

Kiezen voor betere zorg voor kinderen: “gatekeeping”

Netwerkdag Better Care Network Netherlands

22 april 2016, Utrecht

De voertaal tijdens de netwerkmiddag was Engels, het verslag is daarom ook in het Engels

Introduction

Mirjan vossen, welcomes everyone at this special event focussing on the role of gatekeeping in alternative care for children without adequate parental care, organised by Better Care Network Netherlands. The 56 participants of different professional backgrounds: private Initiatives, NGOs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UN, researchers and volunteers, are gathered in Utrecht. A special welcome to our international experts, Maria Herczog, currently Senior Technical Advisor of Better Care



Network and Stela Grigoras, currently Minister of Labour, Social Protection and Family in Moldova. Two other speakers based in the Netherlands will share their field experiences with gatekeeping: Jean Claude Karorera of the Micro Project Foundation and Anja de Boer of SOS Children's Villages. Better Care Network Netherlands kicked off the meeting by a short presentation about the mission and work of the network.

All presentations can be found online at Better Care Network Netherlands.

Maria Herczog – [Better Care Network](#)

Maria has started working as the senior technical advisor of Better Care Network last November. She is an economist and a sociologist with over 35 years of experience in teaching and in vocational training courses, mainly social workers and other helping professionals and doing research in family matters, child protection, child welfare. Maria has been playing an important role in the child protection reforms of Hungary and other transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as a temporary scientific advisor of UNICEF, WHO, Council of Europe, national governments, and the EU. She has been also active in the building of the civil society in the CEE region, becoming the first Eastern European member of the executive board of IFSW for 6 years, later a board member of IFCO for two years. As a member representing the civil society in the EU Economic and Social Committee and a member of the Hungarian Economic and Social Alliance for 6 years Maria took an active role to draw the attention on the complexity of child related issues and the child rights perspective. She was elected to the UNCRC Committee in 2006 and reelected in 2010, where she was the rapporteur of the Committee for the last 2 years. A founding member of Eurochild on behalf of the Family, Child, Youth Association operating in Hungary with her different leadership roles since 1993. She has been working as an elected member of the Management Board in 2009, and as president since 2010 in Eurochild. Maria has written several books, book chapters, articles on child welfare and child protection, partly based on

her national and international research projects, mostly on children deprived of family care, on the child protection system, child abuse and neglect and on alternative techniques to be used to tackle violence, abuse, conflicts.

Presentation

“Why is there a need for gatekeeping? Because we need to keep children out of the care system and we need to provide them with high quality family and community care.”



Although there are many attempts to encourage government to support deinstitutionalisation, there are still too many children ending up in the formal care system: unnecessarily and they spend too much time here. Institutionalisation is a western European concept, which leads to unnecessary separation of children, who would otherwise be placed usually in kinship care. Children are suffering in institutional care and it is causing harm.

The handbook of [Moving Forward: Implementing the guidelines for Alternative Care for Children](#), describes gatekeeping as a ‘recognized and systematic procedure to ensure that alternative care for children is used only when necessary and that the child receives the most suitable support to meet their individual needs.’ The two principles ‘necessity’ and ‘suitability’ are key.

However, in gatekeeping there are no miracles. If gatekeeping is not appropriate it can be damaging for children. Gatekeeping means that if there is a necessity to separate the child, appropriate care should be available. First care option is kinship support. Foster care needs higher requirements. When children are separated from parents, professionals need to act quickly to enable - whenever possible – reintegration of the child. The child is only being separated to ‘repare’ the situation. Professionals do not always understand how to support the (foster)family. An issue in Belgium is the fact that foster care givers are facing difficulties and are living in poverty. Children have complex needs and the task of a being a foster parent can be challenging, both to meet the emotional needs of the children but also to be able to cope financially for the care of the child. We need to take the situation of the caregiver into account. Foster parents need back up of professionals, which needs to be incorporated in the gatekeeping system.

A key question in gatekeeping is, HOW to support and prepare professionals to face the situation of gatekeeping. What skills and knowledge are needed? Who are the different players in gatekeeping? Multi-professional teams should be set up. A challenge is that, medical, education and legal professionals do not necessarily speak the same language. They are not always familiar with talking and especially, listening to children. This is particularly sensitive when it comes to abuse-cases.

Professionals need to be aware that the problems have to be solved where they started: in the homes. Decisionmakers should be close to the families. That is key to a good gatekeeping policy. For gatekeeping and reintegration, families need to be empowered and involved. It is not the professionals who know better: it is the family.

A fundamental requirement for good gatekeeping is research and data gathering: we need more evidence of what works and doesn’t work best for children. We need more documentation of the families. This implies is a lot of work but we need it to take the right decisions.

Currently there is very limited early intervention and family strengthening. If the government would invest in day care centres, it would prevent a lot of problems for children at a later stage

Jean Claude Karorera – [Micro Projects Foundation](#)

Jean Claude is the national coordinator in the Netherlands for Micro Projects Foundations. He works closely with local staff in Burundi, the Dutch Board and external advisors. He is responsible for further developments of the projects, partnerships and lobby and advocacy in the Netherlands and the African countries MPF works in.

Presentation

Jean Claude explains the method of gatekeeping used in the Micro Projects Foundation: Be local - act local is the motto. They approach the villagers, not with a project, but with support they themselves identify. Parents are encouraged to discuss their problems, and to come up with solutions. The programme for example supports the parents to save money for the children's education and to invest in businesses to fight poverty.

Jean shares a personal story: In his family a woman died during labour and the family had to decide about 'what to do with the baby'. The family decided that the father was not able to take care of the baby and that the baby would be better off in an institution. This example highlights the complexity of gatekeeping. Although Jean encouraged the father to keep the baby in the family, the father said he did not have enough money to keep the baby. The family was not able to provide for the child either. The father argued: if you want the baby to stay, help me.

Jean encourages everyone in the gatekeeping system to do better than the institutional care system. As long as parents feel their children are better off in institutional care, the unnecessary separation of children from their family will continue. Our collective aim should be to make the children more comfortable in the family than in institutions. We also need to deliver the health and support services to the families, so they can take care of their children themselves.

In the case mentioned above, the destiny of the child would have been different if health services were provided in time for the mother during pregnancy and delivery: she would still be alive, and the child would grow up in the family. If counselling and social protection services would have been available for the father, the baby could have probably stayed in the community.

Anja de Boer – [SOS Children's Villages Netherlands](#)

Anja works as programme officer for SOS Children's Villages and is steering committee member of BCN Netherlands.

Presentation

SOS Children's Village started after WWII. Nowadays they still have children's villages, but are in transition. Instead of raising children without adequate parental care in children's villages, they are now looking for solutions in the community, which could include children's villages. They have formulated new policies, which include prevention programmes and advocacy towards governments to take up their responsibility towards these children. The new policy includes gatekeeping as a strategy. Anja shares three challenging experiences related to gatekeeping: 1) It is not an easy task, because so many stakeholders are involved and it is an ongoing process in which not everything can be done by SOS itself. 2) It is not a cheap strategy, as it involves more investments to get everyone on board. 3) reintegration, as part of gatekeeping is not easy.

Stela Grigoras – Minister of Labour, Social Protection & Family, Moldova

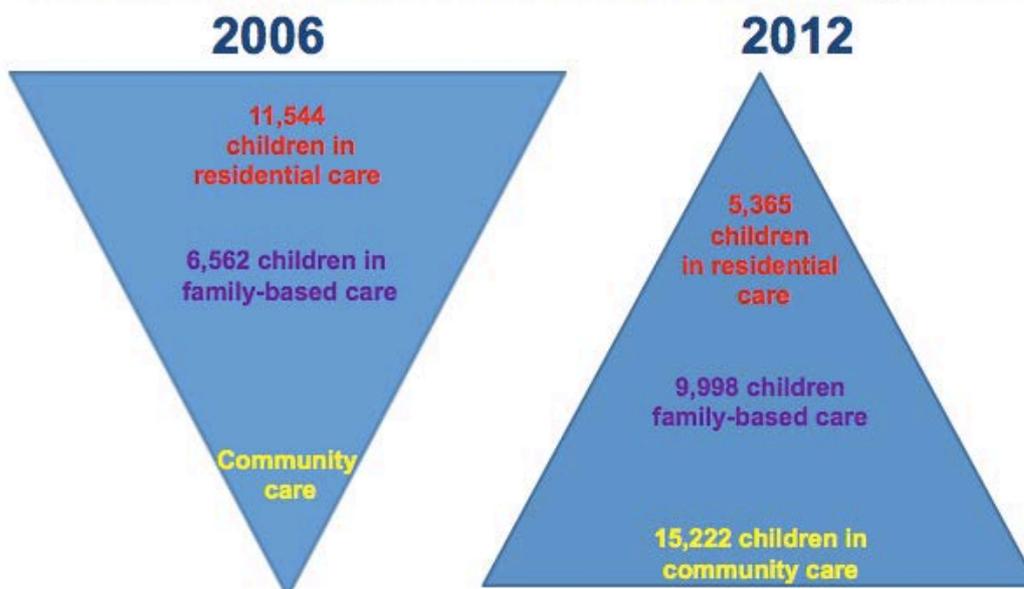
Stela Grigoras (Ph.D.), is Minister of Labour, Social Protection and Family of the Republic of Moldova and President of the International Foster Care Organisation (2003-2011, 2015-present), In her previous positions, Stela has been CEO of Partnerships for Every Child in Moldova (2012-2016) and ran EveryChild's office in Moldova (2000-2011). Her vast experience in developing and managing large social welfare in childcare national reform programs and projects has greatly contributed towards the Moldovan government overhauling its entire social care system. Throughout her professional career, Stela led on supporting the local and national governments in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating transformation and closure of the large-scale residential institutions, as well as planning and delivering community-based social services for children and families; implementing inclusive education programmes, innovative early intervention programmes, mechanisms for inter-sectoral cooperation on cases of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. Stela and the high profile international team at Partnerships For Every Child Moldova have been also instrumental in supporting the national government in developing and revising primary and secondary legislation in child care and child protection in the Republic of Moldova.



Presentation

The deinstitutionalisation process in Moldova has been very successful: A few years back 70.000 children in Moldova were institutionalized and were growing up outside of the family and community context. No childcare support system existed by that time. Gatekeeping was introduced in 2007, and currently only 2000 children are living in residential care.

An overview of the national child care system

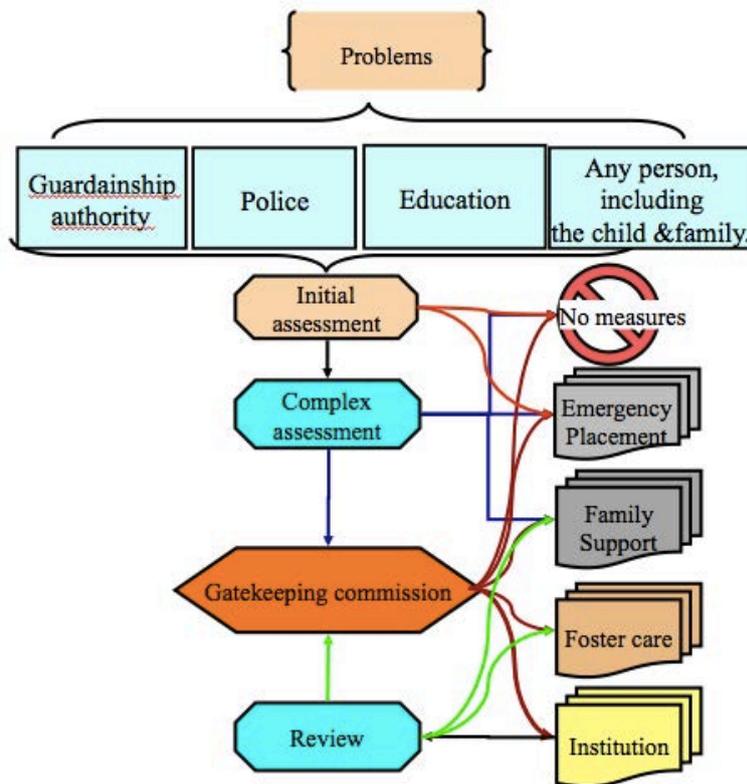


The goal of the deinstitutionalisation process was to reverse the pyramid: They wanted to drastically reduce the number of children in institutions and allow the children to grow up in the communities.

Gatekeeping has different functions over time. When gatekeeping was introduced in Moldova, its goal was to block the entry of children into institutions. Now gatekeeping has developed into a mechanism to prevent unnecessary separation.

In Moldova there are two principles of gatekeeping: 1) Separation only takes place when it is in the best interest of the child; 2) Separation of children only takes place when it is most appropriate and when there is a clear plan. There is no decision taken without an assessment of the child.

Stela explains the design of the gatekeeping:



Gatekeeping is not a social service: it is all sectors working together in the best interest of the child: police, education, health etc: everyone in contact with the children should be involved. Gatekeeping is a good instrument to improve data collection, so there can be a better understanding of the support needed for families.

Decentralisation of social services is a challenge. Local authorities are not always equipped to provide the full range of services for gatekeeping. At community level negative social norms prevail, which hampers gatekeeping to work well.

Plenary Discussion

To involve the audience there was room for questions and discussion. The discussion was fuelled by several statements:

1. *“Good gatekeeping is more a matter of attitude and philosophy than the availability of resources”.*

Key points:

- Importance of multidisciplinary teams. You need a coordinated system why is all about political will. Politics is a philosophy of how you want your country to function.

- Gatekeeping is about what you believe, what is your attitude towards disability (e.g.). If you think specialised care is best, children might be put in residential care, if you think they are best of in the regular education system, the families and school might receive extra support



2. *“Decisions on placement of children in any form of care can be well made without assessments by professionals”*

Key points:

- Responsibility of family versus professionals.
- The voice of the child should be heard.
- Involve community professionals: close to family and children

3. *“As long as many people depend on the alternative childcare sector for jobs, it will be difficult to establish an effective gatekeeping system.”*

Key points:

- Stella: In Moldova 5000 staff were working in institutional care. You have to value their work and find new roles. They were reintegrated in mainstream education to support the staff or become community social workers: It is important to involve them in the deinstitutionalization process.
- Maria: You have to change the attitude of the people who work in the system. They are convinced they do what is best for the children. You also need to invest in the re-training of this staff. In Hungary in 1997 legislation was adapted, but the government did not reallocate money to train the former caretakers. This led to former staff having a bad self-image. Governments need to invest in re-training the staff or they should allow them to retire in dignity.

Key questions to the speakers

Maria Herczog

Q: What about adoption? A: Adoption is one of the alternatives, only if no other alternatives are possible: only domestic adoption. Only if there is no long-term hope for reintegration.

Often time politics love adoption. Adoption focusses on 'rescuing children' instead of keeping them in their culture and identity. Politics love easy solutions. An example is the Dutch 'babybox' (babyluik) which is highly criticised among professionals, but very popular by the politics. This easy solution without gatekeeping is sexy but in severe violation of the baby and the mothers' rights. The babybox encourages parents to abandon their child and not to identify themselves.

Q: What about orphanages? A: too many donors are happy to provide to the orphanage industry: we have the responsibility to make them understand to give the money for gatekeeping and family strengthening to keep the children in the family. What we see is that institutions are expensive and most money is not spent on children. We need to convince the donors that they should be aware of the consequence of opening new orphanages, because it is a traditionally more accepted concept. These children have parents, but donors feel it is difficult to swift their donations. Politics are in a trap to support 'bad parents'. Politically it is easier to help institutions and foster parents, than 'bad parents'. But that is not what is needed. It needs a cultural change.

Stela Grigoras

Q: How do you guarantee privacy in data collection? A: A non-disclosure agreement is being signed. You have to become the data right holder. Share the info in multidisciplinary teams. There it can be discussed confidentially.

Q: How do you recruit foster care families. A: The Gatekeeping commission is responsible for foster care approval and matching children and foster parents. Foster care started in 2000 in Moldova. Now we have national coverage. The profiles of foster parents range from former teachers, nurses of college education or have grown up children. We do not have a problem with finding the parents but to retaining them because there is low remuneration. Foster care families receive social security.

Q: Why are so many children separated from the parents? A: Various reasons: access to education, lack of services for children with disabilities; poverty. Currently migration is an issue: children are left behind.

Q What are the biggest challenges with deinstitutionalisation of children with disabilities. A: The complexity of their needs and lack of services. Children with complex needs are a priority in Moldova and we are developing community homes to live together.

Q: Is there any information on the situation of the reintegrated children? A: We did a longitudinal study of reintegrated children. Most children are doing very well.

Anja de Boer

Q: Will the concept of children's villages disappear? A: We want a loving home for every child. This can mean different things in different contexts. The concept of children's villages also depends on the context. For example instead of separate villages we now also have options for couples to rent out houses to families.

Q: Is it feasible to give every child a family? A: We face challenges that not every parent has the instinct to be a good parent. But we encourage them to be natural. Every human has humanity in the blood.

Jean Claude Karorero

Q: Is it in the culture of Burundi to give away the children? A: the entire family raises the child, but the father takes the decisions. Why did the mother die? (case): Hospitals were not there. Make sure medical services are there. The family needs to be supported. Parents do not always know what is best. But it is also a financial issue. We need to coach the father and family and community.