governments in favour of adolescents who, for the first time, have to face life outside the institute.

During the day of the Conference, the participants tried to examine in depth the degree of implementation of services for young people without families in the countries that have recently joined the European Union and, on the other hand, the difficulties still existing.

From these first exchanges, the confirmation of an indicative and dispiriting fact emerged: care-leavers are the victims of a double abandonment, by their biological family and by society which often forgets about them, leaving them on the sidelines, with socially serious consequences such as marginalization, criminality and prostitution.

For any further information about the Conference or if you wish to download materials concerning it, please visit www.childout.org, available soon in its new version.

A first portrait on European interventions for care-leavers⁶

The first and most significant piece of evidence concerning our analysis about care-leavers in the five European target countries is the lack of information and data about them. Disaggregated data (i.e. specifically on this social category) on care-leavers is almost non-existent, and therefore there are also few traces of the young people once they leave the childhood protection system.

In Italy, for example, traces are lost of about 24% of

young people who leave the social protection system⁷, whereas in Latvia the young people who leave institutes can be traced only if they have applied for economic help from the state⁸.

Actions and policies (at both central and local) level addressing this social category at a strong risk of social exclusion are also minimal and the initiatives addressing them specifically by centres for work, housing or

vocational training at local level are also insufficient. It is very often the private social sector that deals with these young people with actions which are nevertheless limited and frequently of reduced sustainability.

In addition, there is the fragmentary nature of competences in the social protection system and the lack of clear procedures for specific actions. In short, there is a shortage of specific social programmes, as is clear to young people without families themselves, but not so clear to the operators and people with responsibilities in the sectors concerned who consider the problem only if directly asked⁹.

Lastly, it is clear how the age at which young people are asked to become independent is very often inadequate



both with regard to their peers and considering the scarcity of initiatives aimed at promoting their independence in the last few years of their residence in a Care Centre¹⁰.

⁶ Information from Country Analysis Report "Life after institutional care" in Romania, Italy, Latvia, France and Bulgaria, May 2008 presented at the international workshop in Bucharest, Romania, in June 2008.

⁷ Source: Italian ISTAT 2004 HYPERLINK "<http://www.istat.it>" www.istat.it

⁸ "There is no precise information and no statistical data on other

forms of support for orphans and children left without parental care after reaching legal age". Country Analysis Report Latvia "Life after institutional care project" May 2008.

⁹ See: Amici dei Bambini (edited by), "2008 Report Child abandonment: an emergency", FrancoAngeli 2008

¹⁰ Ibid.

What young people without a family say

I'm sure the sun will come!

I don't remember much about my first seven years. I spent most of the others in the Institutes in Stara Zagora, Chirpan, Plovdiv, Skobeleva, and in the hospitals of Sofia because of my speech defect. But that defect has never disturbed me (...).

Life in the Institute of Chirpan where I spent most of my time was almost good. I said "almost" because of course there were things we missed. A life like that teaches you a lot and at the same time it takes you with an enormous strength... You become a lonely wolf (...).

This is because in the Institute you find both love and hate, moments of tranquillity that make you smile and moments of sorrow... Great sorrow. And unfortunately you keep that sorrow. I hope you don't misunderstand me - we can love and we are not looking for pity. And even if you look for it, it's a wrong step to take. I'm sure of that... We get used to the idea that "the world owes us something" and we leave the institute naked: not prepared and without a direction to follow.

I was lucky, and I am still lucky, to meet fantastic people; starting from my first teacher, to the friends I have today. (...) God has given me the most beautiful thing in the world - friends... but I have the sensation that I am losing them very quickly...

(...) After the diploma I could have gone to other cities, but I chose Sofia - the city I grew to love whilst they operated on me for my speech defect. I've never been afraid of work. But with the money I earned I couldn't pay a rent and I was still unsure in my relations with people. I've worked in restaurants, as a messenger, as a sales assistant, as a cashier - lots of jobs but I have never been able to keep one. At times I failed in my work, but only I am responsible for that. Nobody else. And there were a lot of people to help me. Never again will I make that mistake again, I just hope they give me one more chance...

In Sofia, as I was unable to pay the rent, I went to the Employment Bureau of the district. They sent me to a

care centre: I didn't want to go back there but in the end I didn't have any other possibility. I wanted and I still want to escape from this life. It only brings me tears and sorrow. No, not for my sorrow, but for the others I see suffering. Sometimes for me as well, because I went to bed many nights without even having anything to eat. I was afraid..... because there's nothing more horrible than going to bed hungry and not having anyone to warm you up or to comfort you. I know that this sensation does not exist only for me and I feel even sorrier because of that.

But today my life is different – I'm looking towards the future with hope and enthusiasm. Yes, I know that there's the possibility that my world will collapse around me. Nobody can be sure that something of the kind will

not happen to them. If I could, if I were sure that the sacrifice of my life could at least make one child completely happy then I would be glad to give it, without thinking about it too much. Because I know that a smile will light up, then another one and another one...

You can't expect anyone to understand you in these Institutes and Centres. Each of us "knocks" at the door with the hope of getting an answer to our cry for help. It's like that when your heart is so small and you have already experienced so much injustice... Perhaps one day everything will change... when the sun will shine on our path as well! I'm sure that that day will come!

Ivo
Sofia, Bulgaria

The Reports on the Emergency of Child Abandonment by Amici dei Bambini

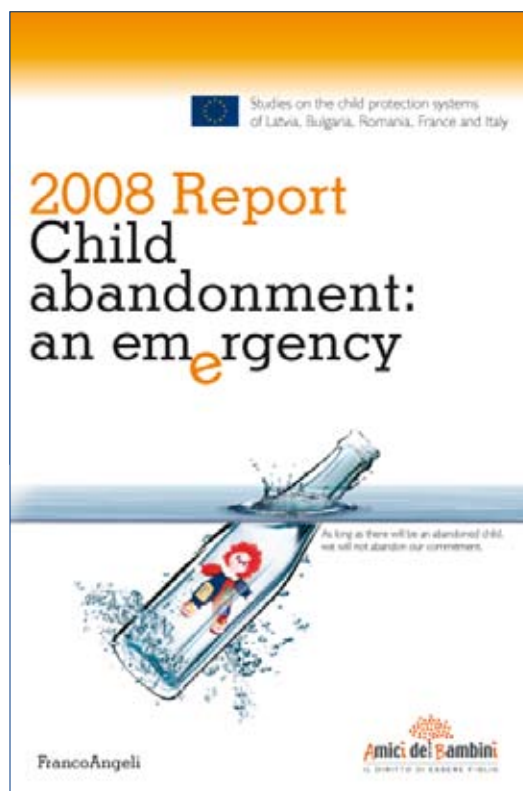
The 2008 Report by Amici dei Bambini on the emergency of abandonment has recently been published in Italy by the publisher FrancoAngeli: "Child Abandonment - an Emergency".

The report analyses the childhood protection systems in old and new Europe (in Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia and Romania), underlining the instruments, the limits and the problems concerning the protection of children outside the family: a real humanitarian emergency.

This is the second Report – after the 2007 one-published thanks to the programme co-funded by the European Commission "Social inclusion for out-of-family children and young people in public childcare".

Starting from the analysis of the current situation on abandoned children in Europe, the 2008 report analyses in depth the social policies and the efforts by civil society, their strong points and their weaknesses, but also the cultural myths and practical difficulties that prevent a concrete and sustainable answer to abandonment based on family care.

A series of recommendations by experts, policy and social actors involved in the protection of abandoned childhood completes this study, suggesting possible solutions to what is often an underestimated emergency.



To order a copy please visit the web site of FrancoAngeli publisher at:
www.francoangeli.it/Ricerca/Scheda_Libro.asp?CodiceLibro=1130.237

Life after Institutional Care



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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
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Forthcoming Events:

- March 2009 (Bucharest, Romania): international care-leavers meeting
- May 2009 (Rome, Italy): first round table
- June 2009 (Sofia, Bulgaria): second 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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