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This is a stakeholder submission by SOS Children's Village Association of Latvia (SOS LV) to the UPR of Latvia and covers issues related to **social security and adequate standard of living**. This submission presents two key issues with respect to social exclusion of vulnerable children and families and violation of rights of young people leaving alternative care.

**Vulnerable children and families:
Poverty related social exclusion – social security and adequate standard of living**

Summary

Statistical data shows that more than 150 000 people are living in poverty in Latvia. The effects of poverty, unemployment and alcoholism often lead to violence, abuse and neglect of children. State social welfare provisions are insufficient to address the root causes of social exclusion and the negative impact on vulnerable children and families. We recommend that the state urgently review the implementation of existing law and policy and ensure the necessary financial and material resources to deliver effective social welfare services according to the needs of vulnerable children and families.

Background

Statistical data shows that in the first quarter of 2010 in Latvia there were 256 thousand families with approximately 393 thousand children in age from 0 -17 years. Eurostat data shows that in the second quarter of 2010 among the EU Member States one of the highest unemployment rates was recorded in Latvia (19.4%). In 2009 the number of people living in poverty was 85,1 thousand (3,87%) but in 2010 June, this number increased to 153,6 thousand (6,86%) people, most of them families with children. Of those receiving the State's guaranteed minimum income benefit 39% are children.

For example, in Riga (capital of Latvia) the social service agency provides information that compared to the beginning of 2009, there has been more than three times increase of the number of clients who have contacted social service agency in order to receive social benefits. Most of the clients are in working age or families with children. From Latvia approximately 1500 people go abroad every month to seek a job.

2009-2010 saw a rapid growth in the numbers of families whom, due to economic reasons, are in crisis which they cannot solve by themselves.

The available services are not sufficient to provide necessary support to all vulnerable families. Municipalities have limited resources to provide material aid and social services. At the State level there is a developed social security net strategy which aims to develop an emergency security package to reduce the negative impacts for society. Laws of Latvia state that each person has rights to receive social benefits and social services according to evaluation of needs and resources.

The real situation is that the available services are not sufficient to address the issues facing families. They are not sufficient to material needs but also not targeted to the individual needs of children and families.

Without receiving adequate and comprehensive support, family problems in most cases deepen, and they often lead to alcoholism, violence and other problems to a situation where the children's physical and psycho-emotional well-being is at risk and children may have to be removed from their families.

In assessing the situation local municipalities have limited resources to provide social work and support services for families with children, often there are not available specialists who can provide the necessary help and aid, such as psychologists, lawyers, etc. Due to financial reasons and limited number of employees there are difficulties to realize social rehabilitation programs.

The findings of our analysis in 2010 are also confirmed in reports by the Ministry of Welfare. The ministry acknowledges that during the monitoring of social service agencies in different municipalities a number of problems were noted. The major problems are with documentation, there is lack of needs assessment and evaluation of client's resources. Many lack the staff or they have not appropriate education or qualifications.

This situation has a significant impact on families at risk. To improve the situation in Latvia and reduce the causes of social exclusion of families with children our recommendations are:

1. Conduct an urgent consultation and review, including civil society and other relevant stakeholders, of the implementation of existing law and policy to identify gaps between policy and practice at the national and municipality levels.
2. To conduct data collection on family vulnerability and social exclusion in order to inform the development of necessary and targeted social services
3. To develop and implement an appropriate range of family strengthening interventions in order to provide tailored and appropriate responses to problems facing socially excluded children and families.
4. To allocate the necessary financial material resources to ensure the delivery of effective social services for all socially excluded children and families.

Young people leaving care:

Rights violations regarding social security and adequate standard of living

Summary

The alternative care system in Latvia includes options to place children in guardianship, foster care or child care institutions. Every year approximately 800 young people age out of these different alternative care options. However, existing policy and procedures do not provide a clear framework to support or promote effective practices in leaving care preparation and after care services. In the absence of systematic leaving care preparation and after care support young people face significant barriers to their social integration, specifically on entering the labor market and in securing adequate housing.

Background

In 2009, a total of 8,709 children were living in out-of-home care in Latvia. Of these 758 were in foster care, 6044 in guardianship and 1907 in child care institutions.

In the SOS LV Child Rights Situation Analysis for 2009 it was found out that due to problems in institutions the integration of the young people from child care institutions in society is often severely limited because children are insufficiently prepared for independent life, and municipalities sometimes have difficulties to provide young people with necessary support after care and adequate housing.

There is also a lack of information about situation with young people who have been raised in other forms of care (guardianship and foster families). But some municipalities can identify cases where young people are not prepared for independent life. Young people have to go back to their municipalities where in the majority of cases there is limited access to employment and other services.

According to the regulations¹ local government, having taken the decision regarding the provision of out-of-family care for a child has responsibility to ensure by, for example, providing psychosocial or material support, to take the measures necessary to ensure the integration into society of any child who has reached the legal age.

However, there is an almost complete lack of specialized “leaving care” workers who can provide and facilitate the necessary support. For example, in capital of Latvia (Riga), there are social workers allocated to work more generally with young people, but in most municipalities there are no allocated persons to specifically provide leaving care support to young people. To reduce the gap between available support and young people readiness to receive support and ask for help there has to be allocated a person who could be able to facilitate young person in the preparation for leaving care and after care support.

The state guaranteed social services system and municipalities are not capable of reacting to all the problems young people faces during the leaving care process because of insufficient capacity and lack of financial resources. Confirmation of this fact can for example be seen in the insufficient capacity of the special apartment type living places, which together with the individually planned programme for preparation for living an independent life are the best available tools for supporting young people for leaving care.

Recommendations

1. Conduct an urgent consultation including relevant state and civil society agencies to develop clear framework to support and promote delivery of effective practices in leaving care preparation and after care services.
2. To ensure, for every young person in alternative care, the allocation of a specialized support worker (mentor) who has the responsibility to facilitate the young person in preparation for leaving care and offer continuing support for the period after care
3. To ensure the child’s right to special support & assistance and quality standards in alternative care by continuing efforts to de-institutionalize the care system and to develop an appropriate range of alternative care options.

¹ *Social Guarantees for an Orphan and a Child Left without Parental Care who is in Out-of-Family Care as well as After the Termination of Out-of-Family Care (18.11.2005. Nr.857) paragraph 32*