

unite for children

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF UNICEF ROMANIA - NR 10, 2011

Hand to Mouth: Families and the Crisis

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children

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Let's Unite for Children!



This issue of the newsletter explores the human dimension of the financial and economic crisis. We start by looking at the overall picture based on the findings of the crisis monitoring surveys UNICEF has been conducting over the past two years. Then we go behind the statistics and talk to the children and families and hear their stories. They tell us how they are coping with joblessness, migration, reduced income, lower welfare and the stark reality of not being able to put enough food on the table. We hear testimonies from families living in a run-down apartment block in Alba Iulia on how they are coping, or not, with the vagaries of the crisis. And we hear from a family doctor on how the situation looks from the point of view of a medical professional.

The picture which emerges is a grim one. The view from the bottom of the food chain is not pretty. We learn what the term "social exclusion" means to people struggling just to survive. And yet there are flashes of real hope and optimism. Even in the poorest of the poor households, children have ambitions. They want to go to school and make something of their lives. Parents will sacrifice everything in order to help their children realise their dreams.

Impoverished communities also rally around their own in times of great stress, as we learn in the account from Turturica. Small unsung NGOs are quietly doing invaluable work in the poorest places to keep the human spirit alive. We hear about the work of the CERME (Centrul Român de Modelare Economică) in Turturica and how Căminul Phillip in Bucharest's Ferentari is giving hope and sustenance where once there was none.

One notable lesson is that even a small amount of outside attention to a community can have the effect of spurring action by local authorities and the residents themselves. We see that in Turturica. Perhaps, if a similar spotlight could be put on each and every socially excluded community in the country, we might have hit on a way to arouse a strong spirit of self-help and social inclusion. The best way for marginalised communities to get out of the "social exclusion" category is to get mobilised and "socially include" themselves. It can be done, as the experience in Turturica testifies. But the authorities and civil society must provide sustained help and encouragement. They must adopt the spirit of "social inclusion" in the real sense of the word by taking what action they can - even moral support - to assist the disadvantaged in their cities, towns and villages.

Finally, this issue touches on the impact of the recession on private sector fundraising, an area on which UNICEF Romania depends a lot in order to fund our programmes.

Edmond McLoughney
UNICEF Representative in Romania

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edmond', written over a thin horizontal line.

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Romania: A Country of Two Tales

Every nation has its official and unofficial records of events past and present but against the backdrop of other European states Romania's contrasts are, indeed, striking. Extremes exist in such close proximity that their juxtaposition is quite overwhelming. The sites of dumps where until recently the poor sorted through rubbish now boast upmarket post codes. In the very heart of affluent cities there are enclaves of horrible council housing where many live below the poverty line in antediluvian conditions. Overall, Bucharest, Timisoara, Cluj and other large cities are truly modern and cosmopolitan. Rural Romania, on the other hand, is an echo from a by-gone era, sunk in darkness and mud.

Running water is a luxury there and so are indoor toilets. In cyber space, some of the most notorious hackers are Romanian whizz kids, yet a large proportion of the population does not even know the internet exists.

Until recently I used to fly to Bucharest with airlines like KLM and Taron which operate their flights from Otopeni, thirteen kilometres outside Bucharest. The airport has light and airy departure and arrival halls. Women in white overalls keep it impeccably clean. It is the welcoming face of Romania to any foreigner who enters the country, especially for the first time.

This spring I chose to fly low-cost, the financial crisis bites us all. And I landed in a different country. A mere fifteen-minute drive from Otopeni is Baneasa, the Bucharest airport used by budget airlines. It does not have an arrivals hall. Friends and family have to queue in the open to greet their loved ones at the mercy of the weather. The passport control



Rural Romania is an echo from a by-gone era

area has seen better days. The peeling paint, broken floor tiles and dilapidated baggage carousels are not quite what one expects in an EU member state.

On my visit I attend discussions concerning the effects of the economic crisis on the most vulnerable. After the first day I desperately wish Confused.com existed for country situation analysis.

Just like the discordant airports, opinions are divided among experts and partners working with poor families and children.

Some insist that the current very poor of Romania were very poor even during the years of rapid economic growth. Their circumstances are unchanged as a result of the crisis. There are pockets of chronic poverty in the country which do not go away in plenty and in want.

Yet, the very poor who traditionally provide for their families as day labourers tell a different story. In urban areas, in particular, they have lost a huge share of their market which is now overcrowded by former regular employees who have been made redundant. Demand for their services has also contracted. Statistically these changes are very difficult to measure as they are not on record.



Anca's parents can only spend €5 on her basic survival needs every month

Local authorities claim that they are coping with the number of child protection cases that are being referred to the system. There has been no noticeable rise in the number of new cases in 2010 compared to the previous three years. Likewise, there has been no decline in the standards of care or the number of services available to beneficiaries. Officially, it is exclusively employees of the system that have taken the brunt of the economic downturn rather than the beneficiaries, either by seeing a massive cut in their salaries or being let go altogether.

NGOs warn that the latter will lead to the rapid collapse of social services in Romania. There is a steady drainage of social workers and young doctors and nurses to the West. County directors of social services have expressed strong concerns about retaining key personnel. Furthermore, figures show that in 2009



How much have the chronically poor in Romania been affected by the financial crisis?

the number of children living under the poverty line had gone up by 100,000 compared to a previous study. Out of these, hundreds require specialized social assistance; only a small percentage constituting the most severe cases of child abuse are resolved due to the system's incapacity to cater for the greater demand. The rest are currently unaccounted for. They are Romania's lost souls. Confusing? I warned you.

Requests for help to NGOs from families more than doubled in 2010. These included housing, financial and basic survival issues. For every two kids that came daily begging for food to the doors of a Bucharest day centre a year-and-a-half ago, now there are five. Small foster homes that had come to replace Romania's infamous pre-1990 orphanages are shutting down around the country unable to pay their utility bills. Many children who are subsequently redirected to larger homes show signs of serious

psychological regression.

Since 2008 there has been a trend among foster parents of children with disabilities, heavily subsidised by the state, to return their dependants to the system, in most cases, in order to take up more lucrative employment abroad.

At the same time, due to the recession elsewhere in Europe, 4% of migrant workers

have returned to Romania facing unemployment and putting further strain on services. Those who remain abroad are sending home a lot less and a lot less frequently. Grandparents looking after the children of overseas workers, struggle to provide basic commodities. More worryingly, some children are left behind on their own. The 'home alone' child is fast becoming one of Romania's open secrets. Left-behind children develop behavioural problems and are at risk of missing a lot of school or dropping out altogether.

Consumption is much lower in both the public and private sectors. Families are making adjustments to their expenditure by cutting out non-food items, extra-curricular activities for their children, holiday trips and, most regrettably, fruit and many veg. When it comes to the crunch, Romanians are meat and potato people.

A formula for calculating the per capita income of a family treats as income children's education bursaries. This has forced many parents into perverse choices preferring to forego a bursary in order to be eligible for income support thus denying their child the opportunity to go to high school or university.

Conversely, a set of stricter criteria for awarding supplementary allowance to families with school age children has led to improvement in school attendance.

The textile industry which employs a majority of women has remained buoyant. Workers have not been laid off. Salaries have not been cut. But working hours have increased. Many of them can no longer find the time or energy to engage with their children.

What families spend on their children varies enormously. Ethnic Romanians in regular employment can on average afford €131 per child per month whereas day labourers from the Roma community cannot manage more than €9.

There are fears that over the coming months changes to the benefit system which were introduced in January this year will seriously affect the most vulnerable members of society. Families on minimum income and the

disabled are expected to be the hardest hit. So far symptoms of this happening are either sporadic or under the radar of statisticians. There are reports that in rural areas that only an estimated third of families who previously qualified for income support now meet the criteria to continue receiving benefit. Disabled individuals who were disqualified from obtaining benefits under the new guidelines are now living under additional stress and hardship.

Government agencies, NGOs and the Church have formed joint committees to steer Romania's social services away from being reactive and towards being preventive in their approach, hoping to improve their quality and make them better value for money. But while they are talking a good talk, time and money are running out for those who depend on their support.



They depend on government action

Bread and Mustard

A ham and mustard sandwich is a delicious combination, won't you agree? But what happens when you take the ham away? What happens when you are so poor that you can't afford to insert a piece of ham between your slices of bread? You end up with a mustard sandwich. One, it is a lot less palatable. Two, when consumed too often, it causes acute abdominal pain. Three, when it constitutes the staple diet of a mother and her children, the lot of them are severely under- and malnourished.

But bread and mustard is precisely what Sandra and her children had last weekend. And the weekend before. And many long weekends before that with no heating, no gas and no running water when the only

way to cheat your hunger would be to fall asleep, provided your head or stomach were not too sore and you had a thick blanket to wrap up in. Sandra's son is a past master at cheating hunger but not so the girls and their mother.

Poverty and pain have become Sandra's lifetime companions. Given that she is a wisp of a woman, it is surprising that she is still functioning at all, never mind doing an amazing job as a single mother. Not in terms of providing for them materially, but in raising them to be respectful, hard-working and have aspirations.

'I fight for the kids. Without them I wouldn't be around now. There was a time when we had to rough it, living in the street, but I carried on sending them to school. Toma was fifteen and Ela seven. My youngest, Cati, was only two.'

The children are now twenty, nineteen and eleven, respectively, but each one looks at least five years younger, their 'bread and mustard' bodies struggling to appear their true age.

Just over twenty years ago, soon after Sandra



This accommodation cannot shelter the family from bad weather

left the orphanage in which she was raised, she had Toma. The father never lived with the family. Then another man entered her life who married and then divorced her because she gave him two daughters but failed to 'deliver' a son.

When asked about the effects of the crisis on her own life, Sandra smiles a bitter kind of smile: 'Crisis! My life has been an interminable crisis. I was in care between the ages of three and eighteen. My dad died and my mother abandoned me as a toddler. No one has ever helped me.'

Life as a single parent has been an uphill struggle but Sandra somehow managed to make ends meet. Until 2010, that is. Some years ago she sub-rented a room from a large Roma family in Bucharest's massive slum, Ferentari; and during the years of economic boom made a living selling pocket calendars, tissues and knick-knacks on the long tram routes of the two-million-strong city.

Then the crisis hit Romania and many unskilled workers who had been made redundant began to compete for the market niche Sandra had carved out for herself. During the mid-noughties she easily made 100 RON (\$34) per day. Now she is lucky if she comes home with 20 (\$6.80).

With such a severe drop in income, the inevitable happened. When she failed to pay the rent last summer, her landlord kicked her and the children out. All their belongings, including IDs, were retained by him. She fears for her safety if she is to go and plead with him to get them back without bringing the money she



Shelter from the recession?

owes. Contacting the police is out of question. Sandra is convinced that the large Roma family will retaliate although she is half-Roma herself.

Without her papers she cannot qualify for social assistance and had huge trouble finding somewhere to stay. Eventually someone took pity and let the single mother have two rooms with a hole in the roof in a village outside Bucharest. Now most of the pennies she sweats for go on the commute to Bucharest for the children's school hours.

'Life is catching up with me,' sighs Sandra. 'Last week I wasn't well.'

Couldn't make it to work. Now I feel so tired. I'm beginning to get depressed from the constant exhaustion. Cati, my baby, suffers from calcium deficiency and is on constant medication. She wasn't feeling well either and I couldn't take proper care of her. I didn't have anything to give her for her headache, just bread and mustard. And she can't stomach it.'

All Sandra's children have benefited from the care of Căminul Phillip, a haven for children in the Ferentari slums. The foundation not only ensures that children from vulnerable families do not abandon school, the staff set the bar high and expect strong academic performance by their charges. The youngsters also learn life skills such as keeping clean, eating well and behaving politely. Back home many of them end up teaching their parents what they learned at the day centre. Slowly, the habits of the community begin to change. Or so do the foundation, its

partners, UNICEF being one, and the local Roma leaders hope. They want to integrate into Romanian society and see their children get a decent education and employment.

This is Sandra's goal too. 'I am proud of my children. They have learned to endure hardship but never for a moment thought of giving up. They work hard at school even on an empty stomach. On weekdays I don't have to worry so much about Cati's meals. She gets a three-course lunch at Căminul Phillip and she knows how to make it last through the day.'

Academically, Sandra's children have done extremely well. Toma is learning to be a car mechanic but is already a dab hand at fixing computers.

'He's so generous that he does it for friends and friends-of-friends totally for free. Always puts others before him,' the mother shakes her head in disbelief and approval at the same time, pleased that she has raised a good man.



Căminul Phillip: a ray of light in a gloomy landscape.

Ela married recently and is learning to be a nurse. She benefits from accommodation for young families provided by a religious charity. This summer Toma will work as an irrigation maintenance engineer in Italy. He wants to buy a small piece of land with the money he earns. If he could build a little house for his mother, she would never again have to worry about a roof over her head.

Turturele (Doves)

In the heart of a handsome Transylvanian city with Roman remains, a medieval fortress and a twentieth-century coronation cathedral complex, there is a block of flats by the name of Turturica. Other than 'turturica' translating into English as 'dove', there is no trace of the 'campaign for real beauty' by the cosmetics giant in the run-down concrete ghetto. For ghetto it is. With the majority of flats consisting of a small single room and a bathroom but inhabited by families as large as ten, the interior is overcrowded, dirty and dark. It shocks and disgusts most visitors. But by the standards of Roma accommodation in Eastern Europe it is pretty average. It belongs in an unendorsed campaign for real ugliness.

Alba Iulia's main pedestrian area opens up towards a lovely vista of the Carpathians. Nice shops line the promenade. Grandparents sit on benches watching their grandchildren play in the sun. Even in the middle of a recession this city looks confident and full of itself. But if you are to take a turning from the high street, you will end up in an estate initially obscured by the shop facades. Turn another corner, and you will be standing in front of Turturica.

It does not announce itself so much by sight as by sound. The clamour of children's voices and the loud conversations of adults jar with the

serenity of the leafy centre. There are no benches for them to sit on but they are content to stand around for hours while the children play tig or kick a ball. Sometimes fights break out and the voices become even louder but no one takes much notice.

'The mayor even built us a playground last year but only the slide is still in use. The rest of the stuff got broken,' says one of the friendly eight-year-olds in a group of curious children which spontaneously forms around the visitors.

In a time of recession the majority of the population suffers a decline in their standard of living but Turturica has seen more benefits since 2009 than it had in the whole of its previous existence. When the financial crisis hit Romania for real, the block was picked to participate in a study supported by the World Bank and UNICEF. Hours of interviews by top statisticians from Bucharest were conducted with focus groups. Diaries were kept and documents studied to determine the extent to which the crisis touched the ghettoised community.

Local bosses sat up and in a short time Turturica acquired not only a new playground but windows in the main stairway. The residents receive regular help from volunteers, support from a Bucharest NGO and many have joined a

motivational programme. Those families who score well on the programme are rewarded, in the main, with school books and stationery, and the opportunity for youngsters to go to summer camp.

One objective of the programme was to encourage the parents and children to take better care of their environment and all the public spaces in and around their block. It has been unsuccessful so far not least because the mayor gave amnesty to offenders who continued to soil the landings and throw their rubbish directly outside from the windows. The programme had stipulated that regular offenders would be evicted from the block after a certain time. That did not happen.

Mariela's is the family where all four school age kids have won awards on the programme. It has been two years now since the recession brought her and her husband back from Central Europe after almost a decade of work overseas. Two of her children stayed behind in a Polish children's home.

'Conditions there were a lot better. I had three rooms, a decent income. The children had learned Polish and were doing well at school. When the economy started shrinking we lost our jobs and decided to return. My husband died from a stroke almost immediately after we moved into Turturica. It broke his heart to see us living on top of each other in this tiny room. The fifteen-year-old twin girls have to sleep on mattresses on the floor at night. They can't change into their pyjamas in peace. My stove is in the bathroom. We live like animals.'

The mum of eight winces from a piercing tooth ache. She suffers from migraines. She is desperate but she must have done something right as her children are presentable, polite and have aspirations for the future. One of the twins is aiming to go to university after completing high school. She will be the first in the family. The other is going to vocational school to train as a beautician. Football is on the mind of the younger boys but Mariela's eldest son, now twenty, is finding life in Romania hard. He has not been able to secure a regular job and between stints of temporary construction work, he spends hours on Facebook with his Polish friends.



Kitchen and bathroom in one



*Will Mihai have a roof over his head next month?
His mother has not paid the rent for a while and may be evicted.*

'At least he is not a thief,' says his mother. 'Last year three teenagers from the block were jailed for stealing.'

In larger cities, apart from petty crime, the recession has contributed to the rise of the number of girls who prostitute themselves, sometimes pimped by their own fathers. In Turturica this has not occurred. Most common are family feuds caused by the return of a relative who worked abroad. Scandals take place outside the block about sharing out the money and gifts that were brought back. The children normally stare in dismay as their parents exchange curses that would make a soldier blush.

The motivational programme¹ tries to educate the children away from this model of behaviour. Many of the parents have become used to receiving social assistance from the state, aid from NGOs

and gifts from family members but are prepared to give little in return as the failures of aspects of the programme have demonstrated.

The adults habitually complain about how poor they are and more recently about benefit cuts. Due to a restructuring of the benefit system last January many families no longer qualify for income support due to a lack of clarity in the regulations and a lack of consistency in their applica-

tion. The local government may decide that possessions such as a computer and a mobile phone constitute wealth and reduce or withdraw a benefit. There have been extreme cases. The lunches which an old woman was offered by her kind neighbour on a daily basis were interpreted as a form of income and her social security payments were substantially cut.

In Turturica a number of parents fear eviction as their supplementary child allowance has dropped, although no one is sure by how much, and they have rent to pay in arrears. Letters from the authorities have been mislaid. Receipts for past payments do not add up. Volunteers explain that the loss to the family will be minimal under the new conditions if the children attend school regularly. A middle aged woman who has just realised that there is 'money in education' runs up to the young teacher who organises weekly activities for the Turturica kids.

¹The motivational programme is run by the NGO CERME

'I have a thirteen-year-old daughter who's never been to school. Will you help me enrol her in first grade?'

A group of women who until recently held jobs at a local clothes manufacturer but were made redundant due to a contraction of the business, now express deep regret for having not completed high school and earned qualifications that would widen their employment opportunities.

Some families are setting their sights on work abroad this summer as the German and Italian economies are back on their feet and need seasonal workers.

The block is teeming predominantly with women, children and old people. The men either abandoned their families long ago or have traded family life for migrant work. There are rumours that Alexandru has a woman in Spain but as long as he is sending money home, his house proud wife, Sofia, alone with three children under seven, is not going to ask uncomfortable questions.

When Anca went to Germany to work as a carer, leaving her husband and two teenage daughters behind, the family was relieved that, at long last, they would have a decent income. Before a year had passed, Anca's husband was informed that his wife had found a new man. He travelled to Germany and murdered her in an act of jealousy. He is in prison now and his daughters are alone, struggling to finish school on a meagre child allowance.

Such are the inequities of Turturica but there is room for beauty in the midst of this dehumanised space. When single

mother Rosa died of cancer last year in her early forties, her son and daughter received huge support from the Turturica community. Two aunties take care of their meals and money, ensuring the children are fed, clothed, clean, go to school every day and do their homework. Neighbours babysit the little boy when his older sister needs to study for exams. There was never a shortage of sympathy and kind words for the orphans.

Is Turturica going to sink or soar? Times are hard, conditions are miserable but there is a core of about seventy children in the block who are learning a set of different values to the opportunism of the adult majority. With education as their top priority, the window is ajar and the new crop of Turturicele (doves) are preparing for flight.



*Denisa is one of the best pupils in her class.
She brings hope to Turturica*

A Case of Obesity

Dr Blaga is an experienced family doctor. She has 2000 patients on her list. She has not been affected by the salary cuts that numbed all public sector employees last year, including hospital doctors and nurses. She is well established in the system unlike younger colleagues who feel there are little or no prospects for them in Romania and are fleeing to greener pastures in Western Europe. She has a good income but she is running out of energy and time.

'When I retire in ten years time, there won't be enough qualified medical staff in our country to fill the vacancies. The health care system will collapse.'

Among the austerity cuts is the subsidy of early health care for mothers and

infants. Until last year family doctors received a good remuneration for every home visit to a newborn. Now they can only claim 7 RON (\$2.40) per consultation. Many of Blaga's colleagues are giving up the visits. A crucial stage of child development and health education is being abandoned to chance. Out of the goodness of her own heart, Blaga continues to make home visits, having taken on the workload of less charitable colleagues. She is really squeezed but she believes that her advice to mothers is vital in ensuring that infants have a balanced diet and the right kind of care. It is her own brand of preventive medicine which will see children grow to become healthy adults.

'The Romanian people are ignorant when it comes to healthy living. Traditional values have been lost. A mother whose child has a bit of fever now rushes to her family doctor. This would never have happened in the days of our grandmothers. We need health centres like in Norway and Finland which deal exclusively with prevention. Psychologists, nutritionists and



Dr Blaga struggles to take good care of her 400 patients under four

paediatricians have to be in place with the requisite time and resources to guide people and, especially, parents.'

This is a utopian vision of the future. The reality on the ground is that although, in theory, every Romanian child has free access to health care, the services and medication that are still available for free after the latest cuts are minimal. If

a child has the flu, the only treatment available for free is Nurofen for children. As a consequence pharmacies are permanently out of stock. The next best treatment costs 12.30 RON (\$4.30) and is beyond the means of families on low income. To get round this, they take their children to emergency. This puts a huge pressure on hospitals but secures a peace of mind for the parents.

Another austerity measure was to cap the monthly expenditure of family doctors. If, depending on the case load, a doctor has used up their allocation for the month before the month runs out, they need to charge patients who come to them thereafter. Social justice aside, a likely spin-off of this will be even more pressure on emergency services as patients from poorer backgrounds



This young mother would have been lost without the doctor's home visits

desperately seek to receive free care and medication.

Furthermore, the drop in income and price inflation have forced many families to buy cheap but filling food. Children end up consuming inordinate amounts of bread and milk without the necessary intake of proteins, vitamins and minerals which a balanced diet would provide. Allergies, anemia, digestion problems and obesity among children are rising steeply.

'I wouldn't like to think that Romania is as poor as some African countries,' says Dr Blaga. 'Our children aren't starving but the financial crisis has resulted in unhealthy lifestyles. Our problems aren't measured by the ribs you can count on a child but by the number of obese children in our schools.'

No Time for a Slipped Disk

As many governments worldwide endeavour to reduce their budget deficit, people at the bottom of the income pile are increasing theirs. In Romania these are often parents on a minimum income who do not qualify for a credit card, an overdraft or an interest-free repayment plan with one of the big furniture or electronics stores. Like the bohemians of an

earlier era, they buy on credit from the local grocer. Potatoes, sugar, washing-up liquid and many other basics have nearly doubled in price since 2008. Desperate parents are accruing debts to buy food for their children.

100 RON (\$34) is the price of a historic tour-for-one in Brooklyn, whereas in Bucharest, Cristina, her husband and their four children have to live off this amount for a month. No wonder they have been supping on beans ever since her husband lost his job in January. A slipped disk kept him off work for two weeks and, when he returned, he found his driving job was gone. Being Roma and in his forties he is hardly an employer's first choice. He has been working since he was a teenager and all his papers are in order. Sadly, the first and only time he was sick, he was ruthlessly axed. Discrimination against Roma employees in Romania is very common. The tough economic conditions have only exacerbated the problem.

Cristina is an ethnic Romanian. She was sixteen when she met Dan, seven years her elder. Their marriage was received very coolly in both camps.



A little princess dreams of better days

'My parents did not approve, neither did his. But we stood by each other.'

Hard-working Dan made sure that the family was comfortable, putting money aside to buy a three-bedroom flat in the capital. Many families in their position, especially Roma, make do with a single room in shabby state-owned blocks built during Ceausescu's regime.

Life looked good four years ago. Then the economy stagnated before starting to go downhill. With Dan's health deteriorating, the current outlook for the family is bleak. Their oldest son, fifteen-year-old Stoica, has had to give up his football club as his parents can't afford to pay the membership fee anymore. Thirteen-year-old twins, Silviu and Alex, haven't got the full set

of books they need for school as the family budget ran out after the purchase of their school uniforms. Little Ana, the three-year-old darling of the family, the spoiled little princess who had such lovely shoes and dresses before, has to wear clothes donated by charitable individuals. The children haven't sniffed sweets or had a bite of meat in a long while. The only way to make the daily helping of beans more interesting is to add some tomato puree to the pot.

'Mum, is it beans again this evening?' the boys ask with frowns on their faces, pressing their hands against their swollen tummies.

Cristina has a part-time job at one of Bucharest's large emergency hospitals. She sorts the dirty bed linen. There

are rumours that everyone in her department will be made redundant soon. For now she takes full advantage of the meal coupons her employer provides and, whenever the canteen has leftovers to go round, she brings the food home.

She might have married too early and not finished the sixth grade of school



Not much to smile about these days

but, in the midst of the financial crisis, Cristina has found a new determination to do better in life. Last year she enrolled in the Second Chance Programme which allows adults to complete the education on which they missed out earlier in life. The programme is flexible and Cristina can cover the material for two academic years in one. Consequently, she is already working towards completing the seventh grade on a par with the twins. They help her out with geography and maths. She hopes to get her tenth-grade baccalaureate in no more than another two years and go to nursing school.

'Once I've qualified as a nurse, I'll be able to support the family even single-handed.'

The joys of being a mature student aside, it is nerve-racking times for Cristina and Dan. He needs a back operation but because his condition has stabilised his case is no longer classified as an emergency and he cannot receive free treatment in a state hospital. Prices at private clinics are prohibitive so he has decided to find another job, any job, and work until his back gives completely in order to qualify for a free emergency operation.

Because of their relative prosperity in the past and Dan's unfair dismissal without a certificate for unem-



Very few women can fill Cristina's shoes

ployment, the family cannot access the unemployment and income support benefits to which they are entitled. The only assistance they receive from the government is a discount for their heating costs which covers less than half of their monthly bills.

Cristina smiles as she tells her story. An intrepid spirit like hers is the only means to pull through a recession made significantly worse by unscrupulous employers and inflexible social services.

Is it still possible to raise funds during a Crisis?

by Despina Andrei, Private Fundraising & Partnerships Manager, UNICEF Romania

Before the crisis started, UNICEF Romania generated two-thirds of its income from corporate sources and one-third from private individuals. Now, two years later, the situation is reversed; two-thirds come from private sources and one-third from the corporate sector.

Most companies reduced their Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) budget; some eliminated it completely. As a result, UNICEF received a far lower response from its public appeals in Romania. Even

though also affected by the recession, private individuals were more responsive to the emotional impact of emergencies such as the Haiti earthquake and the floods in North-Eastern Romania in summer 2010, and gave generously.

Companies expected a stronger *quid pro quo* from UNICEF and other organisations in terms of attracting media attention in return for their financial support for projects.



Andreea Marin Banica with her UNICEF-UNICREDIT card

So can funds still be raised in the midst of a recession? The answer is “yes”, provided that UNICEF and other organisations dependent on local fundraising adapt their strategies to the new reality. In UNICEF's case, income was not just sustained, but almost doubled during the last two years when the recession was at its worst in Romania.

The key was to put emphasis on emergency appeals which generate empathy for the suffering of the victims. This aroused the generosity of private individuals. In the case of the corporate sector, we moved from sponsorships to partnerships. In practice, this means long-term arrangements whereby the corporate donor is involved at every stage of the project from planning to monitoring to evaluation, while the association with UNICEF helps them to raise their profile among the public and reach their commercial targets.

Just as businesses have modified their marketing plans to reflect the economic downturn, the non-profit sector must also adjust itself to the new context in which it must operate. Opinion is split on the likely effects of this critical period, but one thing is certain: it will leave its mark on the activities of NGOs and international organisations. It is hard, if not impossible, to come up with a one-size-fits all solution to fundraising. All not-for-profits have their own methods to raise funds and they have only just begun to adapt to the unfavourable economic conditions. Organisations that rely exclusively on companies for

their financial support will be more seriously affected because of the lower CSR budgets. It may thus be a time to expand donor portfolios by seeking out new supporters from among companies that have not traditionally been associated with sponsorships and partnerships. Also, developing the idea of monthly pledge donors through the banking system, an important source of funding in other EU countries but in its infancy in Romania, may eventually yield good results.

All in all, it is an important time to share our ideas more and to become more proactive and innovative. Flexibility and creativity will determine how successful fundraising organisations will be, especially while the effect of the crisis lingers.



GDF SUEZ Energy Romania representative, Ramona Sararescu, on a visit to one of the project schools

Gheorghe Hagi and five top bloggers visit *The Future Starts at School* programme



Gheorghe Hagi, with children in Făurei

UNICEF Romania Goodwill Ambassador Gheorghe Hagi and well known bloggers Cristina Bazavan, Dan Dragomir, Alex Ciucă, Toma Nicolau and Adrian Zăbavă visited the community of Făurei in the county of Constanța, which is being supported by the UNICEF campaign *The Future Starts at School*.

Between December 15, 2010, and January 15, 2011, UNICEF organised its first online fundraising campaign, *The Future Starts at School*, to prevent dropout and to help children in financial difficulty to continue with their education. The campaign was successful, both in terms of online donations and posts on the topic, attracting over 62,000 fans to its dedicated Facebook page.



Levis looks forward to school every day

Twenty-six major bloggers wrote motivational stories to support the campaign, about how school had influenced their lives and careers. Cristian China, Dan Dragomir, Cristina Bazavan, Bobby Voicu and Alex Ciucă were the authors of the five most captivating tales posted online. Only Cristina Bazavan, Dan Dragomir and Alex Ciucă were able to visit Făurei, the community that will benefit from the fundraising campaign. They were accompanied by representatives of the other two winners: Toma Nicolau on behalf of Bobby Voicu and Adrian Zăbavă for Cristian China.

The guests visited the school and the community of Făurei, and talked with parents and teachers as well as children.

In conversation during the visit, UNICEF Romania Goodwill Ambassador Gheorghe Hagi said, "Education is done in schools and our role as parents is paramount. We must encourage our children to give school the due importance

and studying its value. However, the role of teachers is the most important. They must know how to get children to engage in studying and help them make the right choices to succeed in life. Get a child to study and he or she will be enriched. When I learnt a second language, I felt like a different human being. A whole new universe had opened up to me."

Florina Vişan, a teacher at the school in Făurei, commented, "Before this project, when a child stopped coming to school, I would leave him or her alone. Now I have learnt how to work with parents, to persuade them to send their children to school and make them aware of how important it is for their future."

Football star Gheorghe Hagi threw his weight behind the online fundraiser campaign *The Future Starts at School* and spoke about the importance of education in the lives of children. He also signed T-shirts for the winners of the online contest which invited people to post on Facebook about how their formal education had helped them in their personal and professional development.



A CHILD LIKE AN EGG IN A SPOON



"It is like an egg-and-spoon relay race. You have to race a certain distance, walking as fast as you can with an egg on a spoon. At a fixed point, you must pass the egg and the spoon onto somebody else, who must then continue until they pass it onto somebody else and so on - until the finish line. All of the members of the relay team are vital and equally responsible for not dropping the egg. The more you are engaged in the relay race, the greater the pressure."

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Today, during a trip with the UNICEF within the *The Future Starts at School* project, I was thinking that the lives of various children in their relationship with formal education were like the egg in the race above.

The runners in the relay race are the teachers, the parents, the environment where the children live and their wish to study.

They all start the relay race and the egg-child is always at risk of breaking.

Maybe the school is too far away from the home and it is complicated for the child to reach it;

Maybe his parents cannot afford to get the child to school;

Maybe the child is sent to work instead of school, to feed his siblings;

Maybe the child is afraid of/or is intimidated by the school;

Maybe the teacher is too tired (the teacher too has a lot of issues) and lets the child get away with it;

There are a lot of "maybes" in the school relay race, where the runners in of the race are randomly distributed and, no matter how much you train, there is no way for you to know whether the egg will break; whether the child will drop out of school.

And, if the child drops out of school, from now on, there will be nothing else left for the others to eat. However, if the child stays in school, if they all get to the finish line together - both the race and the victory are stunning.

Post by Cristina Bazavan on May 26, 2011 <http://bazavan.ro/>

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