

REFORMING CHILD PROTECTION

SECTOR
Child protection system

COUNTRY
Romania

LEAD ORGANISATION
Hope and Homes for Children, member of Eurochild, the network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people

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DESCRIPTION

Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) is an international charity working to ensure that all children living in institutions and orphanages have the chance to grow up surrounded by the love of a family. The organisation aims to achieve this objective by encouraging the closure of institutions and preventing the separation of children and their families.

The county of Bacău, in Romania, is an excellent example of the tremendous work undertaken by HHC. In Romania, residential care had generally been considered as the main solution to child poverty and social exclusion, with little effort directed towards support for families. In Romania the economic crisis has had devastating effects on social services, including services for children. In particular, the services that suffered the majority of reductions in staffing are those tailored towards children without parental care and those with special needs. Also, a moratorium on employment of new staff in social services was imposed, which led to further issues in the system. The lack of funding also had an impact on the training of the staff, with training budgets and opportunities reduced. Due to inadequate resources and improper financial allocation, families and communities already experiencing extreme poverty grew in number and were faced with separation, exacerbating their social exclusion.

Using an evidence-based approach, HHC managed to demonstrate to public authorities the added value of a reform of the child protection system. The

reform process, carried out by HHC in partnership with the Romanian Child Protection Directorate (CPD), has led to the closure of institutions, accompanied by the identification of best possible placement options for every child or young adult leaving an institution. Other key elements of the reform process include: development of community-based services; prevention of separation of children and families; family reintegration; training provided to professionals; and technical assistance to authorities.

The whole reform process was designed in consultation with professionals and practitioners involved in plans for the National Strategy for Child Protection, as well as with representatives of 47 county and local authorities. Thanks to this investment in family reintegration, children have been able to develop a sense of belonging to a community and increase their self-confidence, enabling them to fully participate in society.

Moreover, the actions of HHC have also had a positive impact on other policy areas, particularly the fight against poverty, by encouraging parents to secure jobs or engage in training or education in order to provide for their children.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

This project endorses a preventive and integrated approach, and aims for the empowerment of people – in this case children and their families – which is a key aspect of social investment.

An important part of the work of HHC is dedicated to prevention. The organisation tries to avoid children being sent to institutions by working at a very early stage with families that are at risk of poverty. This support is essential; not being separated from family is important for the development of children, and for parents as well since it increases their self-esteem and sense of responsibility towards their children.

HHC developed an integrated set of interventions at regional level based on prevention, family reintegration, family support and alternative care. It designed affordable and quality services for children and their families with a special focus on disadvantaged groups, and especially children with special needs.

Interventions are personalised for each child, covering a wide range of needs. Psychological and social assessments are always carried out before making a decision, in full respect of children's privacy.

Decisions regarding the transition into an alternative service take into account the needs of the children, the need to keep siblings together, friendships, and proximity to parents' homes. Family reintegration consists of reuniting children with their families, so that they can develop their full potential, benefit from a feeling of identity and belonging, and strengthen their self-esteem.

The empowerment of children and families is also at the heart of HHC's actions. Instead of being passive service beneficiaries, children and their families are participants in the decision-making process. When closing down institutions, children are asked for their opinion and are kept informed of the solutions identified for them. Families are considered as partners and fully consulted. Young adults leaving the child protection system are assisted in every decision they take towards independent living.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Given the success of the experience in Bacău, local and county authorities have become active advocates of HHC's work, sharing this example with other councils in regions where institutionalisation is still the preferred option. Systemic reform of child protection services has been achieved in about twenty regional administrative units in Romania.

Thanks to HHC's work, in 2014 a state ban on the institutionalisation of children under three years old was introduced. Moreover, the Romanian Government acknowledged that care provided by alternative services is not only of higher quality, but also less expensive than care in institutions. In Bacău, for example, about 600 children remained with their families instead of being placed in institutions, leading to an economic saving of 40% per year compared to the costs of institutional care.

Furthermore, prevention became an increasingly

important aspect, high on the agenda of local and county authorities. Due to HHC's advocacy work, a legal initiative regarding nationwide prevention and regulations on prevention was introduced.

The initiative of Bacău CPD demonstrates that the costs incurred by a traditional institution with 117 beneficiaries were LEI 2,023k (€44,580,000). After the closure of the institution and the set-up of four small family homes (for 12 children each), the necessary budget was LEI 1,212k (€26,708,000), meaning a saving of LEI 811k (€17,872,000).



According to recent figures, in Romania the number of children in institutional care has dropped from 105,000 in 2004 to 9,000 today.

LOOKING FORWARD

One of the objectives of HHC is to expand the programme to other countries in Europe and in Africa. The organisation has already provided technical expertise to several national and regional authorities, while fully respecting cultural differences and taking into account local needs.