



SOUTH-WEST
UNIVERSITY
·NEOFIT RILSKY·
BLAGOEVGRAD, BULGARIA

VOLUME 1
2001

SCIENTIFIC *Research*

ELECTRONIC
ISSUE

Activities for Child Protection in the Blagoevgrad Region, South-West Bulgaria

The past ten years of Bulgarian' transition period are characterized by increased unemployment, increase poverty, increase of health problems, deterioration in family relationships, increase number of crimes, drug abuse and violence.

As pointed out in the Bulgaria National Human Development Report, UNDP (1998), "...after the economic collapse in 1996, the Bulgarian society "landed"-it very nearly crashed into reality. The introduction of currency board and the hard-budget constrains made life more difficult in the short term with all the consequences this involved for human development."

The crisis impacted deeply on children. As a result the crime rate among children increased and the age of those offending decreased; new phenomena like prostitution, drug abuse, roaming and homelessness appeared; the number of child victims of violence and abuse increased; school drop out rates increased and more and more children were visible living on the streets.

"Services to prevent child abandonment, support provisions for single mothers, alternative resources for children with disabilities, support services in the community for all needy families and children, irrespective of their origin did not exist although some of them are now at a very early stage of development." (The European Children's Trust 2001).

This social vacuum saw the birth of many NGO's (non-governmental organizations). Some of the NGO's organized around the problems of specific groups, such as children with disabilities, children at risk, women, and minorities. The development of these civil society organizations was perceived as having great potential to promote changes in society. "They have a great potential to promote policy change at local and central level articulating the existing needs and development opportunities of their constituencies."(UNDP, 1998). Alongside national NGO's international development organizations such as Save the Children (UK), The European Children's Trust and Care International became involved in projects supporting children and families in Bulgaria and were involved in discussion and creation of the Bulgarian Child Protection Act ratified by Parliament in May 2000. This piece of legislation is the first to specifically address the needs of the children. It created a new state body - the National Agency for Child Protection and its local structures, the Departments for Child Protection. Additionally it defines its responsibilities for the organization, provision and monitoring of the child and family support services and the measures for child protection and the decision-making processes.

This provided a firm foundation for the on-going Child Welfare Reform Project designed by the Bulgarian National Government and supported by the World Bank, UNDP, EU, the British, Japanese and Swiss Governments and other international bodies.

The main principles in the New Child Protection Act, 2000 (Article 3:) are:

- Recognition and respect for the child's personality
- The Child shall be brought up in a family environment
- Special protection shall be provided to children at risk and to children of prominent talent
- Voluntary participation in child protection activities shall be encouraged
- Persons directly involved in child protection activities shall be selected in accordance with their personal qualities and social communication abilities, and with care as to their professional training

- Restrictive measures shall be of temporary nature
- The effectiveness of measures undertaken shall be controlled

Resources in Blagoevgrad

The Blagoevgrad has a population of 82 726 , and from this- 12 306 children (0-18 age). In the town there are some conditions for protection of children and working with them in an appropriate way:

- The Municipality is very responsible and active in supporting all agencies working with children and activities for children. The successive Mayors have been supportive however the fast and frequent political changes have resulted in disruption and inconsistency.
- There is a broad range of schools provision and pre-school facilities
- Other specific child-focused services include the Center for Youth Activities, the Center for Working with Children (art, music, dance activities), Social-Pedagogical Center for Work with Children at Risk, specialized day care center for children with intellectual and physical disability, Children's Parliament
- Two Universities, South-West University "Neofit Rilski" and The American

University in Bulgaria

Additionally approximately 25 NGO's run child specific programs for children, thus we may conclude that there are many and varied resources available. The availability of human resources, as well is an important factor, for example students, professionals, and paraprofessionals.

In the town there are two institutions: "Home for Children and Youth", for children and youth aged 5-18 without parental care and Home for Medical-Social Support (Mother and Child home), for children aged 0-5.

In the last 4-5 years volunteer' activity began with the Blagoevgrad children, mainly for work with children with intellectual and physical disabilities and with children living in institutions.

Recognizing negative tendencies in the period 1990-1993, for example bad living conditions, unemployment, increase number of families under the minimum living standards, increase number of crime in children and youth population (Kaynakchieva, 1994), prostitution, drug abuse and street children, Blagoevgrad authorities, identified the need for effective mechanism for co-ordination and control of the work of all agencies in the system and developed the system for anticipation against crimes and antisocial acts of children and youth. The main goal of the system was to decrease antisocial acts of children in the region of Blagoevgrad while providing them care protection and particular support for integration in the society. The partners in this process are: the Regional Commission against Children's and Youth's Crimes, the Police, the Regional Prosecutor's office, schools, Social Welfare Department and the South-West University "Neofit Rilski". As a result of the worsening situation for children the Municipality of Blagoevgrad founded the "Social-Pedagogical Center for Preventive and Correctional Upbringing Work with the Children". The Social Pedagogical Center was opened on 01.08.1994 and works with following group of children at risk:

- children living in institutions

- children from divorced families and with single parents
- children from restructuring marriages
- adopted children
- children with physical and mental disabilities
- children of unemployed parents
- children of the alcoholics, drug abusers, criminals etc. and with families, providing pedagogical advice and psychological support and counseling.

The center is a liaison structure between The Regional Commission For Prevention of Children's Crimes, the police, schools, social welfare departments, courts, and the labor bureau, NGO's, Center for Youth activities, Medical services.

Since it's opening the Social-Pedagogical Center has responded adequately to the problems of children. The center has organized support classes for children, who drop out school, or didn't enter in school. These were predominantly children of Roma origin. The Center provides free of charge possibilities for children's parties and celebration of birthdays. In a last two years the Center developed a trial program for work with institutions, mainly from Home for Children and Youth, to integrate them with children in the community. Another valuable activity of the Center is provision of weekends and summer holidays in mountain for children with antisocial acts and crime behavior. In emergency cases the Center has provided shelter for four children and two women.

The center organizes regular charity actions for collection of food and clothes for children and families in bad living conditions. The Center works in close relations with pedagogical advisers and psychologists in school, as well as with the teachers. The future direction of the Center is to continuation of the work with children at risk, abused children, abandonment children and families, as well on a preventive level, and conduction of sex education. All these activities the center will conduct in a co-operation with the schools, medical services, police, social welfare departments, NGO's.

We hope that the newly established Department for Protection of children will use the experiences and activities of the Social-Pedagogical Center and will have a good co-operation with it in order to create and sustain better life for children in Blagoevgrad.

CHILD HOT LINE

This Child Hot Line was set up on 12th October 1999 to provide information to children and young people facing difficulties in their personal lives. Twenty-five volunteer Child Hot Line operators provide specialized counseling and crisis intervention on a shift basis. Originally operating 12 hours (per day) the line is now operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The sustainability of the Child Hot Line is supported by various institutions:

- The Municipality of Blagoevgrad has provided for free facilities for running the line,
- pays the phone rental and the running costs associated with the existence of the Line.
- Save the Children Fund UK provided training for the staff and made a commitment to make an initial investment in human resources for two-year period 200-2001. Save the Children UK also supports production of promotional materials in relation to advertising the service, assists the team in identifying other donors to the establishment of the resource centre.
- Regional Police Station provides security for the building

- The Social-pedagogical Centre offers organisational support and temporary shelter for
- extreme cases
- The International Women's club refurbished and equipped the kitchen with cooking facilities.
- The Animus Association (a Bulgarian women's NGO) provided 5 days intensive training for the team in Blagoevgrad and one year supervision once a month. Up until this moment the association has provided 5 training for volunteers.

The Child Hot Line Management Team includes a supervisor and an employed manager of the Child Hot Line, dealing directly with the volunteers in handling the managerial and organisational aspects of the Line. The managing team is engaged in recruiting and training volunteers, holds debriefing sessions between shifts, identifies further training needs and organisation of additional training accordingly. Volunteers, worked on the Line are mainly students in Psychology and Social Work from South-West University in Blagoevgrad, working women, pre-school-educators and unemployed people.

Evaluation

For 18 months of his existence, there are 7426 calls-6486 silence rings, and 940 conversations.

The largest percentage (App./Table 2.) of callers calls (49,3%) is from the teenage group, and the topics are mainly related to misunderstandings and difficulties in communication, as well as problems with sexual relationships. These topics are age related to this group. The most calls received are from are from (App./Table 3.) from female.

The biggest part of calls(app.(table 4) is about problems in communication, mainly in relationships with friends (463/49%) and in family relationships (119/12,7%). The similar percentage have calls about sexual education (5,2%), health consultation(4,8%). There are calls (3,6%) for abuse (mainly domestic and abuse in the street). The percentage of sexual abuse (App./Table 4.) is not big (1,6%) The above issues, expressed in the calls were for a long time a covert topic for conversations. The issue of violence was, in sense, forbidden in the Bulgarian patriarchal society. All acts of domestic violence were kept secret hidden behind the strong walls of the family fortress UNDP (1998, pp76) The Child Hot Line is a good source for giving support of children at difficult situation, with a confidentiality and anonymity.

Sexual abuse

Just 15 cases of sexual abuse were identified from all 940 conversations (1,6%) This is 0.14% from the school population in Blagoevgrad. The abusers were known person for the victim (friend, classmate, neighbour) in nine cases, and in five cases-unknown for the victim, in one case-relative of the case. Four of the victims sought protection from the police and medical representatives. In six cases the victims do not take any further action to stop the violation and continuing to sustain the contacts with the abuser.

Motivation and difficulties, faced by the volunteers, working on the Child Hot Line

The main motivation of volunteers for work on Child Hot Line is connected with the desire to help somebody in need and to be useful, as well as to gain new knowledge and experience.

One of the volunteers shared, "Here (in work on the line) I extend my knowledge and practical skills for work with the clients with different problems. I learn new skills for work in team, as well as emotional valuable social contacts. I work here, because I feel useful, I would like to give the children and youth information, they need, understanding, emotional support, things that I needed to much the same extent when I was in their age. I work here, because I know that preventive and correctional work with children and youth are of particular importance for decrease of social problems tomorrow".

Volunteers provide their enthusiasm, their knowledge and skills for supporting children in difficult situations.

The main difficulties, as shared by the manger of the Hot Line are some technical problems in line, and developing a monthly schedule of the volunteers for 24 hours work of the Line. The consultants sometimes have difficulties with the questions, that they do not always have the answer.

Project "Developing a sustainable service for children and adolescents at risk of sexual abuse ", founded by OAK Foundation, Geneva

Due to the some difficulties in sustainability of the line, "Children First Association" developed a project "Developing a sustainable service for children and adolescents at risk of sexual abuse". The project is funded by OAK Foundation, Geneva.

The main goal of the project is: to establish a sustainable system for support to children at risk or who have been sexually abused in the community whilst strictly observing the rules for confidentiality and anonymity, offering counselling, advice and information on the Child Hot Line thus protecting the rights of the child to a safe life and the right to be respected. Analysis of the information collected will be used to identify specific age groups at risk of sexual abuse and to initiate activities around these.

Expected outputs of the Projects are:

- Child Hot Line to able to run a professional 24 hour full week service
- Advice and consultations, provided to children in a manner that respects both the
- dignity and their rights and ensures their best interests
- Capacity of the Centre to offer temporary shelter to children in need bolstered by the
- provision of equipped kitchen
- Computerised register and database of children at risk in the Blagoevgrad region established
- Capacity and knowledge on child protection issues and practice of relevant authorities strengthened
- Working pilot for child protection in Bulgaria in operation consisting of a comprehensive reporting system and inter-agency planning and collaboration
- Public information campaign informed by hard data and fact developed and disseminated

We hope that the project will support better co-ordination between agencies and services for children in Blagoevgrad

CHILDREN FIRST ASSOCIATION

Founded in June, 2000, the main priority of this nongovernmental organisation is Children whatever they are.

The organisation support and work with Children:

- from poor families
- drop out school children
- victims of violence
- girls at risk for traffic
- whose parents are in prison
- in contradictions with the law
- with ethnic and minority origin

Services for Roma children

Roma children is one of the most vulnerable group in the region.

The serious problem in the field of education remains the growing dropout tendency, especially among children from Roma population. According to this negative tendency the efforts of some NGO's were directed to the sustain children and school. Some of NGO's organise the activities for preparation of Roma children for entering schools, including, the Social Pedagogical Centre and Youth House. They provided special programs for socialisation and preparation for entering school of Roma children, as well as provided basic health education and support for finding the appropriate work for young adults.

Children's Parliament

In 1999 with the decision of the Municipal Council a Children's Parliament was established. This gives the possibility for the voice of the children to be heard more often. The children have creative ideas, they are more sensible to the problems of their peers, and may provide realistic decisions of their problems.

The main activities of Children's Parliament are:

- technoparties
- sport's events with title "No to the drugs, cigarettes and alcohol"
- campaign against HIV and drugs
- concerts, exhibitions

The children have also put forward a strong wish for the arrangement of a security system in schools. The Children's Parliament is a partner in the work of agencies, concerning children. They have a right to take a part in Municipal Sessions, when there are discussions of their problems.

Children's right's education

Workshops for popularising the Convention of Children's right are conducted.

Except that the years passed since ratification of the Convention of Children's rights by Bulgaria " we still think that the Convention is not very well known in the country, not as a text, but as a philosophy, as a principle, something that is not easy for understanding"(2/2201)

Since 1994 Club "Friends of UNICEF" starts to provide workshops about children's rights for teachers, parents, and children. Later on the other agencies provided such courses and workshops. The main approach is CHILDREN EDUCATE CHILDREN.

This year the title of the activities for education on children's rights is "The rights of the children between personal freedom and the responsibilities". This programme will be lead in all schools in the town. The Centre for Youth activities organised a TV programme "School for citizens", in which are discussed a number of topics, interesting for children. The Centre for Youth Activities together with theatre "Flower" in Sofia organizes workshops for using some drama techniques in upbringing of youth.

The health education, sexual education are another topics of activity for some agencies; the Social-Pedagogical Centre, Centre for Youth Activities, the Department of Promotion of Health and South-West University.

All the agencies and NGO's in the town have programs for prevention of drug abuse, which realised through different approaches and actions.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned activities are just a part of the activities for children in the town of Blagoevgrad. There are various positive steps to the protection of children in Blagoevgrad region. But still the activities are not well co-ordinated between particular state agencies, NGO's and other existing resources in the community. The problem for integration of children with disabilities still exist, and inclusive education is still under discussion. There are not enough counselling services for abused children, no research on the topic of abuse and neglect, there are still problems, waiting for a proper decision. There is no centre for treatment of drug abusers. The foster family system has yet to develop.

As pointed out in European Children Trust Programme for Bulgaria, "The newly established State Agency for Child Protection, all the Ministries responsible for the children, the respective local structures and the community groups can improve the care for the children if they actively collaborate and take the necessary responsibilities for establishing sustainable solutions to the current needs and problems"

Sustainability is one of the key attributes of good development and real change. In the context of the new social-economic realities, multi-agency co-operation appears as new philosophy in different areas of activities for children. For effective partnership (Stancheva, 1999) it is necessary to have a proper evaluation of needs and competencies, well defined and organised structures for child protection. It is necessary to move from single projects to a planned system, in connection with the reforms and proper evaluation of the needs, team work, movement from expert models to the partnership between professionals, families and children.

Appendix

Table 1. Clients, seeking support from the Hot line

Who rings	Number of conducted conversations	Per cent to the school children's population in Blagoevgrad
Children and Youth	851	8.02%
Adults (parents, relatives, neighbours, students, journalists)	89	-

Table 2. Calls, distributed by age groups of the clients

Age groups of the clients	Number of conducted conversations	Per cent from the total number of calls
7-12	240	25.5%
13-18	464	49,3%
18-25 years	38	4%
>25 years	73	7,9%
Unknown age	125	13,3%

Table 3. Calls, distributed by sex of the clients

Sex of the client	Number of conducted conversations	Percentage to the whole number of calls
Male	344	36,6%
Female	596	63,4%

Table 4. Types of conversations

Type of conversations	Number of conducted conversations	Percentage from the whole number of conversations
1. Problems in communication and relationships (in school, in family, with friends, with strangers)	707	74,1%
2. Seeking information	146	15,5%

3. Study for the functions of Hot line	112	11,9%
4. Sexual education	49	5,2%
5. Health's consultation	45	4,8%
6. Loneliness	35	3,7%
7. Call for abuse	34	3,6%
8. Drug abuse	34	3,6%
9. Call for problem, which is not subject of the Hot line	23	2,4%
10. Seek for professional psychological support	20	2,1%
11. Discussion on particular topic	20	2,1%
12. Smoke	17	1,8%
13. Sexual abuse	15	1,6%
14. Unwanted pregnancy	10	1,1%
15. Health's problem-disease	10	1,1%
16. Call for thanks to the Hot line	8	0,9%
17. Puberty	7	0,7%
18. Seek for legislative protection	7	0,7%
19. Announcement of information	6	0,6%
20. Alcohol use	5	0,5%
21. Sharing the joy	5	0,5%
22. Divorce of the parents	4	0,4%
23. Homosexual relationships	4	0,4%
24. Disability	4	0,4%
25. Need for social support/assistance	3	0,3%
26. Sects	2	0,2%
27. Angry call to the Hot line	2	0,2%
28. Misuse of medicines	1	0,1%