



High-level Lunchtime Discussion on
The right of children to live in a caring and supportive family environment: examples from
Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Wednesday, 10 September 2014, from 1:15 pm to 2:45 pm
South Dining Room of the Delegates Restaurant, UN Secretariat Building, NY

FINAL REPORT

The Lunchtime Discussion

On 10 September 2014, UNICEF and the Permanent Mission of Bulgaria co-hosted a high level Lunchtime Discussion on *The right of children below three years to live in a caring and supportive family environment: examples from Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. The discussion took place on the margins of the September meeting of the UNICEF Executive Board and brought together over 80 participants, including members of the UNICEF Executive Board, representatives of the Permanent Missions to the UN from the CEE/CIS region, international organizations, NGOs, high level UNICEF and National Committee staff.

Objectives of the Lunchtime Discussion

The overall aim of the lunchtime discussion was to raise the visibility of the work and progress achieved in realizing the right of children to live in a supportive and caring family environment in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Specific objectives were:

1. To showcase the results achieved by selected countries in the region in realizing the right of children to live in a caring and supportive family environment
2. To present a wide spectrum of cross-sectorial policies and practices put into place to strengthen the capacities of families to care for their children, including parental skills and other support for early childhood development.

The discussion represented a contribution of the CEE/CIS region to the wider global discussion coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the CRC and the 5th anniversary of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

The discussion also represented an important follow-up to the 2012 Sofia conference, where twenty governments from Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia joined forces to boost the growing movement to end placing children under three in institutions.

Presenting countries and respective panellists

The panel consisted of high level governmental speakers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Serbia and Turkey, and the UNICEF Executive Director:

- Mr. Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director
- Mr. Hrvoje Sadarić, Assistant Minister of Social Policy and Youth of Croatia
- Mr. Nenad Ivanisevic, State Secretary for International Cooperation, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Policy of Serbia
- Mrs. Azhar Tulegaliyeva, Director of the Social Services Department, Ministry of Health and Social Development of Kazakhstan
- Ms. Nesrin Çelik, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Family and Social Policies of Turkey

The Permanent Representative of Bulgaria, H.E. Mr. Stephan Tafrov, in his capacity as Vice-President of the UNICEF Executive Board, chaired the event. Mr Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director co-chaired the panel.

Themes of country presentations

The panellists presented different aspects of the child care reform taking place in the region with a view to exchanging experiences, identifying good practices and common challenges, as well as strategies to overcome them.

Bulgaria provided an overview of its ambitious de-institutionalization plan implemented since 2010 with the support of the European Union. The plan, developed through wide consultation with civil society actors, aims at closing institutions and replacing them with a range of community-based services. Particular attention is paid to the need to support families at risk, in order to prevent the separation of children unless this is in their best interest.

Croatia provided a comprehensive overview of how the country is developing and strengthening conducive policies to support vulnerable families and prevent family separation.

Serbia focused its presentation on the support provided to families of children with disabilities and the importance of investing in family-support services at municipal level.

Kazakhstan showed how the integration of social workers and outreach services in the health sector is reducing baby abandonment in pilot areas of the country.

Turkey highlighted the wide transformation of child services taking place in the country, shifting from institutional care to foster care and family-like care, but also through the provision of socio-economic support to vulnerable families to avoid family breakdown.

Key topics discussed during the Lunchtime Discussion:

1. All presenting countries recognized the central role of families in society and the need to develop **comprehensive family-centered policies** to prevent the placement of children in institutional care.

UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake described institutionalization as the least desirable option for a child. A better solution is to place children in foster homes. Better still, is to return them to a family member, especially knowing that nine out of ten children living in institutions have one or both parents alive.

Explicit family policies are clearly at the forefront of the policymaking agenda of presenting governments. An important **shift in policy-making** can be noticed in the five countries, moving from responsive child care policies towards developing comprehensive and cross-sectorial family-based policies and services, aimed at preventing children's separation from their biological families and at reintegrating children living in residential care institutions into their biological families.

This new paradigm was translated into practice through the establishment of specific ministries with a coordinating role on family issues, such as the Ministry of Family and Social Policies of Turkey (2011) or the Ministry of Family in Croatia (2011). Serbia recognized in their legislative framework and strategic documents that a family environment is the best setting for the development of a child. The empowerment of families was also cited by the government of Turkey as the most effective economic solution.

All panellists identified **poverty as one of the main causes of family separation**. As a consequence, support to vulnerable families – including additional financial support to care for children with disabilities, or better remuneration for foster care families – were described by all presenters as key elements of the new family-centred approach.

All five countries showed how they are gradually **strengthening national mechanisms that specifically address family issues**, including through the provision of financial assistance to families at risk, and education and social support through social services. A broad range of social/cash benefits intended to alleviate poverty and mitigate risks i.e. social-welfare cash transfers, birth allowances, etc. are also being implemented in all five countries.

In this regard, the Deputy Minister of Social Policy and Youth of Croatia stressed the importance of cash transfers and other monetary benefits intended for families with children, as well as other forms of services for children, such as free compulsory education through support from the Ministry of Science and Education (free books and school transportation), subsidising extended school attendance.

2. Presenting countries have started important **legislative reforms** to reduce the placement of children in institutions, in harmony with the CRC principles. Serbia, for example, introduced a ban on the placement of children under three in residential care. Through its Social Welfare Act (2011), Croatia also prohibits the placement of children under seven into institutional care.

3. Panellists shared information on how their governments are overcoming fragmented and uncoordinated planning and decision-making processes that involve different actors of the child protection system by establishing specific **coordination mechanisms between the health, education, social welfare and justice sectors**. This translates into the adoption of integrated approaches to planning (for example through the creation of one specific authority responsible for child protection or child welfare issues). This is key to ensuring coherence in the development and implementation of strategies and reforms.

The Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan presented their experience of introducing social workers into the health sector to establish a strong link between this sector and the social welfare system in order to prevent baby abandonment. As part of this process, referral mechanisms including protocols for case management were created within the Ministry.

4. All panellists stressed the importance of **strengthening the capacity of social, education and health service professionals** to meet the demand of the new services and provide quality outreach services to the most vulnerable families, in order to prevent family separation.

In 2011, one of the key steps taken by the Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan was a large investment in the capacity building of social workers. Specifically, the government introduced one social worker per 10,000 inhabitants in maternity wards, family medical centers, youth friendly services and polyclinics. It also raised the salary of social workers and introduced policies and guidelines to specify their role in the health sector (i.e. the management of cases of child abandonment is now the task of social workers, thus creating a strong link between social and health services). This led to a reduction of baby abandonment in pilot areas of the country.

In Serbia, family outreach workers are being trained to help parents of children with disabilities access much-needed cash benefits and services, including in education and health.

5. Turkey and Croatia raised the issue of how to make **foster care** more attractive to potential foster families.

The Government of Turkey is currently implementing an extensive programme designed to modernise the fostering system. One reason for the low interest in foster care is the lack of public information, as well as concerns related to socio-cultural and religious issues. By partnering with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies is gradually changing public perceptions and attitudes towards foster care.

Through its National Plan on Deinstitutionalization and Transformation of Social Welfare (2014-2018), Croatia is developing specialized foster care for children, increasing the number of foster families in particular areas of the country where foster care is not well accepted, providing capacity building and supervision of foster parents and further building the capacity of professionals in centres for social welfare and welfare homes.

Serbia set up regional centres to support fostering and adoption, where fostering ‘advisers’ are sensitized to disability issues and now provide on-going support to foster parents of children with disabilities.

6. The **importance of research, data collection and results monitoring to inform policy development**: Countries are developing mechanisms for data collection, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment of existing policies, programmes and practices related to child care reform, including the creation of indicators. Panellists also mentioned the importance of setting up monitoring structures to regularly review standards of institutions. The collection of data and findings from research is key to informing the development of effective prevention and protection measures to identify and support the most vulnerable families. This is the case of Kazakhstan, where the Ministry of Health conducted a study to identify the main causes of baby abandonment. The Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan also developed performance monitoring indicators.

Evidence-based care reform is essential, as well as results-sharing with other regions, and this was also stressed by UNICEF Regional Director for LACRO, who informed the audience that last year, during the Ibero-American Summit, LACRO launched a Call for Action to end the placement of children under three years in institutions, based on the Call for Action launched by CEE/CIS in 2012. He informed the participants that there is strong political will to implement child care reform in LAC, but the region suffers a lack of capacities. Good practices from CEE/CIS should be shared with other regions.

7. The placement of **children with disabilities** in large-scale residential institutions is an important concern for all countries. Serbia shared its successful experience in the development of local community-based services to support families of children with disabilities. An impressive result of this is that 65% of all municipalities in Serbia are now financially contributing to community services for children with disabilities.
8. **Social awareness and changing public perceptions and attitudes** around specific categories of children in residential care (for example, children born to single mothers, children with disabilities or from ethnic minorities) represents one of the most challenging tasks in the implementation of reforms of social services.
9. **The importance of individualized responses**: All countries agreed that there is no common recipe to support vulnerable children and their families. It is vital to provide families and children with individualized services. Plans must be designed with a child's individual needs in mind so that services and supports are age-appropriate and take into consideration specific family situations.
10. **Decentralization** is perceived as one of the most significant changes in relation to child protection reform in the region, an essential process to bring the child protection system as close as possible to the needs of target groups of children. This was very clear in the presentation of Serbia on developing local services for children with disabilities, but was also stressed by the intervention of the Ambassador of Romania to the UN in the Q&A session of the Discussion, where she stated that the involvement of local governments and communities was central to care policy reform in Romania, particularly to promote a shift from reactive to proactive policies and practices.
11. **The role of UNICEF**: All panellists stressed the key role of UNICEF's support to governments and other key partners in addressing common challenges across the region, in stimulating horizontal cooperation and mutual learning and in documenting impact level results for children in different countries.

Key results of reforms

The UNICEF Executive Director informed the participants about the good results achieved in the region since 2012. It is estimated that over the last two years, the number of children below three years in institutional care decreased by 10 per cent.

BULGARIA

- Since 2012, over 2,000 children who needed alternative care were placed in foster families
- Overall numbers of children in residential care have dropped significantly (from over 30,000 in 2000 to 3,113 in 2014).

CROATIA

- Between 2010 and 2013, the number of children and adolescents in foster care increased from 2,001 to 2,306
- The number of children and adolescents in institutional care diminished from 4,014 to 2,504

KAZAKHSTAN

- In pilot areas of the country, the programme on the prevention of child abandonment led to a 42 per cent reduction in the number of children below three years entering residential care institutions
- The number of children below three years placed in institutional care decreased by 18 per cent at national level

SERBIA

- 65 per cent of all municipalities in Serbia now have some kind of community services for children with disabilities
- The number of children in foster care has tripled since 2000
- The number of children with disabilities in residential care institutions has decreased by nearly 60 per cent since 2000
- The number of all children under 3 in residential care dropped by nearly 90 per cent during the same period.

TURKEY

- In the last ten years, more than 10,000 children left residential institutions and went back to their family
- In 2013, 55,000 vulnerable children received support to avoid family separation
- As of 2014, more than 80 per cent of the traditional care institutions for children were closed
- Approximately 5,000 children live in 1,000 child homes and 4,000 children live in 450 small group homes called affection homes.

Remaining challenges

Some of the challenges identified by the panellists are:

- Number of children in formal care in Serbia: The overall number of children placed in formal care (either fostering or residential) is steadily increasing in Serbia. The government is working to systematically prevent family separation by the mainstreaming of new outreach services.

- The issue of how to address the needs of children with disabilities in a more inclusive manner is a concern for Kazakhstan, as these children are the first to be abandoned.
- In Serbia, funding for services for children with disabilities is often unstable and insecure. Services are partly funded by local municipalities – and their budgets have been hard hit by the economic crisis. Mechanisms for ear-marked transfers for community services from the national budget are not yet fully regulated.
- The number of children with disabilities in residential institutions in Serbia has gone down considerably. However there are still too many children with severe and complex disabilities living in big institutions in Serbia.
- How to ensure the continuum of services for children throughout the lifecycle in Kazakhstan.