

# 15 years of De-Institutionalization Reforms in Europe and Central Asia. Key results achieved for children and remaining challenges

Over the last decade, hundreds of large scale institutions for children have been closed and replaced with family-based alternatives in Europe and Central Asia. While the challenges around institutionalization in many countries across the region persist, and the need for accelerated action is clear, important successes have been achieved for children.

## Support to de-institutionalization in Europe and Central Asia UNICEF, EU and others.

Since 2000, UNICEF, the European Union (EU) and other partners have supported Governments and civil society in Europe and Central Asia to move away from large-scale institutional care for children towards family-and community-based care systems. These complex reforms – which directly contribute to improved child care and social welfare capacities in the region – are often carried out in partnership with the EU and other international and national organisations. These reforms mainly involve:

- Bringing national laws and policies in conformity with international standards (including the UN Guidelines on the Use and Conditions of alternative care) and European standards (including EU laws and policies as part of the *EU Acquis Communautaire*).
- Working with governments to plan the closure of institutions, and the scale-up of needed social welfare and family-based care services.
- Developing effective strategies to transition staff and senior management from institutions to new child care services and employment opportunities.
- Improving the quality of family-and community-based care services through the development and application of relevant standards, guidelines and monitoring tools.
- Assisting governments to leverage and effectively utilize donor funds to cover the transition costs associated with the reform process – for example increasing the number of social workers working to ensure children in institutions are comprehensively assessed and assisted with support; recruitment campaigns and training of foster caregivers; acquiring and equipping small group homes.
- Costing and planning the transition of government budgets from institutions (once they are fully closed) to diversified family and community based services.

- Strengthening the capacity of the various institutions and professionals working in the social welfare sector, mainly social workers and para-professionals working within the ministries and departments.
- Raising awareness among policy and decision-makers, as well as the general public, on the benefits of transitioning from institutional to family-and community-based care.



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Six year old Vladimir and foster mother Petya embrace near their home in Bulgaria.

Shortly after being born, Vladimir was placed in a large infant home in Shumen, Bulgaria. Petya remembers the infant home as having iron beds and rubber mattresses. "There were no blankets, no pillows. Each child was tied either by the leg or arm," she says.

At 6 months, Vladimir was removed from the institution and placed with Petya through the UNICEF and EU supported 'A Family for Every Child' initiative which focused on ending the placement of children, aged 3 and under, in institutions.

Between 2010 and 2017, the number of children in institutional care dropped from more than 7,500 to under 1,000 in Bulgaria.

## Results for children

In 2013, UNICEF commissioned an independent evaluation to assess the extent to which child care reforms in 11 countries<sup>1</sup> in Europe and Central Asia between 2005 and 2012 triggered sustainable results for children. The evaluation, as well as other data from country experiences over the past 10 years, indicate:

- Across the countries covered by the evaluation, there has been a noticeable decline in the rate of children in institutional care.
- In Moldova, the number of children living in institutional care was dropped by more than half (over 5,000 children were placed into family-based care).
- In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the total number of children in institutional care dropped by 28 percent (2005-2012), while the number of foster families increased by 60 percent in the same period (111 to 178).
- The reform of child care systems in three new EU Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania) shows significant progress in creating a comprehensive legal framework aimed to improve the quality of care.
- In the EU candidate countries (Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey), there has been notable progress in transforming, downscaling and closing down residential institutions, as well as in the decentralization/delegation of power and functions which have contributed significantly to how the child care systems operate. In Serbia, the number of children in institutional care has decreased from 2,672 to 743 over the last 15 years, with the number of children in foster care increasing from 1,173 to 5,320 over the same period.
- In Eastern Neighborhood countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus), child care reforms are taking place in a less decentralized context, as mandates and funds for child care are still to a large extent concentrated at central levels of government. In Georgia, a decision to accelerate child care reform in 2010 resulted in the transformation and closure of 16 large institutions for children over 5 years.

## Proven strategies

- In all countries, garnering and sustaining political will at the highest level to drive the reform forward have been critical. The strong EU political focus and support for de-institutionalization as part of the EU accession and neighborhood processes have been key drivers for reform.
- Developing a legislative and regulatory framework in line with international and European standards (including EU laws and policies) was also seen to be an important part of ensuring effectiveness and sustainability of reforms.
- Establishing foster care and prevention programmes in parallel to (or in advance of) the process of legislative changes is necessary to ensure that policies and laws can be translated into changes for children and families.
- Ensuring institutional care staff have an opportunity to play a role in newly developed services is critical to gaining and maintaining their support during the process.
- De-institutionalization is an important opportunity to develop more modern, appropriate social work services. Moving away from a 'paternal approach' where social workers 'determine' who receives benefits from the state, towards approaches of empathy, family advocacy, and outreach to the most vulnerable.
- De-institutionalization requires the establishment of an individualized and flexible child care system, which follows the principle of the best interest of the child. As such, de-institutionalization reforms are much more than the transition from institutional care to community-based services. Reforms require changes in legislation, administrative structures, available services, funding mechanisms, inter-sectoral cooperation, empowerment of children and families, the involvement of communities and societies, and changes in the hearts and minds of professionals.
- In short, de-institutionalization is a gateway into transforming and re-shaping government social welfare systems in Europe and Central Asia.

### The Success of Bulgaria

Between 2010 and 2017, the number of children in institutional care dropped from more than 7,500 to under 1,000.

Change in the child care system: The number of foster families increased ten-fold since 2010. As of, October 2017, a network of approximately 2,500 foster families were caring for more than 2,300 children. The number of small group homes or family-type placement centres increased from 48 in 2010 to 283 in 2017. And the number of community-based services for children and families has more than doubled from 241 in 2010 to 605.

How it was achieved: Bulgaria is a clear example of how a government can effectively utilize EU funds in support of community-based services and de-institutionalization. Bulgaria combined funds from the European Social Fund, the Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. As a result of this effort, 80 million Euros of EU Structural Funds were used in combination with additional resources from UNICEF (3 million Euros), to cover the transitional costs of transforming the child care system and the technical support required to assist with the reform. Close collaboration between the EU, the Government of Bulgaria, UNICEF, and other partners throughout the reform has been critical to sustain momentum and achieve results.

## Remaining Challenges

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Children with disabilities are over represented in institutional care across Europe and Central Asia. Children from marginalized groups, such as the Roma, are also vulnerable to being placed in institutional care. UNICEF has identified a set of strategic interventions that can help close the gap:

- **Systematic closure or transformation of large-scale institutions housing children with disabilities and other marginalized groups** including support to governments to systematically plan for and close (or transform) identified institutions through revision of regulatory frameworks, costing, capacity building, and establishing services and case management for each child.
- **Early inclusion and preventing child abandonment** including changing attitudes of health and education providers on the rights of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups, as well as on developmental pediatrics, early identification, intervention and referral.
- **Inclusive pre-school and education** including capacity development and behaviour and attitudinal change in kindergartens/schools and services in communities where children from closed institutions are returning or placed to support access and learning for all children.

These interventions require strategic approaches, including:

- **A multi-sectoral, systems approach** will ensure that vulnerable groups have access to the diverse range of services and support in order to thrive in communities. This includes strengthening linkages and referrals between sector interventions. Lessons across countries have shown that government and community-based social work that is rights based and aims to empower and support families and children on an individual basis amplifies the impact of project and programme-based investments.
- **Advocacy to include children with disabilities and other marginalized groups** drawing on successful partnerships between multi-lateral institutions and civil society networks at country and regional level.
- **Evidence-based support and advocacy** to financing, policies and programme design. This includes examining alternative options, supporting simulations of the potential impact of different policy and programme decisions, costing of options, and exploring different ways to increase fiscal space.
- **Building partnership and horizontal cooperation** to advance the achievement of country-specific targets, including through peer exchanges on integrated social protection and child protection welfare policies and programmes. At both country and regional levels, UNICEF and the EU work to generate and disseminate knowledge to enhance understanding and facilitate horizontal cooperation.

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### End Note

- 1 Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine.





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Six year old Vladimir and his foster mother Petya leave the boy's school in Bulgaria.