Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion

Innovative practices with marginalised families at risk of having their children taken into care

SHORT REPORT

Italy, 11–12 December 2014
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Peer Review: Innovative practices with marginalised families at risk of having their children taken into care

This Peer Review, held in Venice, Italy, on 11–12 December, discussed Italy’s ‘Innovative practices with marginalised families at risk of having their children taken into care’, which uses P.I.P.P.I. (Programme of Intervention to Prevent Institutionalisation). The Peer Review was hosted by the Italian region of Veneto’s Social Service Council and its Department of the Family, together with the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

Representatives from eight peer countries attended: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Hungary, Malta and the United Kingdom. Two stakeholders were represented: the European Social Network and Eurochild. A representative from the European Commission’s DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion took part. The thematic expert was Mary Daly from Oxford University, United Kingdom.

1. The policy under review

In Italy, responsibility for social welfare programmes was assigned in 2005 to the regional and local authorities, and the Italian Ministry of Welfare began collaborating with the Laboratory of Intervention and Research in Family Education at the University of Padua to experiment with new ways of managing the child care protection system. This is in the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and complies with the National Law 149/2001, which guarantees every child the right to live in a family.

Programme of Intervention to Prevent Institutionalisation

P.I.P.P.I. was inspired by Pippi Longstocking, a resourceful and resilient girl in a children’s story. It is a research–training–implementation programme for vulnerable families and is aimed at preventing child neglect. Since 2011, P.I.P.P.I. has been implemented in four overlapping phases. The programme was originally rolled out in ten cities: Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Reggio Calabria, Turin and Venice. During its first phase it reached approximately 100 children. By the third phase, P.I.P.P.I. had been extended from the municipal to the district level, with 500 children; and in its current, fourth, phase it has added another 51 districts in 18 regions.

A crucial element of P.I.P.P.I. is that regional and local social welfare departments collaborate closely with the University of Padua’s research project, which draws up assessment forms, monitors progress, and adapts the programme in line with the results, which the P.I.P.P.I. teams feed back through online evaluation.

P.I.P.P.I., which is a blend of evidence-based research and practice, proceeds in four stages. It starts with a pre-assessment, in which social workers, alongside vulnerable families, complete a form describing the family environment, its internal set-up and the child’s development, in order to assess the level of intervention and support needed to prevent children being taken into care. Those families where the child is in danger of ‘neglect’ are asked if they wish to participate in P.I.P.P.I.; the rest continue with normal social support.

There then follows an assessment or planning stage, in which the social work case manager creates a multidisciplinary team consisting of those professionals who are in regular touch with the family – teachers, social workers, health workers, psychologists and voluntary family helpers – together with the family and the child(ren) themselves. Each family has a dedicated team.
As action-based research is central to P.I.P.P.I., a ‘coach’ from within the government body is attached to each team to act as a conduit with the University of Padua, to pass on results, so that the university can fine-tune the programme. The coach, who undergoes a short training course, also ensures that the team functions well.

In order to build up a shared assessment and care plan, Padua University has designed a web-based tool: RPMonline (Assessment, Planning and Monitoring). This takes the form of a triangular assessment and planning framework, designed to get the child’s view, the family’s view and the professionals’ view of the needs of the child and the family. This information forms the basis of the negotiations about the plan, and is updated regularly to assess progress.

**Stage Three: Realisation of the programme.** There are four main types of activity and professional intervention:

- **Home-care intervention**: weekly family visits by home-care workers to support parents and strengthen child–parent relationships and modify behaviour.
- **Participation in parents’ groups**: weekly/fortnightly meetings, with activities such as music-making and game playing. Some municipalities, such as Bari, organise Family Sundays.
- **Cooperation between schools/families and social services**: to support school engagement, a regional agreement is signed between participating schools, to integrate P.I.P.P.I. with other school support.
- **Family helpers**: local volunteers, who may be family friends, give concrete help/support.

Each family usually participates in P.I.P.P.I. for up to 18 months.

**Stage Four: Follow-up assessment.** This determines whether the family should continue with P.I.P.P.I. or move back to the normal social welfare support.

Results collated from the RPMonline’s micro-planning section show that, in terms of keeping children out of care, there is a successful outcome in 60% of cases, and a partially successful outcome in a further 19.5%. There is also an improvement in parents’ capacity to respond to children’s needs and development. In all cases this is greater than among families that do not participate in P.I.P.P.I.

2. **Key issues discussed during the meeting**

The need for the strong involvement of all family members was discussed. Thus, when working with vulnerable families, there should also be a focus on fathers.

Compared to other programmes to support children and families, this programme requires a high level of professional input from all participants in the multidisciplinary team, and that can be challenging in times of austerity.

While most professionals who participate in P.I.P.P.I. are already trained, and while there is some training within the multidisciplinary teams, the possible need for more formal training for all those involved was discussed.

The coach plays a crucial role in keeping the team together and in relaying results to the University, but it is not always clear to whom he/she is accountable.

The challenge of working with multidisciplinary teams and of ensuring effective collaboration by professionals from different departments (education, social work, psychology, etc.) was a further focus of the discussions.
P.I.P.P.I. needs to be sufficiently flexible, so that it can be applied in different regions, in both rural areas and urban areas, where the environment is different, and so that it can be scaled up as a national programme. The issue of confidentiality about information that families provide to RPMonline was discussed – in particular, the issue of who has access to this information, and whether families can have it deleted.

3. Key learning elements

- P.I.P.P.I. demonstrates the importance of a holistic and integrated approach to planning and provision, with the involvement of children and their families.
- It is important to have government support and cooperation at all levels, as this encourages the different departments and agencies (schools, welfare, etc.) to work in an integrated manner, and assures a financial commitment to P.I.P.P.I.
- The evidence-based implementation programme works well, as the research/evaluation is on-going and enables staff to adapt implementation, if necessary. It also helps justify scaling up such programmes.
- A strong theoretical framework and standardised common online tools are useful for all professionals involved: the RPMonline gives the programme a firm foundation, on which it can be adapted to different cultural backgrounds and environments.
- P.I.P.P.I. is strongly child and family focused, giving children and their parents a voice in the programme, but fathers should be particularly encouraged to participate.
- It uses an interesting mix of activities and people, with professionals working successfully side by side with volunteers and families. But it is important to be clear about the roles within the multidisciplinary team, including those of the coach and the professional in charge of taking decisions, in order to avoid duplication and confusion about roles and hierarchies and to ensure that the child is protected in serious cases.
- Effective sharing of information between professionals and a range of individuals and agencies is essential for effective identification, assessment and service provision.
- P.I.P.P.I. is part of a growing trend across Europe of using multidisciplinary teams to support vulnerable families, signalling a change to social welfare implementation across Europe.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020 and other EU policy initiatives

P.I.P.P.I. is in keeping with the spirit of a number of EU policies outlined in EU 2020; with its flagship targets and its European Semester; with the Social Investment Package; and with the Recommendation on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

EU 2020 targets

In its mission and practice, P.I.P.P.I. contributes to the EU 2020 Strategy, since supporting vulnerable children and families helps to reduce the number of those at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million, as stated in EU 2020, and contributes to the Italian target of reducing those in poverty by 2.2 million.
Through building a stable family environment for children, P.I.P.P.I. contributes to the EU 2020 target of reducing the rate of early school leaving by 10%, and to Italy’s target of reducing it by 15–16%.

**Flagship Initiatives**

P.I.P.P.I. is in line with the European Platform Against Poverty, part of the EU 2020 Strategy, as its use of evidence-based research and implementation promotes the Flagship Initiative of piloting social policy innovations ahead of wider implementation.

A second element of the European Platform Against Poverty is working in partnership with civil society to implement social policy reforms more effectively, and P.I.P.P.I.’s use of voluntary family supporters carries this out.

**Social Investment Package**

In its success in stopping children being taken into care, P.I.P.P.I. helps prevent future hardship – one of the goals of the EU Social Investment Package’s (SIP) section on Social Investment throughout the individual’s life.

P.I.P.P.I. is a project that accords with the SIP view that ‘Focusing on children is vital for a sustainable, efficient and competitive knowledge economy and an intergenerational fair society’, as it carries out the policy of ‘breaking the cycle of disadvantage across generations [and] mobilising a range of policies, supporting children themselves, but also their families and communities’.

Part of the SIP strategy is to implement the Recommendation on Investing in children.

**The Commission Recommendation on Investing in children**

P.I.P.P.I. is founded on the recognition that an integrated approach to children’s services is key to improving children’s chances and children’s wellbeing. It therefore strengthens synergies across policy areas, and also furthers the Recommendation’s commitment to improving the quality of services for children and to protecting children from the effects of the economic crisis.

P.I.P.P.I. places children at the centre of its activities. Approaching them not just as actors whose voice should be heard, but as people with rights, it is firmly in line with the underlying philosophy of the Recommendation. In this and other ways it also advances another core principle of the Recommendation – the involvement of stakeholders.

In helping families develop parenting skills, P.I.P.P.I. is very much in tune with this Recommendation, which emphasises the importance of early intervention and preventive approaches, and calls on EU countries to help families develop parenting skills in a non-stigmatising way.

Through its emphasis on developing multidisciplinary teams and working to change governance of policies affecting children, P.I.P.P.I. is in line with the Recommendation’s call to tackle child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies.

The use of RPMonline to evaluate the programme reflects the European Platform for Investing in Children, which stresses the need for online tools to collect and disseminate news about innovative and evidence-based practices.