

Bulgaria: an overview of Oak Foundation's current strategy and grant-making

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I. INTRODUCTION

The child protection context in Bulgaria as well as in other countries in Eastern Europe is challenging. Oak Foundation's Child Abuse Programme has had to address the lack of resources and political will as well as the problems of low capacity, lack of services and coordination in order to support the development of a national child protection system.

The 2010 external review of the Child Abuse Programme pointed out that 'Oak has been largely instrumental in facilitating the development of a national child protection system and in significantly strengthening the NGO sector to support service delivery and advocacy, resulting in child abuse being better represented on the national/political agenda.'¹

In Bulgaria, Oak has made a deliberate choice to focus on the issues of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children within the broader child protection context.

This systems approach focuses on: the development of appropriate infrastructure; increased awareness and concern for all children; partnerships; and a multi-sectoral collaboration.

As a result of this approach, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation protection measures are integrated in all of Oak's projects and initiatives in Bulgaria. Oak has also supported organisations to build an environment that ensures that these issues are embedded in a safe and functioning child protection system in order to shift from a focus on abuse to a positive, proactive, preventative approach of improving the situation of children.

In Bulgaria, the Child Abuse Programme supports clusters of initiatives that target and accelerate change for children at both systems and practice levels. These include programmes which:

- test new forms of prevention;
- promote solutions to sexual exploitation and trafficking;
- address the demand for sex with children;
- provide recovery and reintegration services for child survivors;
- train relevant professionals to provide improved child protection services;
- accelerate deinstitutionalisation; and
- advocate for public policy change.

In order to achieve the above, Oak supports local organisations to: document learning from their experiences, particularly the benefits that their work has for children; form coalitions to strengthen and expand impact; and jointly lobby for changes in national policy and practice so that thousands of children can benefit.

Oak has also put Bulgarian partners in touch with leading international organisations² in the field of child protection as a way of raising their profile and deepening their expertise. Many of these leading international organisations have helped Bulgarian partners use monitoring and evaluation tools to document learning and improve programming. In addition, they have helped improve capacities to organise social campaigns on issues of child abuse and to measure the impact of interventions on children.

¹ Review of Oak's Child Abuse Programme, Global Child Protection Services, UK, 2010

² Nobody's Children Foundation, Childhood Without Abuse; Terre des Hommes, Mario; Save the Children, Child trafficking Response programme.

II. TRANSFORMING THE ENVIRONMENT

A. Child protection policies and codes of conduct

A priority for Oak is making non-governmental and governmental entities that work directly with children safe and welcoming places. To this end, Oak has done significant work in promoting organisational child protection policies³. For example, Oak supported Keeping Children Safe, a not-for-profit organisation based in the UK, to develop a toolkit to encourage organisations to establish their own child protection policies. This toolkit has been translated into many languages and has been used widely. Most of Oak's grantees in Bulgaria now have a written child protection policy or are working towards this goal.

B. Building capacity

Training programmes for child protection departments for detecting and responding to child abuse cases have been developed. Multi-disciplinary teams and child protection protocols have been piloted and have contributed to the design of the national coordination mechanism on child protection. Oak's partners have begun to impact systems to make them child-friendly and competent in child abuse and neglect cases through: training; child protection protocols and standards for child safety in out-of-home placements; review of legislation; monitoring; and evaluation.

C. Promoting new approaches – resilience, family conferences

The Social Activities and Practices Institute (SAPI), a leading training institute, has introduced resilience as a new approach in Bulgaria.⁴ The resilience approach looks at the strengths and potential of children to strive and develop. Oak Foundation supported the development of an Online Resource Centre on resilience, located on SAPI's website. It offers access to a pool of trained trainers, translated materials and articles, publications and training materials of the Centre and two international experts.

As a result of these efforts, the resilience approach is changing the Government's policy towards protecting children. In addition, social workers, teachers, psychologists, other professionals and parents are now referring to the approach and are implementing it in their practices.

Another promising model, which has been adapted and applied in some parts of the country, is Family Group Conferencing (or FGC). During FGC the entire family (including extended family members and other concerned adults) works closely with professional practitioners to make and implement decisions regarding the care and protection of children experiencing maltreatment or at risk of abuse.

D. Working with the Government and Academia

A 'Know How Centre on Alternative Care for Children' has been established to assist the Bulgarian Government to make informed decisions on issues related to deinstitutionalisation and to provide a strategic overview of the implementation of the Government's Action Plan⁵. To improve coordination and transparency, a partnership officer was based in the State agency for Child Protection. This post has recently been taken over by the Government.

³ Safe Children, Centre for Inclusive education. Bulgaria.

⁴ Resilience Without Borders, Social Activities and Practices Institute, Bulgaria.

⁵ Back Home from the Home, New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria.

III. TRANSFORMING SERVICES

A. Listening to children: services for sexually exploited and sexually abused children

Oak's support to crisis centres has enabled them to include psycho-social support, provide access to education and rehabilitate children in their care.

Oak is committed to helping its partners in Bulgaria shift their thinking and view children as active citizens who should be part of the decision-making process. Through a cluster of grants in Bulgaria, Oak is supporting a more child-friendly judicial system within which children's voices can be heard.

One such example is the Oak's support of child-friendly interviewing rooms, which have been established in four locations in Bulgaria. Following an assessment of their use, Oak has supported the creation of additional rooms in other parts of the country where there is a need and the training of professionals so that they are equipped with the skills to treat a child victim or witness of crimes from a rights-based perspective.

Forensic and therapeutic interviews are a benefit for children and other vulnerable people because they reduce the chances of adverse consequences. Specialised training is provided to police, judges, prosecutors and social workers to ensure that children receive professional and empathic services and are only interviewed once. It is important that existing legislation is adjusted⁶ so that it is possible to use the results of these interviews in criminal investigation and in courts as legitimate evidence, without the presence of the child.

The main principles of child participation in legal proceedings are common for every type of court case – criminal or civil⁷. By including national NGOs in international initiatives, Oak has provided access to leading experts in the field and exposure to innovative services; this has helped policy and systems change to meet the needs of children who have been through traumatic experiences. Therefore, judges dealing with criminal and civil cases receive training in child-friendly interviewing techniques. The National Institute of Justice has expressed readiness to take part in the development of training programmes for judges and to include these issues in its curriculum. This will ensure the introduction of these techniques to all judges in the country.

The Programme has funded a cluster of grants, including two re-granting initiatives to reduce the vulnerability of children to abuse, neglect, homelessness and abandonment⁸. This support has allowed for a continued focus on prevention at a national level, especially with hard to reach and marginalised groups. Family and community strengthening programmes that respond to the needs of children and young people help build environments that are conducive to their health and wellbeing.

The Government's plans to expand the network of community social centres are reliant on input from civil society. In a number of municipalities, Oak's partners have cooperative agreements with the local authorities to run services for them. The types of services

⁶ Structured Interviewing of Young Child Victims and Witnesses, MOVISIE, Netherlands.

⁷ Child-friendly justice, International Social Service – Bulgaria in partnership with Children's Legal Centre – Bulgaria.

⁸ Prevention of abandonment, Tulip Foundation and Rainbow, Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation.

provided include: foster care; day care services for disabled children; family support for children at risk; and potentially abandoned children, among others.

B. Prevention of online sexual abuse of children

Many of the interventions Oak has funded have been replicated or scaled up by others. A school-based education programme that trains personnel to prevent online sexual abuse of children and which is supported by professional, easy-to-use training manuals has been successfully rolled out across the country.⁹

Partners from three Balkan countries have translated materials into their own languages in collaboration with the Bulgarian NGO. The NGO developed a 3D online game called "Comprehensive response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation in SEE"¹⁰, which aims to raise awareness among teenagers of online risks. The game is called Zone of Risk and the player acts as a private detective who must discover the mistakes a young girl made in using the internet and mobile technologies, which led to her disappearance.

On Safer Internet Day (February 7, 2012), a nationwide competition for students was launched. In one month more than 7,000 students played the Zone of Risk, with 700 succeeding in rescuing the abducted girl.

A 15-year old boy from a Sofia school had the highest score and was awarded a tablet computer with a licensed anti-virus programme installed. It was provided by Hi Computers – a private company that agreed to be a partner in the competition.

Zone of Risk was awarded first prize at the annual Web Awards competition in Bulgaria in the category of Science and Education. The game is accessible at <http://game.safenet.bg/>.

C. Family and community-based alternatives to institutions

There are persistently high numbers of children in institutions. Therefore, Oak is engaging with NGOs that offer care to children while supporting the development of alternatives to institutions within families and the community. The range of services in which Oak is active in Bulgaria include:

- support to keep families together where possible;
- family-based alternatives for children (kinship care, foster care, small group homes);
- prevention of abandonment; and
- moving children from institutions into the community and providing appropriate support and follow-up.

Ways to divert care-leavers (like young people who "age-out" of institutions) from engaging in exploitative ventures¹¹ include:

- piloting mentoring programmes and half-way homes;
- life skills and vocational training; and
- assistance in finding and keeping a job.

⁹ Applied Research and Communications Fund, Bulgaria

¹⁰ Save the Children, Bosnia and Herzegovina

¹¹ Life Skills Education for Successful Social Integration after Care, Demetra Association; Protected children in secure families, For Our Children Foundation; A Comprehensive model for work with children at risk and their families, Alliance for Children and Youth.

The first re-granting project has been launched in Bulgaria¹². Through a series of small grants around the country, Oak is funding innovative prevention initiatives to stop institutionalisation. These include:

- parent support groups;
- community workers/mediators;
- prevention of abandonment with underage pregnant girls; and
- training on surgery for cleft palate problems in children.

Institutions for children up to three years old are a main entry point into a dysfunctional childcare system that fails children and causes them lasting damage. Oak is now supporting partners¹³ to work with the Bulgarian Government to close down eight baby orphanages over the next two years.

Oak Foundation has been instrumental in attracting another private donor, Velux Fonden from Denmark to this cause, which will allow for the closure of an additional five baby homes. They will be replaced by services which support families to stay together and provide family-based alternatives.

IV. ADVOCATING FOR POLICY CHANGE

The focus of the Bulgaria portfolio is shifting from service delivery and capacity building to prevention, advocacy and policy change at national level.

The following grants target policy change for children and families:

1. Pressure from civil society and the EU has led to political commitment from the Bulgarian Government to close down its institutions for children by 2025. To facilitate this challenging process, Oak has established a *Know-How Centre on Alternative Care of Children* (KHC), which is linked to the New Bulgarian University.

The KHC serves as a think tank on deinstitutionalisation, maintaining a “good practice” database, and providing thematic papers for the inter-ministerial working group and for more general dissemination. It also provides evidence for policy makers, advisors, managers and practitioners to:

- develop effective strategies for deinstitutionalisation and the development of family-based care;
- develop Bulgarian expertise to guide deinstitutionalisation projects; and
- ensure that progress is carefully monitored and errors in policy and implementation are identified and resolved.

This partnership between a private donor, a university and the Government is a new type of collaborative in Bulgaria and the region. Though it was welcomed with enthusiasm, it has proved to be a challenge for the academia to be practice-oriented and for the Government to seek evidence and commission research to inform decisions and serve as a basis for planning.

¹² Tulip Foundation.

¹³ Hope and Homes for Children, UK.

2. *The National Network for Children*, a new alliance of NGOs and partner of Eurochild, is the only advocacy group in Bulgaria. It was founded with Oak's support, enthusiasm and funding. A multiyear core grant has enabled it to become a powerful and influential advocate that advises government, the EU and others to support improved government responses on child protection, education, juvenile justice, health and institutions.

V. LOOKING AHEAD

On a national level, Oak will increase its efforts to support the development of the NGO sector, strengthening existing agencies and identifying or creating new ones that are capable of driving forward the following three areas of work:

- **eliminating the sexual exploitation of children everywhere in all its forms;**
- **engaging men and boys as driving forces in the elimination of the sexual abuse of children; and**
- **providing prevention and protection efforts in a comprehensive and coordinated way.**

There is still a huge need for professional training and capacity building across sectors as a whole, especially the health and education sectors, as well as for parents and children. Oak's experience in Bulgaria suggests that the first pathway to prevent the entry of children into sexual exploitation is to promote deinstitutionalisation and community-based alternative care.

The following actions are necessary to prevent children's entry into sexual exploitation in Bulgaria:

- understand and address sexual exploitation as a survival strategy;
- monitor the safety of children in the schools they attend and within alternatives to institutions;
- keep children in schools; and
- bring children's voices into policy and service delivery related to child sexual exploitation.

A Learning Action Partnership (LAP)¹⁴ is in preparation to highlight the links between sexual exploitation and alternative care/deinstitutionalisation and to define a second pathway to prevent entry. LAP recognises the complexity and challenges of work aimed at the prevention of violence, as well as the range of skills and experience needed.

Work with men and boys will be mainstreamed into the health, education, child protection and media sectors. Opportunities to engage men and boys in promoting gender equality will also be identified. Positive change will be facilitated through information, campaigns on parent education, family support, life skills and reproductive health (systemic change based on piloting of new approaches). A MenCare Fatherhood campaign, with guidance from Promundo-US, will be the start of this work in the region.

¹⁴ Rather than assuming that any one organisation can deliver real and sustained change on these complex issues, the LAP is envisaged as a forum that brings together for example, implementers, researchers, policy-makers and communication specialist that have the potential to impact on the incidence of sexual violence.

In addition, Oak will continue applying pressure to close institutions. Clusters of grants relating to transitioning out of institutions, and policies around that such as housing, education, cash grants and other entitlements from the Government and NGOs will be supported.