Voice of children at risk in the provision of integrated child protection services in multicultural communities

Štefica Karačić, president of Croatian Association of Social Workers
Implementation Area – Medjimurje County

5,107 Roma - almost a third of the total Roma population in Croatia (16,975 Roma), estimations much higher

- mostly housed in several Roma settlements with poor infrastructure
- an above average number of household members
- beneficiaries of cash benefits and assistance as well as social services
- low education level, high level of ununemployment, no income
- high-risk environment for child development and safety - neglected and isolated settlements, at frequent risk of conflict
- a present distrust within and outside of the community

Social welfare system:
- providing various benefits, specialized services and interventions to Roma children and families
- contributing to integrated service provision

Implementing partner of UNICEF CO Croatia in the implementation of the programme „Phase III: Testing of the Child Guarantee in Croatia“

Objective: improving access to integrated child and family protection services, including early identification, referrals, effective case management and cross-sectoral cooperation that are adapted to the inter-cultural environment (including for Roma population)

Some activities in the area of the provision of the integrated child protection services in multicultural communities:

• analysis of existing and development of new work methodologies with Roma families at risk
• additional education of experts of social welfare centers Čakovec and Prelog and family outreach workers, empowering social welfare managers to better manage CSW work processes, crisis management and adequate supervision of the work of experts
• cross-sectoral cooperation of all key service providers to families at risk important for the specific local area (Roma settlement)
• initiating changes at a wider social level with a view to more clearly combating poverty and social exclusion as well as advocating for the social integration of Roma into society with a particular focus on early risk recognition, positive discrimination against Roma children and adequate support for parenting
Focus groups
– informing planning and service delivery, including in case management

FOCUS GROUPS WITH

1) PROFESSIONALS in social welfare system
2) PARENTS – beneficiaries of interventions and services provided by centres for social welfare in Medjimurje County and family out-reach workers
3) CHILDREN living in at risk families

Aim:
- gain a clearer insight into the CSW work methodology with at risk families and key challenges
- from the perspective of beneficiaries (parents, especially children) - effects of social interventions and other forms of assistance to families at risk and the protection of child well-being and safety by the social welfare system

development of needs-based training materials and methodologies for the social workforce to work with children living in a multicultural environment and integrated service provision
Focus groups with children

When asked when a social worker comes to you - how do you get along with her - do you talk when she comes?

• "So we talk, she tells me what are good things and what's bad. I feel good then."

Do you see a change in parents' behavior when she comes?

• "I don't know what they're saying, but I see a change, a lot in the parents. They solve problems. That's why we have them."
• "It's changed: Dad started working, got a job, he was just interviewed yesterday. I don't know what to say."

What makes you feel good regarding the visitation from a social worker?

• "We talk about how are we, how is school, what we do and other things."
• "She asks me if something bothers me and tells me that I can confide in her and she’ll help me(...)"
• "(she asks) Are you learning, are you correcting your grades? Do you get good grades(...).”
• "Well, there’s something that sticks to my mind, so I'm thinking, they’re right - without education, there's no life."
• "He/she talks to me about the problems that we have at home and (encourages me) to go to school"
There isn’t and ever will be. I wouldn't want them to come to us every time and check out what we have in the house and that's it. Ask you social workers what they’re doing and what they’re seeing."
• "I have another question. What are you going to do with this recording?"

Is there anything else she can do to help your family?
• "He asks mom and dad and us. We talk, he understands, he understands everything, what else would we do!”
• "We have a meal at school. It is very difficult in this school, The meal is not free - we have to pay 200-300 kunas .....”
• „The social worker said that when we have homework, that mom and dad should help us when we do it, to know how. This would be some concrete help and it started happening."
Child Participation in Croatia

- regulated by numerous laws and policies, covering child participation in the assessment of child safety, well-being and needs, planning, service delivery and monitoring.

In our practice, it is still more often formal than practical.

- assessment of children's needs and planning of interventions is carried out to a greater extent by involving other stakeholders (parents, school, kindergarten, doctor, OCD) who provide data and opinions on children and their needs.

- Active participation of children and expression of opinions is still not enough due to limited professional and technical resources in the social welfare system, but also because of the attitudes of parents, difficult access to children.

- examples of good practice are observed in working with older children with behavioral problems who are generally actively involved in the implementation of interventions (expressing their own opinion, problems, wishes and expectations, defining special activities, cooperation with family out-reach worker, taking on certain responsibilities in accordance with their own capabilities).
Competencies of professionals

• **additional knowledge and skills to work with children** - how to include them, encourage them to speak, hear their voice and be guided by their needs...

• **methods of facilitating conversation with children** - different techniques and creative materials (ecomaps, dance with dolls, drawings and photographs, story telling, wish cards ..)

• **standardized instruments of social work** (Ajduković and Sladović Franz, 2015)
  – as a template for talking about difficulties and possibilities of changing the situation and the hopes of the child
  – after seeing a certain questionnaire that the child has completed.
Conclusion

If we really want to **protect** the child's well-being and safety, it is not enough to just see a child - we must also hear its voice

The child's perception of his own well-being is one of the most important factors in assessing how suitable the child's environment is for the development of his/her full potential

(Ajduković and Šalinović, 2017)