

Presentation on the outcomes of the Reception and Living in Families Project

Liedewij de Ruijter de Wildt, 23 January 2015

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Good morning to you all. Welcome to the second day of our conference. I hope you all slept well and that nightlife in Amsterdam has not been too tempting.

Yesterday we heard some interesting presentations on out of home care in general and RLF specifically. We also heard about practice in the UK and in Ireland.

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Today we will go into detail by hand of the research that has been done by

- Counter Human Trafficking Bureau (Philip Ishola, our chairman yesterday and Peter Dolby),
- the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Elisabeth Melin) and
- Nidos (my colleagues of the RLF-team, their manager Peter van de Pol, Jan Murk, today's chairman and myself).

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The project aims at the promotion of RLF by increasing knowledge on it, connecting stakeholders in Europe, promoting good practice and offering strategies on increasing it. During this presentation, I will share with you the good practise on RLF that we found and what is needed to bring it further according to experts we met on the way, of whom many are present today.

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We visited 10 countries and did a desk research on the other EU-countries. We also included Norway and Switzerland in the research as we learned they have promising practise on RLF.

We organized 2 workshops in the UK and in Sweden for which we were able to invite experts on RLF from all over Europe. During the first workshop, we shared good practise and talked about ways to spread it. The second workshop went deeper in to how to recruit families and how to provide training to them on taking care of unaccompanied minors.

All findings will be described in a final report that will be ready in February.

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There is a general consensus amongst stakeholders in the EU that foster care is better for most children. The fact that it is generally less costly than institutional reception makes it also possible to reach commitment.

However, only a part of unaccompanied and separated children in the EU live in family care. Most live in institutional care. This is mostly due to practical reasons where youth care and asylum/migration systems mismatch: insufficient knowledge on how to increase quality and quantity of family care for this target group, good practices not reaching beyond the local level where they are developed, financial and organizational structures that do not support development of alternative family care explicitly. There seem to be hardly any ideological or budgetary objections to reception in families.

We found practise, be it traditional foster care or kinship care, in 16 European countries. Most of the 16 countries that offer RLF have scattered practise.

With this we mean that public, private or voluntary bodies are involved in the placement of a minor within a family, which in its application differs nationally, regionally or locally between communities.

Some of the countries do have a more structured system in place. These systems are characterised by the involvement of a mandated or state-certified public, private or voluntary body (at a national, regional or local level) in the placement of a minor within a family. In theory, it is a regulated and/or consistently applied framework within a specified geographic or administrative area where the family is at minimum responsible for the day-to-day care of an unaccompanied minor in their home and is paid a salary and/or remunerated for expenses, rendering them accountable.

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Scattered practise has been found in **Austria, France, Germany and Italy**, where practice differs a lot from one region or federated state to another region or federated state, as they all have their own legislation on youth care and basic welfare for asylum-seekers.

In all of these countries we found very good examples of RLF on a local level, for instance in the City of Graz in Austria, in the Department of Pas-de-Calais in France and the federated state of Lower Saxony and the City of Bremen in Germany. In Italy, the Municipality of Venice provides foster care to even 50% of the unaccompanied minors they are responsible for, mostly kinship care. They will give a workshop on how they managed to accomplish this later this morning.

We also found scattered practise on RLF in **Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Finland, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland**.

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Ireland, Sweden, Norway and the UK do have a system in place, although not all children in need of foster care do benefit from it. We already heard about the systems in Ireland and in the UK yesterday and both Swedish and Dutch experiences will be shared in several workshops later today.

The Netherlands has a special system on delivering foster care to unaccompanied minors that is available within Nidos and accessible to all of the children Nidos is responsible for if they are in need of it.

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In most member states that were investigated in the desk research, foster care for unaccompanied minors does not exist and in some of them there is hardly any discussion going on on accommodation or placements for unaccompanied minors. This is for instance the case in **Bulgaria, Hungary, Malta and Romania**.

In **Cyprus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia**, all children including unaccompanied minors should have a right to move to a foster family according the law, but in practice this does not happen with foreign children. There is no foster care system available for them in these countries. In some of these countries NGO's try to change this, for instance the Organisation for Aid to Refugees (OPU) in the Czech Republic and Slovenian Philanthropy in Slovenia. The fact that these countries have had low numbers of minors entering the last few years, causing free spaces in facilities for foreign children, however is said to put pressure to the system not to take them in to foster care.

Foster care is also the preferred option for foreign children in **Poland**. In contrast to the countries I just mentioned, the custodian court (being responsible for placement) places most non-asylum seeking unaccompanied minors in family like surroundings by means of a list of possible families it is provided with by the municipality. Some families are of the same origin as the minor, but most are Polish. However, current practice is that foster care is not an option for those unaccompanied minors who asked for asylum. These children live in institutions.

Worth mentioning is **Estonia**, where amendments to the Social Welfare Act that entered into force in April 2013, provide the same types of reception to unaccompanied minors as to other children, with a preference for foster families and substitute homes. Good practice is the fact that SOS Children's Villages provides alternative care for unaccompanied minors since the end of 2013 and has a contract for several years, one of the conditions being that either a foster family or a family-like substitute home will be provided.

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In countries that do offer reception in families, it can be divided in traditional foster care provided by families that are not known to the child and kinship care provided by family members or the extended network.

Denmark and Finland for instance do not provide traditional foster care but only use the alternative of living in kinship care with family members. Other countries use both.

One of the challenges in most countries that use kinship care is the fact that the children go to live with the family directly and do therefore not enter the child care system.

There can also be made a distinction between the use of indigenous families and the use of ethnic families with different cultural backgrounds.

Except for practice in the Netherlands, using foster carers with different cultural backgrounds is not the norm, though some of the countries do use both indigenous and ethnic families. Indigenous families taking care of unaccompanied minors often experience cultural differences and language problems which sometimes cause break downs in the placement. Those countries that are experienced with the use of ethnic families report this to be promising. Those of you who will participate in the workshop on experiences of Dutch foster families will learn more about the pool of foster families with different cultural backgrounds Nidos has recruited and how they work together with Nidos.

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All countries that provide RLF reported a need to develop training for both indigenous and ethnic foster families. Working with these children is not only about different backgrounds and speaking different languages, but also concerns issues like the effects of living in between cultures and coping with trauma and loss. Preparing foster families on these themes can ameliorate the care provided and decrease breakdowns.

We also found that social workers, reception professionals or – sometimes – guardians, who have the responsibility for counselling reception/foster families for unaccompanied minors are in need of tools and specialized training on how to work with this group of children.

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We now arrive at the point of looking at how to bring the issue further and make steps forward.

The main reason that only a limited number of unaccompanied minors live in families, is that there is insufficient knowledge on how to increase providing foster care to this group of children, for example on how to recruit suitable and willing families.

In addition, good practices often do not reach beyond the local level – one municipality or region may have developed good practices, but it is not replicated to others. Finally, financial and organisational structures often do not explicitly support development.

There is an interest in and a need for cooperation, exchange and training. European providers of reception and care from different countries have much to learn from each other.

Providing reception in families for this target group has many similarities – the content of the work in practice differs only to some extent between member states. Coordinated development of capacities would be beneficial.

Jan Murk will lead a discussion on creating possibilities to fund initiatives in the national and international arena in one of the workshops.

As the group of unaccompanied minors differs enormously from state to state, both in size and in characteristics, a one-fits-all foster care system applicable in all Member States will not work.

Countries in North-western Europe are mostly destination countries (numbers are high and most minors ask for asylum). In Scandinavia about 80% receive a

permanent residence permit and in Sweden around 40% have a relationship with somebody.

Central and Eastern European countries are mostly not a destination country (numbers are low and most minors do not use the asylum system).

Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain are used both as destination countries (as a minor can relatively easily work there) and transit countries (numbers are high and the majority of the minors does not use the asylum system).

Child protection systems in EU-member states do also differ. Whereas the countries in North-western Europe generally have a well-developed foster care system in place, both Central and Eastern European countries and Southern European countries (Spain and Italy for instance) deal with the challenge of changing the tendency of institutional care to a family-based care.

Therefore, setting up a system that fits the specific Member State is the key.

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RLF is a way of accommodating unaccompanied minors that links to both the system of asylum reception and the youth care system. Taking into account the existing situation in a Member State in both fields and the characteristics of the group of unaccompanied minors present, solutions for setting up a suitable system can either be moving the youth care system towards RLF or enlarging the existing asylum reception system with RLF.

In order to develop a system, looking at all levels of responsibility, in particular the national governments, is advised. It is recommended to copy successful existing practise or promote preferred models and develop a practice document. Saving budget for a national approach as costs are so scattered amongst different actors could also be of help.

As there is a general lack of foster families, recruitment is an issue that should be addressed as well. Special focus on recruiting families from other communities and with different ethnic backgrounds will be of help. As will making kinship care part of the child care system.

As I stressed before, daily practice would also be helped with the development of tools and training to support foster families on parenting children with the specific needs of a refugee separated child and to help them raising up children between cultures.

In order to monitor the effectiveness of campaigns and changes to any guidelines or policy it would be helpful to establish benchmarks through the collection of data on the number of unaccompanied children in receipt of various forms of foster care (or other placement types).

It is also recommended to build upon the existing knowledge base available that highlights the positive impact of foster placements, the ways in which cultural and network families have important roles to play and use these to best effect in order to initiate change.

Stimulating improvement of the system, for instance by organizing client participation of both foster families and minors can be of help. The same counts for stimulating research on the effects of RLF on the well being of children. The University of Groningen will provide information on how this is being done in the Netherlands in their workshop in the afternoon.

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The quotes behind me speak for themselves. Children involved in research on the living circumstances of unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands made

these comments on their experiences with RLF. There will also be 3 former unaccompanied minors present later today to tell us about how they experienced the period they lived in a foster family in the Netherlands when they were under age.

It is because of this kind of feed back on RLF that we started the project in the first place.

After all, it is the children we are responsible for whose needs have to be addressed!

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Are there any questions?

Now that all questions have been answered, I want to thank all of you for your interest in this important issue, also on behalf of the project partners: Elisabeth Melin of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and Philip Ishola and Peter Dolby of the Counter Human Trafficking Bureau in the UK.

We have been in touch with many of you during the past 1,5 year. This was a real pleasure to us and I hope that we will keep in touch.

Thank you very much for your attention and enjoy your workshops.