

26.05.2020

Minutes – Webinar on child and family poverty

Stefan Kitzmann (SK)(Policy Officer ED) opened with a word of welcome to all participants (20) and also stated quickly technical guidelines for the meeting.

The webinar aims to provide members with an update on the proposed Child Guarantee as one of the EU tools that could support child protection and wellbeing, while firstly setting the scene in mentioning some of the social challenges for children and social changes affecting children's social services' work in light of COVID-19 in general. And also, to provide a space to share knowledge between members to better understand the short & long-term challenges of child/family poverty in different European countries and how it affects staff & organisations in the provision of social services. He gave an overview of the agenda for the day:

- ✓ Setting the scene in light of COVID-19 and update on the proposal for a Child Guarantee
- ✓ Members Presentations and updates plus Q&A
- ✓ Discussion (in break-out groups)
- ✓ Conclusion and next steps

[Setting the Scene in light of COVID-19 and update on the proposal for a Child Guarantee](#)

Stefan started his presentation with a poll testing the participants knowledge of the EU Child Guarantee. He asked participants to what degree they felt they were familiar with the proposals on the Child Guarantee. The results were:

Yes: 27%

No: 9%

Somewhat: 64%

He went further stating the emerging needs for Children's social services in light of the COVID-19 crisis. In throwing more light on updates from the Commission, He gave an expose on Child guarantee, what it is and what it is for. (See Slides) The slides will be sent to all participants.

He ended his presentation with an excerpt of a story from a social worker, 'In these days we are only calling families, in practice we are not doing anything for them, but they thank us very much.' Teresa and her group make regular phone calls to families asking simply how they are, and they have the feeling that they are not helping. In fact, they are not proving help, they are providing their presence, which is much more (or at least worth a lot, too).

[Members Presentations and Updates](#)

Janne Raanes - Church of City Mission Norway: Findings from the report -Talk about poverty

She started with a short summary of what they have done thus far. There is still a lot of believe that there is no child poverty in Norway, but the truth is, child poverty is on the increase in Norway at the moment and has been for the last ten years. There is a big disparity between youths who can afford food and clothes and those who have more than enough and it is hard when all of those around you seem to possess far more than they actually need.

They undertook a study as their seemed to be a lack of children's voices in this debate around poverty. There was an enormous response. From the study, they now know what it means to have children living in poverty. The political debate is biased, it is more like the government should help parents get jobs and if they don't then that's their problem.

There has been a saying in Norway for long; 'No child has to go hungry to bed, the statement was even repeated by the Prime Minister last year. During the last ten years more and more children are affected when it comes to health, housing and education. Children living in poverty are affected because of their parents situation. The Norwegian debate has changed focus as a consequence of the report. The report has given a face to young people living in poverty. Now the discussion got deeper into the consequences of poverty and politicians now reference the report.

As such, as a follow up, they plan to make a social media campaign targeting youths, it was supposed to be launched on the 13th March but got postponed due to lockdown. They plan to launch the campaign in August when schools start again.

In the meantime, they will make advocacy plan to follow up because it is political relevant in Norway.

She concluded her presentation with a personal story of how young people have become professionals in hiding family secrets. Poverty is still a taboo and they tend to feel ashamed taking their friends home for fear of exposure of their family circumstances.

There was a question regarding how the Norwegian Government has been tackling child poverty? The government has been a bit naïve, they have not made enough effort to go to the root of addressing family poverty. Most of the kids affected are of migrant background as such they government hasn't really embraced the fact that the kids live in Norway and have rights.

Dr Attila Kocsis - Reformed Church on Hungary

Focused on foster families as a pastor of foster families in Hungary, established in 2008.

They have two divisions of the network with 1300 children in 500 families in the Central and North Eastern part of the Country aged 0-18 years.

The priority is to find the most competent for children who have lost family due to different situations like crime, poverty and abuses, they try to find best families for them. The team has qualified professionals like social workers, advisers, psychologist and a pastor. Having a psychologist and a pastor is a plus compared to state-run facilities.

On the impact of COVID-19:

- Schools were closed, and everything turned to online education.

- Most families with three or four kids didn't have enough technical materials like laptops, computers, tablets to continue their studies at home.
- Secondly, foster parents were not qualified to teach children at home, it was a new experience which was difficult in the first month of lockdown.
- Children with special needs and care were also home with families. The parents were not equipped to teach kids with special needs. This had emotional impact on the kids, they lost their sense of security.
- There was also a problem of foster parents who had to still work, so they had to depend on the cooperation of grandparents or neighbors to take care of the kids while they went to work.
- Another challenge was the kids had no chance to meet with their biological parents due to lockdown. It was prohibited, they had to find other ways like skype but the personal touch was lost.

As such, the organisation had to provide online assistance to solve the problems by helping the parents with the school subjects.

They also launched an art competition, 'Behind the windows,' the kids had to send in drawings against prizes that will be awarded in August.

They also had community sites and training to parents on how to be prepared for these situations, how to do different activities with kids in lockdown.

There was a question on the background of the kids in foster families.

Answering, Dr Atilla stated they do not have kids with migrant background, the kids are mostly from Roma families. They also have Roma families who are foster families which provides a good system for integration.

Magnea Sverrisdóttir/Ragneiður Sverrisdóttir - The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland

Opened their presentation with some brief general background information about Iceland at the moment:

- 350,000 people living in Iceland
- Unemployment rate in January 2020 was 5% and 17% in April, there are more unemployed
- The borders have been closed with hardly flights into and out of the country
- The tourist business was hit the hardest
- They had many migrant workers in hotel industry, the biggest number of workers from Poland (around 20,000).
- Around 60,000 people have been tested i.e about 70% of the population.
- 1080 Covid-19 infections but currently no case in the hospital.
- 10 deaths were recorded.

Now the situation of children: currently they are easing out of the lockdown, meetings of 200 people are allowed. Schools have been open throughout for younger pupils but not for teenagers and universities whose education moved online.

Parents could voluntarily keep their children at home but it is now proving harder for those who were kept home to reintegrate back into school. This is particularly the case with migrant workers who had conflicting information from their home countries, they kept their children at home and now it is difficult to get them back to school.

There is a higher risk of school dropouts this year than in previous years.

They have also seen an increase in reports of home violence, including children calling in to tell about their situations. There were campaigns to get people reporting so it could also be related to this.

Undeclared workers are facing challenges because they do not have rights to benefits.

Also, migrant families who were in the process of getting their documents but had not completely the formal process also do not have right to benefits.

Low income families were badly hit and are also facing challenges.

Children in poverty have been getting help from Salvation Army and Church Aid. They had 56% more applications in March/April 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

She ended her presentation by making reference to a recent study that throws more light on child poverty (Health and Behavior of School-Aged Children – HBSC <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Life-stages/child-and-adolescent-health/health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-hbcs>).

She outlined that half of children from low-income families say that they have challenges making social connections in school.

Nicole Borisuk - Living Hope NGO (Ukraine)

Opened up her presentation with the quote, 'Crisis always reinforces existing inequalities'.

Covid-19 has exposed existing problems in Ukraine. 6.3 million more people are likely to fall into poverty as a result of this crisis, 1.4 million of whom are children. Absolute poverty is likely to increase from 27% to 44%. Child poverty is expected to rise from 33% to 51%.

She also used two quotations: one from UNICEF and another from the Minister (See slides) on child poverty

They had to change their work due to the crisis.

They moved to an online approach in education but can only reach half of the kids they work with. In the villages, 44% do not have access to computers, 37% have no internet at all, so it is quite challenging to effectively go on with online education.

Support from the government is very small. Not everyone in need has access to adequate help.

Bureaucracy is also a big issue in Ukraine. The dilemma is people in government are far away from the real life of the people. There is constant violation of children's rights, constantly posting pictures of children receiving food packages without blurring their images.

Corruption and populism is a big barrier to changing things for children in Ukraine.

They turned to giving out food packages for the first time due to an almost overnight massive loss of jobs with no social protection. They give out food packages on weekly basis.

Also, domestic violence is on the increase during this period.

They are currently reaching around only 30% of children online. They try to provide support over the phone too. They give language lessons, psychological support, Bible study lessons, online youth meetings, WhatsApp groups and regular help with basic needs (paying bills for electricity, rent, medicine and water).

Their expenditure has risen considerably during this season.

Children with a migrant background (including refugee children)

Apostoli, Vasileios Meichanetsidis, Greece (unfortunately unable to join, because of technical difficulties).

Other feedback (group discussions):

Lena Maria Brunhoff - Lutheran Church Sweden

Schools have been closed for children over 13 which has had an impact.

A lot of people have access to internet and computers. They have extended help to families.

They have free kindergarten that has attracted many families. They offer an opportunity of social interaction to children who do not have other siblings. However, they see that young children are not interacting with one another as much as they would usually do after this period of isolation.

Due to schools closed, children who used to have free meals at schools are forced to have meals at home and it puts a huge burden especially on low income families. They may also have to start providing food packages.

Isolation is causing problems and mental illness within the family is having a big impact.

They are providing prayer services over the internet which is having a higher viewing audience than they expected.

Miriam Diaconia Valdese

There is a similar scenario in Italy but this topic is not currently a core competence of theirs but they will like to have more updates regarding child and family poverty.

Conclusion

SK brought the meeting to a close by extending appreciation to everyone and made a call for members to be bold in trying to create positive change during this crisis and to continue our joint fight against child/family poverty.