

NATIONAL NETWORK FOR CHILDREN

The [National Network for Children](#) – Bulgaria is an alliance of 141 civil society organisations and supporters, working with and for children and families across the whole country.

The promotion, protection and observing the rights of the child are part of the key principles, that unite us. We do believe that all policies and practices, that affect directly or indirectly the children should be developed, applied and observed, taking into account the principle of the best interest of the child and with the active participation of children and young people themselves.

In all our activities we are lead by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a key document that lays down the philosophy, the values and the way of work of the Network.

The National Network for Children is national coordinator of the [“Opening Doors for Europe’s Children”](#) – a pan-European campaign advocating for strengthening families and ending institutional care in Europe.

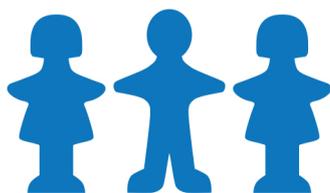
Based on our experience, we would like to present the following examples of good and bad practices on the use of EU funds towards reforms in deinstitutionalization (DI):

Maximising the Use of EU funds – Supporting DI Reforms in Bulgaria: Good Practice

“Vision for Deinstitutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria” is a national strategic document outlining an ambitious vision for closure of all large-scale residential care institutions in Bulgaria within the next 15 years. The document has been developed collectively by the national and local authorities, civil society representatives and UNICEF Bulgaria to ensure that all reform initiatives are consistent throughout the country and are implemented within one concise and coherent national framework.

According to the national strategy, deinstitutionalization (DI) is seen as a national policy that is binding upon all stakeholders: municipalities, local, education and health authorities, social service providers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It ensures the right of children to a family environment and guarantees access to quality care and services based on children’s individual needs. The vision commits to a moratorium on placement of all children between the age of 0-3 years in residential care.

The strategy welcomes investment of more than 100 million euro from the European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development to support DI reforms in Bulgaria. Making connections between these funds is an example of **good practice** – it sets the ground for efficient and integrated spending of the EU funds.



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In 2010 – 2015, implementation of the vision for DI throughout five integrated EU projects has successfully resulted in closure of eight out of 31 infant homes and all of the 25 institutions for children with disabilities. It created an environment for extending DI efforts and encouraged NGOs to implement DI projects with their own resources.

	By the end of 2009	At the beginning of 2016
Number of institutions	137	50
Number of children placed in them	7587	1495

Negative practice on the use of EU funds towards implementing DI in health and social protection sectors

A) Project “Direction: Family” was implemented by the Bulgarian Ministry of Health during 2007 – 2013 in partnership with the State Agency for Child Protection and the Agency for Social Assistance with total investment of 16 633 982 leva (over 8 million euro) coming from the European Structural funds and the national budget.

The aim of the project was the restructuring of eight residential institutions for children between the age of 0 and 3 years¹ and their replacement by the community-based complexes for social and healthcare services for children and families (including family-consultative centers, centers for early intervention, centers for mother and child health, mother and baby units, day care centers, etc.)

Until now, there is no clear and tangible commitment on the side of the state and the municipalities for the financing of the integrated social services. A majority of them are currently either not functioning or have been closed down. There is no mechanism for ring-fencing the released funds from the closure of HMSCCs towards the development of innovative services. In addition, there is no clear understanding between the different stakeholders on the integrated approach and how it should be regulated. Lack of any progress questions the existence of political will for the next stage of deinstitutionalisation in Bulgaria altogether. For many years, non-governmental organisations have insisted on urgent measures to ensure sustainability of the DI reforms and advocated for the urgent analysis of the process and

¹ Homes for medical and social care for children (HMSCCs)



regulation of the innovative services in particular. The closure of residential institutions has been of crucial importance not only because of the long-term damage by institutional care on young children but also because shutting the entrance to other institutions depends on it.

B) The aim of the **project “Childhood for all”** was deinstitutionalisation of 1800 children with disabilities above the age of 3 from 24 homes for children with mental disabilities and 31 homes for medico-social care for children. Their transition from institutional care to the community-based small group homes² was completed by 2014.

The project was implemented by the State Agency for Child Protection in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Agency for Social Assistance and the Ministry of Healthcare. It was funded by the 2007 – 2013 Human Resources Development Operational Programme with co-finance from the European Social Fund. 80 million leva (over 4 million euro) were allocated for infrastructure under “Regional Development” and “Rural Development Fund” Operational Programme; 23 million leva (nearly 12 million euro) went towards support of the services and 5 million leva (2,5 million euro) were invested in capacity building activities.

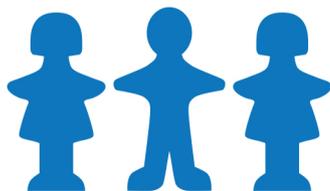
At the same time, small group homes as the main alternative to institutional care for children with disabilities remain underfinanced. Service capacity of maximum 15 children³ per small group home puts at risk the quality of care. The annual national standard of 3 700 euro per child barely covers staff and building maintenance costs.

The methodology for their funding– per child, per number of days in the placement – based on the efficiency principle of EU spending has allowed for the children to be moved from institutions in haste and disregarding their individual plans. Failing to ensure the best interests of children, the transition aimed at filling the capacity of the newly established services and securing immediate funding for them rather than ensuring children’s safety during the transition from institutional to family-based care.

Due to delays in developing infrastructure and the health and education systems failing short to join the process, a lot of the children at the initial stage of transition endured an unduly long stay in the institutions without socialisation or appropriate individual care. Lack of capacities and skills from

² A type of residential care in which a small group of children live in a house in the community, and are cared for in an environment that is as family-like as possible – Save the Children UK, Child protection and Care Related Definitions, October 2007

³ The capacity of a small group home established under the pilot project “Childhood for all” includes 12 permanent and 2 emergency places. The capacity recommended by the Agency for Social Assistance is maximum 15 children.



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education, health care and social service providers failed to ensure the quality of life for children in the new alternative environment.

All of the above represents a form of re-institutionalisation as opposed to deinstitutionalisation. It calls for the review of spending proceedings, flexibility and individual approach, and adequate sustainable funding of the alternative care solutions by the national and local government. Without these prerequisites DI reforms in Bulgaria might turn into a grave misuse of the European funds and a replacement of the will of the European community.

During implementation of the DI reforms, Bulgaria came across a few other obstacles related to the EU funds spending rules and regulations:

1. NGOs remain excluded from the implementation of DI reforms with financial support from EU. When working through a direct beneficiary (e.g. Ministry, governmental agency or local authority), projects should be allowed to use mini grants to attract the expert resources of NGOs.
2. Lowest price public tendering in many instances jeopardizes the quality of the offer (i.e. poor quality construction works or inadequate methodological guidance materials). In the context of deinstitutionalisation and improving the lives of most vulnerable children pursuing the lowest prices may necessarily not be the solution.
3. Current appeal system prevents the start and leads to disruption of the planned and inter-related activities. It delays achieving vital objectives and jeopardises viability of the entire projects.

The National Network for Children, April 2016