

Georgia

Experimental apartment declared a successful alternative to orphanages



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Children living in the experimental apartment in Rustavi, set up by UNICEF in partnership with the NGO EveryChild.

By John Budd

RUSTAVI, Georgia, 17 July 2007 – In a depressed city it seems time has forgotten, there is a building that hasn't seen much care for years. But seven floors up, UNICEF helped renovate an apartment for an experiment that has already begun to change the lives of children in Georgia.

This unlikely real estate investment is at the centre of a larger effort to help move children out of large, impersonal orphanages and back into a family environment.

Eighty per cent of the children in Georgian orphanages have at least one parent. Artur, 14, is one of them. Although he has parents who live here, he lived in a Rustavi orphanage for five years before being moved to the UNICEF-supported, family-style home in the apartment building.

"I only see them occasionally," Artur says of his actual family.

Poverty brings rise in 'social orphans'

Rustavi, which is located just 15 minutes from the capital, Tbilisi, was once was an economically viable city. The local metallurgical factory employed almost everyone in the area. When it closed, unemployment took a toll on families. Many children were put into local orphanages by their parents mainly because they couldn't afford to care for them.

Last year, UNICEF and the British non-governmental organization EveryChild set up a partnership to help the government find homes for what they call 'social orphans' – children living in orphanages who still have one or more parents.

UNICEF's Representative in Georgia, Giovanna Barberis, says the organization has been pressing for institutional reform for many years and has made great headway at the policy level.

"We wanted to prove to the government that there were socially better environments for children, which were not more expensive than the institutional system," says Ms. Barberis.

Life in a large orphanage is difficult. Children are often left unsupervised or punished by being slapped or having their hair pulled.

"I visited my Granny without asking for permission and when I got back I was punished and had to spend two hours locked in the toilet," says one child.

'It's calmer and neater here'

With backing from UNICEF, EveryChild renovated and furnished the Rustavi apartment. In January, eight social orphans whose parents cannot take them back were shifted to this family home.



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Artur, 14 (right), and Levan, 13, lived in an orphanage for five years because their parents could not support them.

EveryChild has employed two full-time and two relief staff members to run the apartment. The staff were provided with special training in child development and child rights.

The eight children, several of whom are related, say they feel better about living here. They have better living conditions and better food, and they aren't left alone at the end of the day. "It's calmer and neater here," one child says.

Experiment is a success

For UNICEF and EveryChild, the success of the project was reflected in the improvement of the children's welfare. They were also able to demonstrate that the experimental apartment costs no more than what the government currently budgets for orphans' care.

The Government of Georgia agreed that the experiment was a success, and in May of this year, they took over the responsibilities of running the apartment. The hope is that more apartments can be set up and fewer children left to the poor environment in orphanages.

Back at the orphanage, children's grades suffered because they often skipped classes. Now, that's not possible because they have adequate adult supervision. The children may grumble a bit about it, but their grades are improving and that makes them feel better about themselves.

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