In the fall of 2015, the Lithuanian media reported some cases of child abuse in residential childcare homes. These cases have provoked a new round of discussions about the stagnation of the reform of deinstitutionalisation. While residential childcare reform started in 2003, there has been no systemic change – over the past decade – and the reform process continues to meet direct and indirect resistance.

Description

Evidence of abuse in residential childcare facilities in the fall of 2015 provoked sharp discussions in Lithuania, and renewed attention from the president and the government towards the issue of deinstitutionalisation (DI), which was in stagnation during the past few years. The president initiated several political and legal actions, which have relaunched the debate.

The DI policy of childcare system in Lithuania dates back to 2003, when the Child Welfare State Policy Conception was introduced. This initiative stressed the priority of childcare in the family environment and the need to reduce residential care. In spite of this, statistical indicators do not demonstrate a strong trend towards DI (see Figure). So, family care does not seem to be seen as an alternative to residential care. The number of day care centres for children from at risk families is increasing; yet, the National Audit has reported that the demand is satisfied only by 42% of those in need (National audit report, 2014). In 2015, 16 pilot children’s homes were selected for reorganisation. However, despite the political commitments to DI, the Vilnius district municipality managed to build a new residential-type childcare home in the fall of 2015.

The process of DI aims to encourage family care, but the number of people willing to give foster care during the past decade has decreased by 25%. Among the reasons is low childcare allowance paid to foster-parents. The processes of care and adoption complicate the lack of mandatory training for potential foster parents and social workers certified to work with foster families (National audit report, 2014). Furthermore, sometimes public opinion stigmatises foster care in families as an improper source of income.

The Regional Office for Europe of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights claims that effective family support services at the community level are impeded not by a lack of financial resources, but by deeply rooted stereotypes (ROE OHCHR 2011). Public opinion in Lithuania is inclined to support residential care institutions. In addition, the coalition of directors of residential-type childcare homes is still a powerful stakeholder (Puras, Sumskiene, Adomaityte-Subaciene, 2013). Residential childcare institutions also benefit from EU structural funds: during the financing period 2007-2013, eight residential childcare homes have managed to implement 27 projects for a total of €15 mill. The projects were designed mainly for the development of infrastructure and the improvement of living conditions (National audit report, 2014).
Outlook & Commentary

As far as municipalities are obliged to finance the services for family-based childcare, the new system of the alternative care requires additional funds. Non-governmental organisations criticise the process of deinstitutionalisation for poor management, an inability to think holistically, and the lack of an integrated plan. Due to uncertainty about their future employment, the administration and employees of residential childcare homes hinder the further reforms process. Often municipalities do not allocate enough resources for the alternative services such as day centres or foster care. Low childcare allowances and the lack of services for caregivers do not encourage foster care. The child adoption process is complicated and long.

In 2015, the president of Lithuania actively encouraged the systemic reform process. She proposed to increase the childcare allowance, to speed up the examination of adoption cases in courts and to amend the Civil Code with the requirement to send children to residential-type care institutions only in exceptional cases. This means that municipalities will be forced to develop foster care services more intensively.

*The number of children placed under guardianship per year and the number of children deprived of parental care varies because not all children deprived of parental care at the end of the year were placed under guardianship.

Source: Statistics Lithuania

Further reading


Authors
Romas Lazutka; Arunas Poviliunas
and Laima Zalimiene, Vilnius University