

ACCESS – Cottonera Community Centre

Comments and Statements

Rasa Zabarauskaitė

Institute of Labour and Social Research

In Lithuania, as well as in many other EU countries, more and more attention has been recently paid to the minimisation of child poverty and social exclusion. The consolidated action for the minimisation of poverty and social exclusion for 2007-2008, as approved in Lithuania in 2007, defines 'elimination of child poverty and increased family support' as one of the prioritised trends for the minimisation of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania. Other measures envisaged in the tackling poverty problems in the country include encouraged participation in the labour market, accessibility to high-quality services and curtailment of education and training defects.

1. Situation Review

1.1 Dynamics in the number of children and families at social risk in Lithuania

According to Lithuanian Statistics, the total number of children under 18 amounted to 718.8 thousand or 21.1 % of total population in Lithuania at the beginning of 2006. The number of children dropped down nearly by 28 thousand in 2005, while over the latter 6 years the number of children has been dropping down 25.4 thousand on the average every year. Such a situation is determined by delaying marriages and first childbirths for future, and by an impaired family model in the country what conditions increasing number of common-law marriages, lone-parent families and illegitimate children in Lithuania. In 2005, a share of children born in common-law families increased from 22.6% to 28.4%, as compared to 2000.

At the end of 2006, there were 13.5 thousand families at social risk and 31.4 thousand children living in such families in Lithuania. In total, 4% of all children lived in families at social risk in Lithuania in 2006. The key reason for families to appear in the group of families at social risk is alcohol abuse by parents. As many as 60% of all families in the group of families at social risk find themselves in this group due to the above-mentioned reason. However, it should be noted that the number of families at social risk and children living in such families dropped down in 2001 – 2006. Compared to 2001, the number of families at social risk shrank by 5.2 thousand, and the number of children living in such families – by more than 11 thousand. This improvement was to a large extent determined by intensive work of municipalities, municipal social workers and experts from non-governmental day centres of the country with families at social risk.

1.2 Child poverty problem in Lithuania

Before the year 2005, at-risk-of-poverty rate in Lithuania was estimated on the basis of Household Budget Survey data, where the poverty margin was established as 50% of the median equivalised consumption expenses. From 2005, poverty risk indicators are calculated using uniform EU-SILC methodology, taking the poverty margin as 60% of the median equivalised disposable income (equivalised income below 60% of the national median income).

Irrespective of rapid economic growth in 2005 (GDP grew by 7.5%) and other positive economic changes (unemployment rate dropped down from 11.4% to 8.3%, average monthly gross wage increased from EUR 333 to EUR 370, as compared to previous years), the Survey on Income and Living Conditions showed that at-risk-of-poverty rate was quite high in Lithuania in 2005 and amounted to 20.5%. Analysis of at-risk-of-poverty indicators by the household composition show that individuals living in households consisting of one adult person with dependant children (47.9%) and two adults with 3 or more children (45.0%) are most of all exposed to the risk of poverty. Analysis of at-risk-of-poverty indicators by age demonstrate that the youngest group of the national population – persons under 16 – is most of all exposed to the risk of poverty in Lithuania in 2005 (27.3%).

1.3 Institutions implementing the policy of child poverty minimisation and legal environment in Lithuania

In the Republic of Lithuania, the responsibility for the formation and implementation of the social security and labour policy, including the minimisation of child poverty and social exclusion, is vested upon the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. The following institutions assist the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania in the implementation of the policy of the advocacy for children's rights:

- Children Rights Protection Service and its councils for protection of children's rights functioning at the municipalities of the country;
- Child care settings (county and municipal child care homes, non-governmental child care homes, mercy homes for infants, mercy homes for children with disabilities, and other institutions).

The mentioned institutions and child care settings implement the protection of children's rights, advocate for children's rights and righteous interests in the procedure prescribed in the law, organise and supervise the guardianship (curatorship) of children left without parental care.

In 2003 Lithuania approved a Concept of the National Policy on the Child Welfare. The Concept contains the basic principles of the child welfare policy and provides for the main objectives of the child welfare policy. A Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare and Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare for 2005-2012 were developed and approved in 2005. These instruments are aimed at creating background for the welfare of all children living in the Republic of Lithuania, envisaging for this purpose national long-term strategic measures for the national child welfare policy and adequate funds for the implementation of such measures.

In 2004, the National Programme of Children Day Centres for 2005-2007 was approved for 2005-2007. This programme is aimed at the promotion of social service infrastructure development for the work with families at social risk, in order to create possibilities for children to grow in their families and don't be excluded from their children. This program is intended to ensure the sustainability of the National Programme of Children Day Centres for 2002-2004 and implemented in day centres registered in the Republic of Lithuania and awarded the public tender. The day centres render training services, preparation for lessons, free-time activities and catering services. Systematic social work is done in respect of the parents of the children attending the day centres in order to build parental responsibility for their children, to assist in dealing with social problems of families, to train them housekeeping skills required in the context of children raising, to render, if and as much as possible, psychological, pedagogical and legal assistance to the parents aimed

at eliminating the reasons leading to the establishment of guardianship (curatorship) to their children.

2. Potential Transferability of the Maltese Practise to Lithuania

Despite some social and cultural differences, both Lithuania and Malta are facing similar social problems which are particularly relevant in families at social risk (absences from school, low learning motivation, crimes, etc.). There are various target measures being implemented in Lithuania in order to solve the mentioned problems (social benefits to families, various privileges and compensations, free catering of children, etc.). One of the measures aimed at the minimisation of child poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania is the provision of social services to children and families. It's worth noting, however, that the network of social services for children and families is underdeveloped in Lithuania. In cases of social risk, social workers often confine themselves to referring a child for institutional social services, while preventive measures are not enough implemented in order to retain a child in the family. The Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare indicates that roughly 60% of social beneficiaries live in social service institutions, while family support centres are functioning only in some municipalities.

Within the framework of a Social Service Delivery Reform, a new Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania was drafted and approved in 2006. This law focuses on the improvement of the system of social services for families, i.e., the system is better attuned to the family's needs and the quality of services, interdepartmental collaboration and involvement of non-governmental organisations are promoted.

As we can see from the Discussion Paper, the Cottonera Community Resource Centre in Malta delivering various services to children and families. In Lithuania, similar services are delivered at children day centres. The children day centres are social service settings intended for the provision of day care, occupation, free-time organisation and other services for children. One of the objectives of the children day centres is improvement of the quality of life in low-income families and problematic families with children, and normalisation of their relations with social environment. According to the Lithuanian Statistics, the number of children attending day centres, crisis centres and night shelters grew from 8.3 thousand to 11.7 thousand in Lithuania from 2003 to 2005. In 2005, day centres were attended by 8.5 thousand children from families at social risk and 1.7 thousand disabled children.

Involvement and activation of communities in the organisation and provision of services are highly advantageous. To this effect it should be noted that a system of voluntary work is far better developed in Malta compared to Lithuania. In its turn, this enables ensuring better accessibility of services for children and variety of such services. Effectiveness of the services in the Cottonera Community Resource Centre is higher also because of assigning individual carer who plans activities and programmes for each child and monitors their progress throughout. In Lithuania, efforts are taken to implement the mentioned practice in day centres, but one of the main problems preventing implementation of this initiative in Lithuania is the shortage and insufficient qualifications of skilled professionals (psychologists, social workers) in the field of child welfare.

Accordingly, we can say that one of the important preconditions for successful implementation of the model of the delivery of social services for children and families in the Cottonera region is approximation of the mentioned services to the community where the basic characteristics of service beneficiaries and the need for such services are known best of all. This way it is possible to identify the need for services even by the most difficult-to-access groups of individuals. Therefore, the Maltese practice is particularly reasonable to apply in small communities, where it is

possible to work closely with local community in order to facilitate and encourage a process of change within the community through local participation.

Irrespective of positive valuation of the services delivered at the Cottonera Community Resource Centre, the Discussion Paper hardly contains statistical information enabling better valuation of the efficiency and benefits of the delivered services. It would be interesting to know how these services work as preventive measures in order to retain children in their families instead of referring them to institutional care homes.

3. Important Issues that are Currently Debated in Lithuania and Future Developments

Both Lithuania and Malta face the problem of insufficient statistical information on the services delivered to children and families. Therefore, one of the tasks envisaged in the Lithuanian Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare for 2005-2012 is accumulation of extensive statistical information about all groups of children and by all areas of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child. The shortage of statistical information significantly impedes the assessment of the quality and effectiveness of available services and creates no proper preconditions for improvement of the delivered services. The Lithuanian Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare envisages the following strategy implementation evaluation criteria:

- statistics on the families at social risk with children, children deprived of parental care, child sickness rates, child abuse;
- the number of developed and implemented projects aimed at the development of interdepartmental collaboration, cooperation of state and municipal institutions with local community;
- changes in poverty rates in households with children;
- the ratio of the number of children under guardianship (curatorship) in families and institutions of various types, etc.

Currently, there are the following priorities of the national child welfare policy identified in Lithuania in order to minimise child poverty and social exclusion:

- raising parental responsibility for the implementation of the child's rights;
- encouraging coordination and collaboration among state and municipal institutions, agencies, non-governmental organisation and society as a whole;
- improvement of the system of child welfare institutions;
- development of a network of necessary family and child services, ensuring the quality of such services and improvement thereof;
- minimising danger for children's health;
- improvement of children's protection against all forms of assault and abuse;
- continuous monitoring of child welfare situations;
- improvement of qualifications of professionals employed in the field of child welfare.

It's worth noting that in the context of the minimisation of child social exclusion, much attention is paid to increasing possibilities for children to develop their individual skills. After-school activities of children are of particular importance for the implementation of this goal. Organisation of high-quality and attractive after-school activities accessible for all children not only contributes to the physical, mental, social, cognitive and cultural development of children, but also enables reduc-

tion of the number of children with delinquent behaviour in the country. There are many child and youth organisations functioning in Lithuania (scouts, naturalists, etc.), which are designated for training of young individuals and seeking for full expression of their physical, intellectual, social and mental potential as that of individuals and responsible citizens.