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Commentary

Investing in children: The best way to prevent separation from parents and families

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ABSTRACT

The reliable and disaggregated data on children deprived of family care, living in different forms of public care is essential information to implement the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care of Children and its principle on necessity and suitability. At the same time all needed information and data would also be needed on all forms of support, universal, targeted and specialized services provided or not provided to children and their families locally to prevent separation of children, on different forms of informal care. While there have been many efforts made to prevent institutionalization of children worldwide especially in the most developed countries, placement of children out of their families for different reasons, many of them closely related to poverty is still too often accepted. Some current programs in Europe described in the article can contribute to better implementation of the current policies and recommendations globally, however there is a parallel movement towards emphasizing the need and value of institutional care and the lack of alternatives in many cases, that should also be taken into consideration. More research, evidence and data is needed to defend the arguments for deinstitutionalization.

Gathering data and administrative records of children living in residential and foster care by the experts of UNICEF is a very important and timely act drawing attention to missing information and lack of reliable data and statistical evidence on children in different forms of formal care.² It also needs to be acknowledged that beside these sources on children in formal care, there are even much less information and statistics available on children at risk or harmed; about access to different local, universal, targeted, or specialized services for families and children in healthcare, education, social and other types of services; children in informal care or without any type of care and supervision; support systems available and their relation to referrals, assessment, placement and review decisions, just to mention a few.

According to Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their children. This Article also describes the State Parties' role in providing appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians to be able to fulfill these responsibilities by ensuring access to the needed forms of support, services, and facilities.

Without understanding the linkage between the actions before and following family separation, the opinions of children and their family members and caretakers being heard and taken into consideration, the actual number of children in different forms of care would not, in itself, provide sufficient information neither for better government policies and practices nor for advocacy.

While there is a growing body of evidence on the possible harm and damage caused by different forms of out of home care and

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² Petrowski, N., et al. Estimating the number of children in formal alternative care: Challenges and results. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.026>.

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family separation, and the efforts made to prove the effectiveness and efficiency of high quality prevention, early intervention, family strengthening and local service provision in all related areas (health, education, social, housing etc.), the holistic, comprehensive vision of connecting these two aspects is often lacking; it is often not clear and visible for those responsible for decision making and allocation of resources. There are several reasons explaining these shortcomings including, among other things, clear political, ideological, financial considerations, many conflicts of interests but also missing evidence, information, data. It is still easier to blame the parents for not fulfilling their obligations and overlooking the responsibilities, roles and the short term interests of the communities and the State in investing in children and supporting families.

Data collected on the number of children in care do not necessarily include information about the reasons why and how children are referred to the care system, the services provided to them and their families to prevent institutionalization and support their reintegration and preparation for leaving care, as in many countries the basic assessment and documentation system is lacking or is not available for decision makers and for carers themselves.

1. European perspective

In its recommendation to the Member States, the European Commission³ describes a comprehensive child rights based social protection system focusing on tackling poverty, provision of affordable and accessible high quality services while also enhancing parenting skills in a non-stigmatizing way to prevent separation of children from their families. In case out of family placement is needed, it should be quality community based, family type care instead of expanding institutional care. In the European deinstitutionalization (DI) policy the focus is not only on children but also on persons with disabilities, with mental health issues and the elderly, clearly indicating the need to develop family, community type alternatives to institutionalization for all persons in vulnerable situations and strengthening, among other things, solidarity between different groups of society.⁴

The Commission's recommendations concerning children are in line with the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care⁵ and much research and practice-based evidence on the close relationship between poverty, social exclusion, segregation, and lack of adequate service provision for families and children. Despite the evidence and the recommendations, growing child poverty, cut-backs on and limited access to services, as well as the lack of comprehensive strategies on deinstitutionalization of children focusing on prevention, early intervention, gatekeeping and reunification of children with their families is characteristic in Europe as well. There is still no data-gathering on the linkage between poverty, risk of social exclusion and the number of children separated from their parents at EU level.⁶ The Fundamental Rights Agency's mapping of the child protection systems in EU Member States⁷ was initiated by the EU Commission to learn more about the policies, data and practices to develop a European child protection strategy. As the results indicated, it was not possible to gather enough reliable data on the areas of child welfare and protection and especially not possible to make it comparable for many different reasons.

The 'Opening Doors for Europe's Children' campaign coordinated by Eurochild,⁸ started in 2013, aims to support the implementation of the European DI efforts by promoting the need to develop better family strengthening, child welfare and protection systems, ensuring high quality community based services for all, and targeted, specialized services for the especially vulnerable children and their families to prevent separation of children from their parents and family members. It focuses on existing achievements and highlights the challenges the participating countries are facing when promoting and implementing the reforms. Twelve countries participated in the first phase of the campaign; apart from Greece all of them were transition countries⁹ facing many challenges despite their ongoing reforms. In the second phase, beginning from 2016, important changes have occurred. In addition to Eurochild and Hope and Homes for Children conducting the campaign, SOS Children's Villages International, the International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO) and the European branch of International Federation of Educative Communities (FICE) have also joined as partners, expressing support from many international organizations working with families deprived of parental care. Western European countries have also joined the campaign – Austria, Belgium and Spain – where forms of institutionalization are relevant issues, for different reasons. In Austria, the transformation of institutional care only started in the mid 1980's and has been almost completed, although most of the children in care are living in group homes, accommodating 8–10 children and one-third more than in foster families. The recent influx of high numbers of refugee and unaccompanied children is very challenging for the child protection system, just like the care of children with complex needs, such as mental health problems.¹⁰ In Belgium, the majority of children, mostly those with disabilities, deprived of family care are placed in institutions. There is no DI strategy in Belgium and more institutions have been opened to accommodate the refugee and unaccompanied children during the recent period.¹¹ In Spain, despite the important reforms undertaken, there are still high numbers of children and adolescents in institutions, approximately 40% of all

³ Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage, (2013/112/EU) Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013; <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TEXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112&from=EN>.

⁴ Transition from institutional to community based services (Deinstitutionalisation) http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/social-inclusion/deinstitut/.

⁵ UN General Assembly, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, UN Document A/RES/64/142, 2009, UN Geneva, https://www.unicef.org/protection/alternative_care_Guidelines-English.pdf.

⁶ Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php/Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion.

⁷ Mapping the child protection systems in the EU, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2014/mapping-child-protection-systems-eu>.

⁸ <http://www.eurochild.org/projects/opening-doors/>.

⁹ Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

¹⁰ Country fact-sheet, <http://www.openingdoors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/countryfiche-Austria-2016.pdf>.

¹¹ <http://www.openingdoors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/country-fiche-Belgium-2016.pdf>.

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