

EVALUATING PROJECT SUPPORTS: SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN THE DELICATE PHASE BETWEEN ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD WHILE LEAVING ALTERNATIVE CARE FACILITIES

A BOILING CALDRON AND A DEPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

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Evaluation is not about praising or about judging in any other way the work of a collective. It is about extracting the *value* of an initiative, about extracting the inner truth that has been guiding the teams involved in the endeavours. It is also about unveiling the inherent conflicts in the nature of the working task that has been hindering processes, structures, procedures and efforts. 21-century evaluation research is mostly concerned with the tension between value-laden and value-neutral research ([Hammersley, 2008](#)). Most conventional evaluations leave a vacuum as to the value of available options when applying solely “rational” procedures ([Julnes, 2010](#)). With this study, I have made a conscious effort to bring together evidence-based and value-based methodologies along a continuum of qualitative and quantitative approaches to address the challenges of producing a report that will illuminate and ignite rather than present a dry narrative of what went well and what did not work.

Leaving care as a specific and overwhelming experience of transition to adulthood, in particular leaving alternative care facilities as they are emerging in the de-institutionalisation processes is an underexplored field. It should be emphasised that justice has to be done not only to this project but the experience of collaboration of this consortium in previous projects before. While formally the project is very recent, in reality what has brought the teams of the three organisations to such a success under so challenging circumstances during the implementation since the pandemic and the lockdown, is a long-term previous cooperation. The accumulated experience and learning has to be taken very seriously and this is how I see the task of the evaluation - as a distilling intervention to help the process of developing an adequate policy at national, regional and European levels.

The key messages, as presented by the project teams, are therefore:

- The accumulated evidence and learning **MUST** be used to inform national decision making and policy making.
- There is a need to enhance the channels of information and communication from care facilities to the policy level.
- A lot of work - rigorous and robust work - is needed to ensure that children participate both as individuals and as a group in decision- and policymaking.
- Capacity building should focus on shift in knowledge and skills **but also** of attitudes.

A key question then becomes that of sustainability: what next? How to ensure that the tremendously valuable learning and experience from the project and the work that preceded will be disseminated, valorised, used and applied?

In a way we can consider the project a case study research: In Yin’s terms, ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ ([Yin, 1984](#)). ‘Case study’ here is also understood as a multi-methodological approach and a design feature, ‘a frame determining the boundaries of information gathering’ and an ‘attempt to explain holistically the dynamics of a certain historical period of a particular social unit’ ([Stoecker, 1991](#):97-98) by focusing on “cases” of the most challenging child profiles (violence, asylum seekers)

and the most problematic contexts in Southern Europe. This allows to explore the phenomenon of transitions towards adulthood from the perspective of what approaches and techniques are needed to be mainstreamed while targeting the most vulnerable children and young people. The answer to the question of sustainability therefore lies within consolidating the learning and developing further, more powerful and better formulated and equipped interventions.

METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

The methodology of the evaluation is held together by an approach known as Theory of Change (ToC), or mapping the logic of the intervention as a part of strategic planning, activity implementation and, consequently, to ground the monitoring and evaluation ([Mason and Barnes, 2007](#); [Coote et al., 2004](#)). ToC proceeds from mapping the steps collaboratively with as many as possible stakeholders - from identifying key issues in the context to achieving the intended impact. By identifying implicit and explicit theories of change from a variety of stakeholders, the approach designs the activities in a project, programme or initiative, with a view of what outputs and outcomes they should produce to arrive at the required objectives and overall project goal and have the desired impact. To extract those, the evaluation intervention proceeded from a through project documentation review, interviews-as-observations with key figures within the consortium, and observations of consortium meetings and conferences.

THEORY OF CHANGE

In terms of **context**, the project teams have found issues at several levels. Starting from EU and national policies, it is evident that while policies are overall good - implementation is patchy. This is linked to the challenges in the support system which is fragmented in all three countries and lacking communication and consistency across referrals, professionals do not have enough knowledge, skills and adequate attitudes, especially when it comes to the issues faced by the most traumatised children and young people.

The **rationale** for action within this project is illuminating and developing structures, processes, procedures and techniques to enhance child participation as a foundational pre-condition for empowering the children and shifting their focus to preparation for leaving care facilities and preparing for adulthood. A huge number of **activities** were implemented, which differ from country to country as well as aim to hold the partnership together in their efforts to support young people while learning what works, for whom, in what contexts, under what circumstances, how and why.

The mere **results** of the project can be considered a number of meetings, communication and coordination with sites (care facilities), group and (especially!) individual sessions for children and young people (online throughout the lockdown when necessary), videos, other materials, 2 conferences. What is important for the evaluation though are the **effects**:

- a) on children: most importantly giving them a voice and making them feel heard and agents of their life as well as establishing specific structures for that with their processes, procedures and results; these structures also consulted the materials produced by the project teams;
- b) on professionals: highlighting the gaps in knowledge, skills, attitudes and communication and developing and providing the necessary tools and interventions to address these gaps; not least, the work with the professionals, despite of being the most challenging also constitutes interventions within the national systems, the effects of which will have ripple effects in the future;
- c) on the implementing organisations: embedding the developed approaches, practices and techniques in their routine practices building on previous experience and methodologies;

- d) on the consortium: building on an already establishing practices and strengthening its capacities to continue with the interventions for years to come with follow up projects and continuous cooperation, collaboration and shared learning;
- e) the effects on local systems and on an EU level can only be predicted as they are a subject of the long-term workings of the “seeds” of this project - all the materials that have been provided as well as the dissemination of the evaluation report and the development of follow up projects.

The evaluation shows that there is a potential for a huge **impact** of this project: generalisability of findings, developing and upgrading a rigorous, transferable across contexts evidence-based methodology combined with value-based principles, and clear and tested tips on adaptation.

IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY

The methodology that is emerging is built around two pillars: child participation and focus on the transition to adulthood and leaving care facilities. All three teams have been adhering mainly to these two elements of the intervention. Where there were challenges, these were related to the intervention dosage due to the lockdown: the planned meetings and sessions were more often online and sometimes they had to be interrupted in some facilities. Even though the pandemic was a challenge, the greatest challenges in all three contexts lied within the systems and the relationship with other professionals from the official care system as well as the background and underlying practices that affected the overall wellbeing and re-traumatisation of the children and young people.

As per the quality of implementation and maintaining standards, all three teams followed high standards as accepted in the field and the international covenants on the rights of the children. They also developed new ones to meet the challenges in these specific contexts and in this particular unique period of time, characterised not only by unprecedented in recent history lockdowns but also by severe, especially in Bulgaria, turn to retrograde policies and unfavourable public climate.

It is paramount to highlight the implemented inevitable differentiation, that is the unique characteristics that make this intervention work (within its variations across beneficiaries and organisational and national contexts). Regardless of the ways in which implementation was carried out - either through face to face meetings (group and individual), through video materials, online work, etc, the focus has been on building strong and powerful groups of young people who connect with their voices and have spaces to reflect on the transition.

Perhaps most valuable is the exploration of how the adaptation did work across contexts, target groups and circumstances which will be described in further details and with case vignettes within the full report.

CONCLUSIONS

Paramount for the project is the direct involvement of children from institutions, including building Advisory Boards and facilitating an experience of agency, respect and taking control over one's life within a supportive and protected environment. It is also key that all methodologies across the three contexts were based on an initial needs assessment of the system at the start of the project. This provided a chance for a momentary snapshot of the system(s) and identification of the “hot spots” and weak links to be targeted within the individual activities. The teams were too busy as it is increasingly the case in the field due to a lack of funding, high turnover, competitiveness in the NGO sector and the need for attending to ad hoc practicalities and challenges which reportedly led to a slight disconnect between aspects of coordination and methodology. There was also the inevitable challenge of all stakeholders being surprised by the pandemic. Nevertheless, thanks to previously

established and tested methodologies that were adapted to these difficulties and not least because of the policies and standards of practices being generally good and well defined, their otherwise patchy implementation was addressed by polishing the approaches and techniques especially at the micro levels.

Unfortunately, a key finding is that “the whole system is totally wrong”. In particular, there is a lack of consistency within the referral systems in all three countries which affects adversely the children's wellbeing and their further retraumatisation. The professionals’ practices are characterised by a lack of knowledge, especially on embedding a human rights approach and on understanding the spirit of human rights. The professionals are massively undertrained and their training is unsustainable due to high staff turnover. The alternative care facilities turn out to be only formally “alternative” as they fail on a massive scale to provide security and a trusted supportive environment. These are only a few of the challenges that have to be addressed by the consortium in the very near future as the cost for children is high, especially in terms of unnecessary sufferance, failed life goals and projects, unrealised potential and so on.

Unsurprisingly, at the core of the success of the project is the “soul and spirit” of each individual team member - as one of the interviewees said “You can't do this job if you lack a heart”. Crucial was the personal engagement and commitment and the focus on the work task regardless of the visible obstacles at all levels of implementation. The ethos of a problem-solving orientation combined with what interviewees called “the spirit of comradery and partnership” allowed a great sensitivity and attention to the needs of beneficiaries, identifying what works best, for whom, how and why. These ingredients are at the core of what has to be considered when implementing future projects to multiply the effects of what has been achieved and to valorise the methodological and scientific findings.

Future projects and initiatives by this consortium (and probably its expansion) hold a tremendous potential of an awesome power to reach to the heart of problems, challenges and obstacles that hinder the adequate reform of care institutions not only at the national, but also at the EU and wider levels. A task of the evaluation report is to outline possible avenues for powerful yet economic interventions that build on what has already been achieved so far. The consortium and the accumulated with it reach experience and results can be considered a boiling caldron for ideas for the years, and even decades to come. I strongly advise the readers of this bulletin to take note of the findings of the project and to watch this space for future knowledge, insights and understanding.