**De-institutionalization and inclusion of parents in Bulgaria and Romania**

**WEBINAR SUMMARY**

**December 10, 2015**

I. Experts:

Mariana Arnautu, World Vision, Romania

Emilia Sorescu, Associate Professor at the University of Craiova, Romania

Galina Markova, lecturer, Know-How Centre for the Alternative Care of Children, Bulgaria

II. Romanian Case Study on De-institutionalization. Model of Best Practices and Partnership in Child Protection

Mrs. Arnautu started by sharing the experience of World Vision, working in Sector 5 of Bucharest, Romania’s capital, to create a safe environment for children to be cared and loved by their families and communities. Sector 5 has two neighborhoods, Rahova and Ferentari, with a large population of ethnic Romas as well as some ghettos.

There are 1100 children with disabilities institutionalized in the system, but since 2007, no services has been in place for children with disabilities’ families. In 2007, there were 300 institutionalized children in five institutions, acting as orphanages. In 2015, only 2 institutions remained open at all time, especially to see children in emergency, especially street children. At the same time, 124 children are held in institutions and 200 in foster care.

Upon Romania’s entry in the European Union, one of the requirements was to close institutions with more than 100 children.

As part of that process, in Bucharest, the Saint Mary Orphanage was hosting 124 children and had be closed. In helping to close it, World Vision established a partnership for continuing of child welfare services to provide social education and rehabilitation activities for the most vulnerable children. It established 14 de-institutionalization projects to prevent child abandonment and create alternative services. The closing took six years, cost over one million euros, and involved a collective effort of small steps in the right direction, requiring time, resources, time and flexibility.

The programs established ranged from early intervention, such as vocational training and after-school programs, to family reunification and preservation services, including maternal centers for couples...
mother-child, and adoption services, including by providing life skills to children in institutionalized facilities.

In 2010, when the financial crisis substantially started affecting Romania, it was difficult to continue the de-institutionalization process, as the sector’s child protection department could not hire new staff needed in the implementation process and make any other investments. With the help of EU funds, the implementation process was nevertheless allowed to continue.

Mrs. Arnautu emphasized that they implemented several steps in the process of de-institutionalization:

**Step 1: Alternative Services to Institutionalization**

Between 2007-2009, the focus was to reintegrate children in nature/extended families or in foster families.

This had low levels of success, so, in 2011, World Vision introduced home groups, which are apartments with four rooms in the neighborhoods, allowing children to live closer in the community. More home units were gradually opened.

The organization also created a life-skills program, helping children to make informed life decisions.

**Step 2: Create and Provide Services for children with disabilities, parents and caregivers**

They created an inclusive integration program for children with disabilities, a counseling center for parents and caregivers and a national conference for parents with children with disabilities.

**Step 3: Create and Provide Services to Prevent Child Abandonment, Neglect, Exploitation and School Drop-out**

Mrs. Arnautu emphasized that World Vision created a daycare center for vulnerable children, a maternal shelter and a vocational and professional rehabilitation program for vulnerable parents.

**Step 4: Promote volunteering and child participation in community**

World Vision helped Sector 5’s local authorities create a community center, where members can come interact and be involved as volunteers, while also

Mrs. Arnautu emphasized that the next steps in continuing this de-institutionalization process revolve around monitoring these implemented projects and following their sustainability on the long-term.

### III. Historical and Statistical Data regarding Social Work
Mrs. Sorescu started by briefly presenting Romania’s social work history, which she suggested is comparable to some Western countries. Romania created the professional category of social workers, since the interwar period, due to some of its intellectuals’ insistence. However, under the communist times, the social worker was removed, because, ideologically, the communist society faced no problem: no poverty, no social issues and therefore no need for professional individuals to tackle them. As a result, the social work schools were also eliminated and the vulnerable were placed in institutions with hundreds of other people in them as well. The institutionalized children’s lives were dramatic and well documented in the international press.

Romania started facing a problem of children on the street, who preferred the insecurity of the streets to living in the miserable conditions of the institutions. After 1990s, a large number of children started being adopted, especially through international adoptions.

Romania had its first child care law in 1997, which was focused on children in distress and adoption, while the current laws it follows were adopted in 2005.

While the children’s population has continuously decreased since 1990, the proportion of children in the child protection system has not reduced. Foster care was introduced and many alternative services. The residential centers have fewer children and have improved care standards, including through the case management system.

At the end of her presentation, Mrs. Sorescu drew attention to attachment theory, which stresses that secure attachment relationships in early childhood play a vital role in child’s psycho-emotional development. Children, who do not have such attachment, find the world a hostile place and find it difficult to relate to others. For institutionalized and vulnerable children, social workers and the child protection system have to ensure figures of attachment, who can supplement the warm, loving, attention of a parent.

IV. Between parental representations and institutionalization of children in Bulgaria

Mrs. Markova started by emphasizing that she became interested in the parents’ motivation to voluntarily place their children in foster care during communist years. Before 1944, Bulgaria had 30 institutions for orphans. The number substantially increased to 287 under communism.

A study of child services showed that, since the fall of communism, 35,000 children have been placed in institutions. Of this number, only 2 percent were actually orphans. In 2000, the first child protection law was passed through the Parliament.

The obvious reason for institutionalization include poverty, disruption of relationships and reliance on the state as a provider. The underlying reason is the need for the state to take care of children, in order
to allow mothers to have equal access to the labor market, effectively transforming the state into a parent. Many parents approached an institution to place their child for a limited period of time. Gradually, the parents were not encouraged to come visit their children and the parent-child relationship eroded.

Mrs. Markova was intrigued by a study in Bulgaria comparing mothers who placed their children in institution vs. those who did not, even though they shared the same level of poverty. She became curious on the psychological motivation of parents who would place their children in institutional care.

The expert used object relations theory to understand some of the psychological needs and limitations of the parents’ placing their children in care. The theory argues that early relations with the parents shapes further relationships and parenting, providing knowledge on how to relate with children later on. At the same time, early relationships with our parents are represented in our psyche. So, her research question became: what are the mental representations of their parents for people who place their children in institutions?

The hypothesis was that institutionalization will relate to the quality of parental representations. Long-term separation through institutionalization can be explained through the lower capacity of the parents to understand and respond to the children’s needs for attachment.

She compared three group of mothers and their representation of their parents:

1. Mothers using daycare
2. Mothers using weekly care (leaving the children on Monday and picking them up again on Friday)
3. Mothers using institutional care.

All mothers lived on the poverty level and their children were between 2 months and 8 years of age.

They were asked to describe their parents, with the description being afterwards coded. The more complex descriptions of the parents suggested better relationships with the parents, with their positive and negative sides, as well as the ability of the current mother to understand the behavior and motivation of her parents.

Many mothers who had their children in institutional care had experienced traumatic situations with their parents. Analyzing their description, they all betray in their content feelings of loss, anger and loneliness. Many of them had been institutionalized themselves. This means that, once the system of institutional care is developed, it is very difficult to challenge and re-organize, because part of the population are attached to it. Long-term care and secure attachment need to be developed so that the pattern of institutional care can be adequately challenged.
Mrs. Markova concluded by emphasizing the need for professionals to reflect on their attitudes to parents and the complex relational dynamics at hand, especially by being aware of their own prejudices against parents who have problems with their children.