

RECOMMENDATIONS

for the development and improvement of measures, services and programmes for the prevention of removal of children from families, i.e. for the return of children to their primary families if the removal has already happened

One of the basic rights of all children is the right to life in family. With the intent to support that right and exercise it in the child's best interest, it is necessary to provide adequate and timely support to a family so it can be a good enough place for the growth and development of a child. We need to change the approach, the paradigm on which we base the work dedicated to the exercising of children's right to a life in family, the improvement of normative framework and strengthening of the capacity of institutions and of collaborators in the social welfare system.

By carrying out the **RECOMMENDATION**¹, we shall directly contribute to the implementation of measures defined by the Action Plan for the Chapter 23 of negotiations on Serbia's accession to the European Union.

Paradigm Shift

- ① We need to support the shift of focus of the social welfare system from the restrictive ones to the measures of support to families by developing continuum of services intended to families with numerous and complex needs, ranging from preventive to intensive services.
- ① The continuum of services is provided not only by the development of new services, but also by strengthening and bringing up to date the existing services in the social welfare programmes aimed at strengthening family, and parenting skills.
- ① The services provided by different systems such as social welfare, education, health care systems comprise the continuum of services.
- ① Simultaneously with the development of services in community, it is necessary to transform large residential institutions, which requires development of transformation plans for the institutions for accommodation of children and more efficient monitoring of the violations of children's rights in those institutions.
- ① It is equally important to insist on faster return of a child into the family, as well as on prevention of child's removal from it. Services, programmes and measures are very much alike.

¹The recommendations were produced on the grounds of the conclusions of the national conference "Strengthening Families - Windows of Opportunity" organized by the Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia MODS in cooperation with the Republic Social Welfare Institute, with the support of UNICEF and under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Issues.

- ⊙ In order for the support to families with children to be efficient, it is necessary to provide a mechanism through which local authorities shall have a well rounded and integral system of support to children and families which shall encompass: early recognition of difficulties and problems in children, early intervention as support to children and families at an early age, development of services that will enable constant, timely and adequate support to families with numerous and complex needs, both to families in crisis and to families having children with developmental problems. Local authorities shall also develop and make sustainable social and educational programmes and services supporting social inclusion and education based on inclusive principles.

Normative framework

- ⊙ The Law on Social Welfare should explicitly recognize the measures of providing support to families, particularly to families in crisis, that are at risk of having a child removed from the family and providing support and helping with preparations for the return of a child to its primary family.
- ⊙ Enabling the establishing of services of intensive support to families, social and educational, as well as counselling and therapy services – passing the missing rulebooks for these services; envisaging funding from the republic budget for the services of intensive support to families.
- ⊙ The Law on Social Welfare should envisage that the decision on the continuation of residential accommodation of a child under three years of age should be checked during the review process every two months, and that the prolongation of accommodation after two months have passed should require the authorization of the line Ministry.
- ⊙ The Law on Social Welfare should envisage that a child under three years of age can exceptionally stay at a shelter with the approval of the Ministry in charge of social welfare by having the decision on the prolongation of accommodation in a shelter reviewed every two months within the six-month legal deadline.

Capacities

- ⊙ Human and material resources of centres for social work (CSW) need to be improved so they can fulfil their duties and responsibilities envisaged by the law, especially bearing in mind the growing gap between the scope of work and raised standards of protection, on the one hand, and stagnation/drop in number of professionals, on the other hand.

- ⊙ Professional workers need continuous support and strengthening of their professional competences. Introducing external supervision that would primarily be directed at educational, developmental and supportive functions could be an effective approach for the improvement of professional competences of professional workers.
- ⊙ It is important to work on professional advancement of the workers in the social welfare system in line with contemporary findings on the importance of continuity of relation between a child and its family. It is also necessary to develop procedures that enable and support contact between parents and child immediately after separation, every time the continuation of contact is in child's interest.

Financing

- ⊙ Improve the services financing system, both in the domain of the availability of financial resources, and in the domain of the very mechanism of services financing.
- ⊙ Improve the mechanism of committed transfers - earmarking the mandatory part of resources for the provision of support services to families with children.

Learning from experience

- ⊙ Making professional procedures and proceedings uniform through learning from good practice examples in work with children removed from their families. Good practice examples show that it is possible to raise the quality of work with parents in accommodation and strengthen the ties between family members, regardless of the child being in the residential accommodation or in a foster family, and encouraging rapid return to the family wherever the return is possible.