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Interactive work with street children as a way to teach citizenship

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Introduction

In the last two decades Latvia has been experiencing the challenges of the transition period, in a time of both economic and social tensions. This has created new problems and exacerbated existing ones. One of the new problems which appeared is that of street children. Most of these children at risk come from dysfunctional families, and it is not their fault to come from families in which they do not get enough parental care and support and when 'the street is often a better and even safer place for these children than their home' (Lukashinska, 2002). These youngsters are part of our society and cannot be left unaided, and though the government is making various efforts to address the problem of street children and to develop a whole system for the protection of children's rights, it is complicated and closely connected with the general situation for children and families in the community. Alongside the National Programme to improving the situation of children, local government support for low-income families, the repressive methods of Law Protection bodies, and developments in the educational system, social service and special services for street children, there are non-governmental organisations that also play a substantial role in helping children at risk. Many of the non-governmental organizations that provide forms of social help and support for street children were created around 1996, and since then have gained much experience in working with street children. One of these is the Riga Christian St. Nicholas Children Shelter, which is day centre aimed at developing children's civic life skills, specifically considering the bitter life experience of this group.

The street children phenomenon in Latvia

A report on the situation of street children/children in the street made for the Joint Programme of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Soros Foundation in Partnership with the World Bank, on ten countries in Central and Eastern Europe (1999), found that 'a third of Latvian families can be regarded as dysfunctional for one reason or another, and thus risk being incapable of providing for a harmonious development of their children'.

During the transition to a free market economy families and children were exposed to various types of risk (low wages, unemployment, high public utility payments etc.), and did not receive sufficient support to overcome them. As a result, by the mid-1990s, begging by vagrant children began in the streets of Riga and other towns. At the same time children not attending school became a problem. The reason for this was not only the impoverishment of many Latvian families with children, but also the complete breakdown of links between family, school, society and governmental institutions, which had been functioning rather effectively during the previous decades, but had not been replaced during the first years of independence.

Information provided by the Riga Municipal Crisis Centre for Street Children 'Mars Avenue' (2002) suggest that the typical reasons why children end up on the street are:

- the parents are drug addicts or alcoholics, and conditions at home are unsanitary;

- the children have been abandoned and left without care;
- the children have been abused;
- the children have had conflicts with their parents;
- the children have run away from childcare institutions.

Failure to attend school or dropping out of school can be both cause and effect in the process of a child becoming a street child.

Contemporary statistical reports and studies in Latvia lead to the conclusion that the number of street children is not declining, and that their problems are becoming increasingly serious, deeply-rooted and chronic. If allowed to continue at its present rate of growth, the street children phenomenon would have a deleterious impact on the general welfare of society in the country in the near future. The consequences will be apparent not only in the negative effects on the street environment and on the civic development of children and their ability to function in society as responsible citizens, but also in growing crime and threats to public safety. Sociologists predict that society will suffer from a rise in crime, drug addiction, prostitution, theft, beggary and hooliganism.

A prolonged life on the street leaves a deep impact on children and reduces their ability to function within a society as a civic-minded part of population. They become part of a specific subculture with a crippled system of values ruled by street laws. This includes such features as street culture, street ethics and street values that have little in common with the norms of civics and a civic society.

Social Work in Riga Christian St. Nikolaus Children's Shelter.

The non-governmental organisation 'Riga Christian St. Nikolaus Childrens Shelter' works as a day centre. It is now in its ninth year of operation, working with street children close to the centre of the city with a nearby park, where groups of children spending their time, day till late night. The work of the Children Shelter is based around year-long projects financed by international foundations and on donations from firms and organisations in Riga and abroad, mainly in Scandinavian countries. The Shelter often finds it difficult to guarantee the sustainability of its services, which is particularly important in working with street children. If financing ends, projects must be discontinued.

The day centre has a staff of four full-time social workers and some part-time workers and volunteers, and it is attended by approximately 25 teenagers (the number floats). It is open for children from 4 pm till 9.30 pm. The shelter has a two-room apartment in an old building, with a small kitchen, and is not spacious enough to receive all the children who would like to apply to the Shelter for help.

The target group of the Children Centre are children and teenagers from social risk families, their parents, step-parents and custodians. Coming from dysfunctional families these children and teenagers constitute risk group children. Their family circumstances are different, but the problems are similar: shortage of food and clothing, unsanitary living conditions, parental negligence and a low-culture environment. Some of them are from large families where fathers are alcohol-dependant and cannot support their children, other from large one-parent families (generally the mother), where there is no

money for food, children's clothes and school supplies. Some parents are unable to give their children sufficient care and attention because they are forced to work long hours to pay for housing and public utility expenses. Many of the families the children come from are stricken by poverty and unable to solve problems within the family: they suffer permanently from psychological pressure, stress, and a feeling of helplessness. Conflicts arise, alcoholism, poor health and unsanitary conditions prevail, and parents neglect their children because they are unable to cope with their own problems. The children attending the Shelter in their everyday life experience parental negligence, feel unloved, unneeded and lonely, are often hungry.

In the Christian Street Children Shelter the children and teenagers have, first of all, an opportunity to have meals, to wash their clothes, to get immediate moral support, to consult the social worker and the psychologist, to get advice for solving his or her problems, to know more about their rights, to receive information about organisations and institutions where they can apply for help. The children and teenagers can come to the centre every day after school. They meet in the centre an atmosphere of friendliness and love. The staff of the Day Centre show genuine warmth, respect and care towards every child or teenager and create a peaceful and trustful environment for them. The newcomer's practise obeying the rules of good behaviour, which for many is not so easy at first. The children take part in the duties in the Shelter, for example, acting as leader for the day and distribute tasks among the children (such as cooking meals, laying the table, washing the dishes, cleaning the rooms, taking out garbage). The leader is responsible for discipline, order, for completing the tasks by other children, and has a right to give punishment to children who break the rules of the Shelter or who do some harm to a weaker or a younger child. They perform the role of a mediator in cases of a conflict between the children and teenagers.

Every activity held in the Centre and every element of work with the children and teenagers is targeted on the development of *civic life skills*. The teenagers are taught to be responsible for their actions and to be open to receive criticism and punishment when it is necessary. The topics very often discussed with the teenagers are their duties, honesty, respect, compassion, discipline, self-control and courage – all of them the components of being a good citizen and their lack is a stumbling block in their everyday behaviour at school, at home, on the street. The teenagers are also taught to organise their leisure time with useful and exciting activities, as an alternative to vagabondage, drugs and alcohol. They can study English for free in the centre, with the accent on survival English – they learn how to identify themselves abroad, how to protect themselves against possible trafficking or being involved in the sex industry.

As the Centre has a computer class with internet access, the teenagers can get computer knowledge, necessary in terms of future occupation and better opportunities in job hunting. They are taught to use the Internet to get useful information and to develop their cognitive activity.

The parents and the custodians of the children and of the teenagers also have an opportunity to apply to the Centre to get necessary information concerning social welfare matters, advocacy, housing and rental problems and their civic rights.

Project Work: Peer to Peer Street Work.

The work of the Day Centre is not restricted to this. The Children Centre has a range of activities coming out its Centre premises. A very important part of the work is street-based work. Three years ago the centre introduced a new programme *Peer to Peer*. This is based on the methods of interactive work with street children and teenagers, and the object is to create and develop street social work in Riga in order to deliver help and information to street children.

In 2002 a group of former street children who had been attending the Children Centre, after having been taught to conduct social work in the streets, started to work as volunteer outreach workers or teenage social workers. Their working space is a nearby city park where they have joint activities with street children three days a week.

The aim of *Peer to Peer* is to support children in the streets: it could not be specific in their situation. It gives street children information they need in their particular context and thus give them possibilities to make decisions based on this.

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- to teach, organise and encourage teams of teenage social workers (selected from among former street children) to work with children in the streets;
- to test in practice the experience of other countries in Latvia;
- to create contacts with street children in a familiar environment;
- to conduct different polls and interviews, thus finding the real situation with street children, their problems and needs;
- to encourage the street children to solve their own problems, not to solve them for the children;
- to inform society about the situation they are in and about their problems;
- to inform the children about their rights and the possibilities of getting help of various types;
- to teach children different games, organising for them street ball games and other sport activities, involving them into enjoyable occupation, creating experience of spending time in healthy and interesting way which is an alternative to dysfunctional behaviour.

Experience elsewhere shows that one of the most effective methods of working with street children is street work which allows informal approaches to a greater number of street children. Two teams of young outreach workers have been formed and organised, all of whom were themselves former street children who have decided to participate in social work with street children. Trained through specially designed programmes for young outreach street workers, these teenage social workers go into the street as volunteers (wearing special uniforms with identification signs) and work with current street children.

Teenage social workers with similar past experiences are very effective and relate well to the children who spend most of their time on the street and places such as amusement

arcades, computer parlours, basements and abandoned buildings. They know how to approach them, what to say and what to do, and in which way to speak to them. Being in close contact with street children who willingly trust their peers, the teenage social workers collect information about the processes that take place in the life of the street, which is given on to the social workers of the centre. Then this information is checked and analysed, serving as a source for further activities in preventing and combating cases of violence against young children and abuse of various kind. Sometimes they bring alarming information about other risks concerning large families and their housing problems: because of debts for rent a family can be under threat of eviction without the offer of any other place to live, thus making the family with children homeless. Intervention of the Day Centre social workers in cases like this have sometimes saved the situation of families and brought great satisfaction to the families, as well as to everybody who in one way or another took part in solving the problem.

The street work gives the possibility of knowing the problems and needs of the street children and teenagers. The outreach workers organise games and other sports activities in the park, involving the street children in occupations other than vagabondage, drug and alcohol abuse or roaming in the market places. During the games and other activities the young street workers create an atmosphere of friendliness with the street children, and particularly importantly, they get the trust of the street children, which helps the street children to be open and to share their troubles and fears. If a child is closed and does not want to discuss his problems, his friends usually tell about the situation of that child. Identification and recognition of the existing problems are the first links in the chain of activities which are needed for achieving positive results. Very often the outreach group works preventively. For example, they bring food with them to the park where they feed hungry children and teenagers, keeping them from stealing, begging or other illegal actions. The street workers also know that in some situations they have to be on alert and if they see a child in a risk situation, they give immediate support, being ready to intervene.

Information work appears to be really a very valuable part in the street social work. The teenage social workers are ready to give the street children information about organisations and institutions where they can turn to for help: sometimes it is the mere lack of information that can be a reason for problems which are otherwise easy to solve. The street children may not know much about their rights, so they also get information about them, as well as about their responsibilities and the risks of street life, where they can become victims of sexual abuse and a part of the prostitution market. Young girls are warned against possible trafficking.

The young street workers gather information about the situation of the street children in the city and pass it to the social workers in the Shelter. They tell them about living conditions, family and school problems of the children whom they work with in the park and discuss the ways they can be helped. After each street work activity in the park the staff and the young outreach workers analyse and give each other feedback on the work done. They analyse the procedure of their activities in the park, try to find their drawbacks and reasons for them, discuss successful and less successful moments and communications with the street children, and point out what and in which way their work can be improved.

Conclusion

Certainly, 'the phenomenon of street children cannot be addressed without a broad social policy strategy which tackles those social and family factors which put children at risk', as is noted in the World Bank survey on situation with street children in ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Yet, as workers of non-governmental sector, the staff of Riga Christian St. Nicholas Children Shelter are making a considerable contribution in social work with children from dysfunctional families, using effective methods in working with street children, fostering citizenship education in society, promoting citizenship training through social work. The years spent in the Children's Centre, as the former street children recognize, helped them to develop a strong motivation to organise their lives and instilled in them a sense of belonging and a stake in society.

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