Hungarian Report on focus group meetings with vulnerable children 1-2

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Report on the focus group meetings with vulnerable children

I. Group

Background

The colleagues at the Budapest Capitol City Regional Child Protection Agency were very open to coop, when we asked them to select a group of children to participate in the Speak up! project on children’s rights. They were very flexible concerning the administrative duties, venue finding. In accordance with our request they also paid attention on the age and gender distribution of the children applying or chosen. The social workers provided all the basic information about the project to the children and their carers.

The two days program was arranged in the room where the children are meeting with their biological parents who are visiting them, while in temporary care in the building of the Budapest City Regional Child Protection Agency. The room is spacious, sunny, well equipped and comfortable. Children could feel themselves relaxed and free, knew the place well.

Venue:

Budapest Fővárosi Önkormányzatának Területi Gyermekvédelmi Szakszolgálata - TEGYESZ (Budapest Capitol City Regional Child Protection Agency)

1081 Budapest, Alföldi utca 9-1

Time:

7-8 December, 2011

Basic data on the group:

- Number of participants: 10 persons
- Age: 5 - 13 years old, 4 -14 years old, 1 -15 age old
- Sex: 6 girls and 4 boys
- Place of living: Budapest 6 children, in the suburbs 4 children
- Ethnic background: In the group two children had one Roma parent, others were non-Roma Hungarians
- All of them are living in foster care, 2 of them were brought back on the previous day due to the suspicion of being abused
- Two experts from the Agency (Mrs. Szabo, and Ms. Vida) distributed the invitations and based on the willingness of the children selected them, in some cases they needed to be convinced as there are not many activities they are taking role.
- The members of the group did not know each other, it took a long while for them to „warm up” and trust each other a bit.
Preparation of the children

- Children were prepared for the meeting by their foster parents or by the professionals/care takers at the Agency based on our written description of the program and personal discussion with us. They were told that there is program where the young persons are going to play, discuss issues concerning them and their rights and have fun.
- Children have never met the facilitators before the focus group meeting
- The children participating have not had any previous experiences on human rights or child rights education

Program/Methodology

Program:

1. day

9.00-9.45 Welcome, Introduction: learning each others’ names, introductory games
9.45-10.30 Background information, rules and framework, child friendly information on the UN CRC
10.30-10.45 Break
10.45-11.15 Discussion on child rights
11.15-12.00 Playing with the child rights cards
12.00-13.00 Lunch
13.00-13.30 Choosing two rights for further exploration
13.30-15.00 Discussion on the two rights (Focus)
15.00-15.20 Break
15.00-16.30 Evaluation of the day

2. day

9.30-10.00 Welcome back, looking back to the first day
10.00-10.30 Choosing two rights for further discussion
10.30-12.00 Discussion on the two rights (Focus)
12.00-13.00 Lunch
13.00-14.30 Evaluation of the two days, closing

- During the first half of the day we were playing to strengthen the trust and building co-operation, help learning more about each other and prepare the participants for the focus group discussion. We were making video recordings to back up children getting used to the camera. The drawing exercise and the different forms of movements helped them to become more relaxed. To work as a group needed a lot of patience and time on behalf of all the participants. Their verbal skills were surprisingly weak, not knowing many expressions to express their views and especially feelings.
During the games we started using the Word Cafe method, and also played other games (like grouping children into 3 subgroups, each of them getting a name of an animal and children had to campaign in the name of that animal, convincing the others why that given animal should be the king of animals (Camel, turtle and eagle).

The small groups were working around tables for four, otherwise in the large round they had the discussions, playing together, for these periods, tables had been taken to the back of the room.

1. Main conclusions

- It took a long while for the children becoming open and relaxed in the large group meetings, while during the exercises, games, drawing went much better. Despite of the efforts made to integrate the activities and facilitate the discussions part of other forms of groupwork. (The selection of the 4 rights were also arranged through play.)
- Listening to each other was not easy, it took a relatively long time to become confident and patient enough for them. Children during the discussion – regardless of the actual topic or rights – repeated on many occasions, that children should have a right to health care and a right not to be hurt, abused.
- Children living in foster families seemed to be very isolated, often not having experiences in sharing their life story, good and bad memories, foster parents not prepared and/or willing to listen to them or not understanding the needs to work on former life experiences, traumas.
- It seemed to be obvious that there are no services provided for the children (therapy, group work, relief work, drama, etc) to heal and express their feelings, anger. They did not find their own story exceptional, different, not knowing about other children's lives.
- Concerning physical abuse children insisted – for the surprise of the facilitators - again and again, that if the parent or the teacher is helpless and the child „is doing something stupid and does not understand that he/she was mean, bad" than „perhaps hitting is not the adequate respond but very useful” . While children told physical violence should not be tolerated corporal punishment was seen as a form of acceptable discipline and not necessarily as a form of physical abuse. Other children said however that „from hitting one can not learn”.
- „If a parent is hitting her/his child it qualifies them, and it means they have not got heart and soul” – was also stated.
- They had no information on the possible consequences of any form of child abuse, opportunities to ask for help, operating helplines, complain mechanism in any case, despite of the total prohibition of any form of corporal punishment in Hungary.
- Facebook and Internet was mentioned as a way of enforcing child rights.
- Using 4 letter words and screaming was also considered as abuse.
- Under the umbrella of right to health they were very preoccupied with death (infections, illnesses, avoiding death).
• It was also mentioned that as health care is free (there is no co-payment in Hungary), more people go to doctors than if it were payable
• Right to education meant for them „Children need education, so while going up they get conscious and have experiences”, „They need education to find a job when they grow up” and „If children had no right to education they would not have basic culture”
• They expressed their fear that the lack of education is leading to homelessness. „Once we are provided right to education – thanks to the UN – we should utilise it to have some housing when becoming adults”
• „If children do not learn how to read and write and basic maths, and these are missing from their lives, than they will not be able forming own opinion and can not find a job”
• It was hard to talk at all levels about rights, as they have never met with the term „right” and „child rights” and its function. Their verbal communication is very poor, they are not used to discussions, dialogues, mostly use a couple of words to describe their stories, experiences. Child participants in the group are not aware of their family background, school is not providing them with the feeling of success, openness, curiosity. In the second half of the program when they were more relaxed and had more interaction with each other, the opportunity to play and enjoying themselves made it easier to involve them. They enjoyed the opportunity to spend time in a friendly environment but were not interested in the topic.

3. The 4 rights chosen:
   1. Children should not be abused
   2. All children are equal
   3. Right to education
   4. First they chose the “right to play” but changed later saying that right to health is more important for them

They would require “harsher punishment” for those who are abusing, hurting children to ensure the better implementation of this right – if they were the Prime minister – in the framework of a big conference organised to resolve this issue.
The participating children formed their opinion for the first time on child rights and never heard of having rights previously.
Equality was chosen based on the many forms of exclusion and discrimination experienced by the members of the group even if it has not been explicitly acknowledged by all of them. However, the participants in the group do not have a vision on how equality could be achieved.
Right to education is seen as a tool not as a source of joy or success, rather something needed to find a job and housing.
Health and access to health care was considered to be an important element of their needs, most probably not the children themselves, but many family members must have suffered from the lack of appropriate help and services.
Death was an important issue, due to many experiences in the biological families of early death, serious illness.
The choice of the 4 rights were based on the understanding about their own needs, the most concrete and practical ones, helping them to survive.

5. The needs of children concerning the four chosen rights

The participating children shared mostly their experiences in relation to different forms of abuse and exclusion (lack of feeling equity, equality). Despite of the many negative experiences in relation to different adults, like parents/carers, teachers/caregivers their approach have been very permissive, understanding, accepting the ways in which they were handled in different situations. This must have been also the impact of the many years spent in the care system and lacking acceptance, inclusion. They asked many questions, were very curious, wanted to get new information on different matters. It was also clear that they are lacking basic knowledge and information on different issues and areas that are evident in many other children’s group. They were also very hesitant in any situation when choices had been offered. The missing experiences of different type of relationships, interactions, situations in everyday life were visible. They said: „I do not know what is the consequence of...”, „Have not heard of this right...”

In the group the participants blamed themselves first of all for behaving badly, being irresponsible, if their rights were not exercised, or provided.

6. Suggestions concerning policies or interventions in relation to child rights

Their respond to the question on their interventions to ensure the rights to be protected from abuse, they suggested a „meeting”, a „really big conference” to discuss the matters and harsher punishment for the abusers.

7. Evaluation of the meeting
   „I liked the company most”
   „It was good to laugh a lot”
   „I enjoyed the exercises and games”
   „We heard a lot of new things”
   „It was relaxing, not many rules”
II. Group

Background

Our second group was formed by inviting children living in a residential home. The director of the institute was helping to arrange the meeting. We could feel a stronger resistance than on behalf of the children living in foster families. The age differences were bigger (12-16 years of age) and the older ones had different needs. It required diverse techniques to manage this issue. The first half of the first day was more difficult and the group facilitators had to share their attention and focus on this problem area at certain situations.

The participating children arrived from three group homes that are situated in the same divided residential facility. The staff members of the group homes got a written description of the program and there was an ongoing consultation with the director of the children’s home as well. The preparation included a detailed program describing the aim and methodology of the exercise, just like the request to recruit children on a voluntary basis. As the meeting was held a couple of days before Christmas, we also decorated the room accordingly and brought some small presents, primarily sweets, fruits that also helped a lot to involve the children more and provide a warm and friendly environment.

Venue:

Család Gyermek Ifjúság Egyesület (Family, Child, Youth Association, Training rooms)

Address: 1064 Budapest, Podmaniczky u. 75

Basic data on the group:

- Number of participating children: 12 persons
- Age: 3-12 years old, 1- 13 years old, 1- 14 years old, 4 15 years old, 3-16 years old -
- 9 girls and 3 boys
- Budapest Capital City Children’s Home (Budapest Főváros Önkormányzatának Gyermekotthona, 1158 Budapest, Pestújhelyi út 66)
- Ethnic background: 3 children: one of the parents were Roma, both parents were Roma of 1 boy, 8 non-Roma Hungarians
Preparation of the children:
Children expressed a stronger resistance than those coming from foster families or those could mask their ambivalence to a lesser extent. We had some doubts concerning the ways the children had been selected. At least two children participated despite their plans to do something else on the days of the meeting. One of them was the „bad girl” of the residential home, always protesting, a private student, not attending school as a consequence of her behavior. The other girl wanted to go to school, as she would have had the opportunity to write a test to improve her performance.

The publications of the Europe Point on the different programs and activities of the EU in Hungarian attracted the attention of all participating children regardless of their age, however in other instances it needed special attention to involve them into different activities due to the different types of needs. These were the result of the very diverse interests, levels of intelligence, capability. Some had better verbal skills than others, the „bad girl” was acting out, wanted to leave soon. She first withdrew herself from all activities but later enjoyed drawing, using the internet, looked at the EU materials and slowly started contributing to the conversations.

Program/Methodology

Program:

1. day

9.00-9.45 Welcome, Introduction : learning each others’ names, introductory games by using the Discover Europe (EU materials), Make a step forward! Demonstrating differences, enaqualities and discussing it
9.45-10.30 Background information, rules and framework, child friendly information on the UN CRC
10.30-10.45 Break
10.45-11.15 Discussion on child rights
11.15-12.00 Playing with the child rights cards
12.00-13.00 Lunch
13.00-13.30 Choosing two rights for further exploration
13.30-15.00 Discussion on the first two rights (Focus)
15.00-15.20 Break
15.00-16.30 Evaluation of the day

2. day

9.30-10.00 Welcome back, looking back to the first day
10.00-10.30 Choosing two rights for further discussion
10.30-12.00 Discusion on the two rights (Focus)
12.00-13.00 Lunch
2. Main conclusions:

- Children in this group mostly knew each other from the children’s home. During the discussions it was clear that they had known the others’ stories on abuse, trauma, escapes, runaway. With this group there was more opportunity to go deeper and experiencing more detailed explorations and interactions. There were no secrets, perhaps the older age was also helpful. Living in the group-home and being part of a larger community meant more joint experiences, and also perhaps some relief knowing others’ stories as well. It seemed to be clear that these life histories have already been discussed earlier by most of the members of the group. In the group-homes there are 5 professional carers working in 3 shifts, children can find a reference person often easier than in the foster families, especially teenagers coming into the care system at an older age.

- Children admitted that in the group homes they can often tell older peers their problems and can ask for advice.

- Conflict resolution in the group homes are often managed by the older peers and as there are 12 children, it has got a special dynamic, sometimes constructive, sometimes destructive depending on the composition of the group.

- In this group there were more tensions in relation to ethnicity. As more Roma children participated, they contributed by telling their experiences of racial discrimination, prejudice, pain and humiliation.

- The group – compared to the other vulnerable group of children in foster care – was much more informed, open for discussion but also harder to coop with. More tension, hard to handle situation, acting out, partly due to their age. It seemed to be also part of their life in the group-home to be louder and more aggressive to succeed.

- As we spent more time together it has become more honest and relaxed, the attention they are so hungry for was needed, in many instances they wanted personal conversation, not only group work.

- It was hard to balance between the integration efforts and the individual needs. It was out of question that the children would need much more personal care, more attention paid on their individual needs, on their rights.

- Under the theme “All children are equal” – their most important observation was the need for opportunities to speak freely, expressing one’s opinion, severe abuse experiences in all forms, and the many types of discrimination, exclusion they experience.

- Ethnic background was mentioned and expressed as an important factor contributing to bad feelings but at the same time discussed in a more transparent and honest way than in the other two groups, primarily because it is their everyday experience. Even the slang used for those being „half Roma” (MACI – a mosaic word for ma(gyar) (meaning Hungarian) and ci(gány) (meaning Gypsy), compared to the
Roma, (CICI – a mosaic word for ci(gany) twice.) is a clear distinction and identification form.

- While these vignettes could be stigmatising they are not seen like that, rather accepting the identification of others and theirselves, defined into a certain category.
- The abuse, misuse, degradation, humiliation used by the staff (even sexual abuse, harrasment) were tackled in a very open and clear way, and discussed as part of the issues related to hierarchy. It was mixed with all kind of disciplinary measures, like different forms of punishment (limiting time to spend away, latest time to get back, not accepted prohibition of some activities or programs, etc)
- The role of the parents, bad memories of parent abuse, the brutality, agression of some fathers, step fathers, neglect. At the same time the positive role of some neighbours, other family members helping them in crisis situations. There was one gorl who remembered helping to another neighbour in the same situation as well.

3. The chosen four rights?
   I. Right to tell the opinion
   II. Right not to be abused
   III. Right to freedom and protection from torture
   IV. All children are equal

However children had no previous knowledge and information on any child rights, the older ones could catch up very quickly, not only understood the concept but started formulating the most relevant rights from their own perspective and stories from their own life or other known experiences. They also explained how their environment would behave, how adaptive the adults and other children, young people would be in their environment. It was also estimated how could they utilise their rights, implement them and what kind of consequences would it lead to.

3. The needs of the children concerning their chosen rights

The need for being listened to was chosen as the most important. There is clear evidence that these children are hardly listened to, their opinion does not count or not even asked. Part of it is the lack of healing procedure and support to it, the need to talk about all the bad things and unjustice they have experienced in their life. According to their contributions there is no justification of the grief and loss they have suffered from. Nobody says: „It is not fair, it was very bad what happened to you” The same harm is caused by the discrimination, segregation They would need more empowerment and the clear declaration of the fact: „it is not ethnicity or family background that counts, determines lives” and „it does not lead neccessarily to committing crime, wrongdoing”
5. Suggestions concerning policies or interventions in relation to child rights

The participating children would prefer small group discussions, like the organised program. Despite of their clearly expressed scepticism and resistance before the meeting they found this method very useful and effective to learn about child rights and its implementation. It was interesting in both groups of vulnerable children living in the public care system that nobody mentioned the school, the foster family or grouphome staff, media as a way of learning, getting information. Their use of the internet is mostly related to playing games and not to learning, getting useful information.

8. Evaluation of the meeting, program

The children honestly expressed their enthusiasm and joy, ask for more such opportunities. Two girls explicitly asked us to enable them participating at Eurochild activities, conferences if possible. They enjoyed the food (we ordered pizza among other things)