

**Providing most vulnerable families with adequate support
To prevent family separation**

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**Marking the 5th Anniversary of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and
the 25th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
“Combating family breakdown due to poverty”**

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We all know that a caring and supportive family environment is what is best for a child, but the reality around us, if we just turn on the news, is that many children throughout the world just don't have that. Poverty, hunger, war, epidemics, and disasters tear families apart. Many of those children end up in institutions. According to the UN Global Report on Violence against Children, around 8 million children in the world are living in orphanages and other forms of residential care.

Poverty is “a human condition characterized by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights” (The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2001). Extreme poverty is “the combination of income poverty, human development poverty and social exclusion” where a prolonged lack of basic security affects several aspects of people's lives in the meantime, severely compromising their chances of exercising or regaining their rights in the foreseeable future". It is therefore a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by the virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competences and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination.

By hitting both employment and welfare systems, the financial and economic crisis that started in 2008 has severely affected children and their families across Europe and Central Asia.

Between 2008 and 2012, the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe went up by almost 1 million.

Growing up in poverty can dramatically change children's chances in life. Directly or indirectly, poverty is depriving children of educational opportunities, access to healthcare and healthy diets, adequate housing and living environments, family support, and protection from violence. Poverty deprives children of dreams, hopes and rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states the priority that "*the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment*"¹ and the guiding principle that "*State parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will except when (...) such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child*"². At the same time, the region of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia is known to have some of the highest numbers in the world³ of children growing up separated from their families. The total number of children who grow up in formal care in the region is estimated at 1.4 million, out of which 650,000 live in residential care. Of these children, some 200,000 have disabilities, and 30,000 are under the age of three.⁴

The high rates of separation in this region are to a large extent due to the legacy of systems inherited from the socialist regimes. Before transition, the paradigm of state-run systems of protection based on residential care dominated. Mindsets based on the common belief that the state could easily substitute family life prevailed in policies and practice.

Even if patterns differ slightly from one country to another, generally child care institutions in the region are capturing children with disabilities, children with chronic diseases or behavioural problems, children from ethnic minorities, and children whose families became socially or economically vulnerable (single mothers, mothers who give birth to children out of wedlock, parents with mental illness etc.).

Stigma, discrimination and gender dynamics are also thought to be very influential in decisions about institutionalization. For example, high levels of poverty among single mothers or strong cultural norms of 'motherhood', combined with an absence of an efficient support system when a mother cannot meet the social expectations that are resting upon her have been identified as root causes for baby abandonment.

1 UNCRC, Preamble.

2 Article 9 of the CRC

3 UNICEF (2009), "At Home or in a Home", p. 9

4 TransMONEE database 2012

There are still far too many children who continue to be excluded and are not benefiting from economic and social reforms:

- Very young children are three to six times more likely to be abandoned or sent to institutions.
- In some countries, children with disabilities represent as many as 60 percent of all children in institutions, due to the lack of specialized healthcare and inclusive education in their communities.
- Discrimination against certain groups of children, for example from minority ethnic groups, children of single mothers and those from broken families, also leads to these children being disproportionately represented in institutions.

Data confirm that nine out of ten children living in institutions have one or both parents alive. We also know that with the appropriate support, most families would be able to care for and protect their children, thus avoiding unnecessary separation.

This is why the time to act is now. Comprehensive reforms are needed. UNICEF recognizes the central role of families in society and the need to develop **comprehensive family-centered policies** to prevent the placement of children in institutional care. We are supporting governments to strengthen national mechanisms that specifically address family issues, including through:

- The promotion of legislative reforms and policies that prevent the separation of children from their families in the first place, limiting separation to a last resort measure, and setting strict conditions for the placement of children below three years into institutional care;
- The provision of financial assistance to families (such as social welfare cash transfers and birth allowance);
- A comprehensive package of health, educational and social measures (including indiscriminate access to services for the most vulnerable people, appropriate training of medical and social professionals, integration of social work in perinatal services, temporary housing for single mothers, home visiting nurses, etc.)
- A serious investment in social work (outreach social work, case management, development of personal plans, etc.).
- The development of high quality community-based services and family-based care options, such as foster care, for children who need alternative families.

In a country like Croatia, the development of such policies combined with free compulsory education, the development of early childhood services and inclusive education for children with disabilities lead to a decrease of the number of children placed in institutional care from 4,000 in 2010 to 2,500 in 2013. A decrease of 1,500 children when only 300 more children were placed in foster care during the same period. I could have as well mentioned examples and results in countries like Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey and Kazakhstan.

On a human perspective, this is the right thing to do. It is also the most effective and sustainable approach – the smart thing to do. I can mention three main reasons for that:

It is an equity issue. Separating the most vulnerable children from their parents and excluding them from a healthy life in their communities deprives them of the chance to reach their full potential. All children must have a fair opportunity to live full, healthy lives in a caring and supportive family environment, no matter their parents' income, irrespective of their race, gender, socio-economic background or ability.

It is a good investment issue. Research has proved that family and community-based services represent a cost-effective solution. In the long run, they are less expensive than residential care and far better for vulnerable children.

It is a child development issue: Family separation can be detrimental to the mental, behavioural, emotional, and social development of young children. For every three months a young child lives in an institution, she loses one month of development.

I would like to conclude by saying that children who grow up in a caring and supportive family environment are more likely to become caring parents. They are more likely to contribute to the positive development of their communities and their country. They will be individuals who are more likely to respect all other human beings. This is also why we need to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

The International Guidelines on Alternative Care represent for us an important leveraging tool for promoting painful reforms with governments in the region where I work and everywhere in the world. They have been the backbone of our campaign for preventing the placement of children below three years in institutional care. In our region, it is estimated that during the last two years, the number of children below three in institutional care has decreased by almost 3,000 — a 10 per cent reduction.

Copies of the Guidelines are available and I invite you to take a copy when leaving the room.