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Special issue on foster care

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EDITORIAL

Foster care: From the omission or non-existence of a measure to its idealisation 

The numerous deinstitutionalisation movements worldwide have propelled foster care to the front row. As a reaction to this controversial phenomenon, the ISS/IRC has decided to dedicate a special issue to this form of child care.

Scientific evidence on the harmful effects of the institutionalisation of children on their positive development is now widely recognised (see Monthly Review 4/2007). In response to this problem, legislative and political decisions have been approved in an increasing number of countries, which provide for the closing down of institutions, often in record time, and for the sudden promotion of foster care. Even though the latter offers undeniable advantages, such as preserving the bond between the child and his

family of origin when the competent authorities are reluctant to terminate it, such decisions nonetheless reflect the gap, which sometimes exists between political will and the reality in the field. In order to adopt this type of measures, certain preconditions must be met, such as: are foster care systems able to respond to such a demand from one day to another? What about those countries in which a culture of foster care remains to be established? (see pp. 3 and 6)

Family and professional resources

One of the factors to be considered in order to adequately promote foster care is the availability and abilities of these families. Indeed, the changes in living circumstances (higher costs, the housing crisis, growing individualism, etc) have resulted in the number of families, who may be applicants to the temporary care of children separated from their family, to become increasingly scarce. Furthermore, foster families too often also suffer from a lack of support from public entities in the fulfilment of their functions in relation to the children. Foster family recruitment campaigns, as well as an in-depth reflection on the support offered to the latter, therefore appear necessary (see pp. 5 and 7). Thus, for example in Burkina Faso, a decree has been drafted in 2011, aimed at promoting foster care.

Another factor, which is worth mentioning here, relates to the professional resources assigned to this form of child care. The development of foster care must necessarily occur jointly with a strengthening – as much with regards to their numbers as in relation to their training – of the teams appointed to work on the selection and provision of support (see pp. 3 and 9).

About the specific definition of foster care

Defining foster care as an antagonistic response to institutionalisation is a risk that must be strongly prevented, as it may jeopardise the children themselves. Indeed, foster care has a definition that is specific to one country or another – as evidenced by the various models mentioned in this Review – and is not a response to the needs of all children, who are

temporarily separated from their parents (see p. 7). Furthermore, the development of tools, which clarify the content of this measure, and the indicators to be taken into account when deciding on it, are another issue, which countries, such as Spain, have decided to address (see p. 9). In particular, this would make it possible to avoid the negative implementation of this measure, which often occurs in practice. Indeed, it is often the case that this so-called temporary form of placement becomes a *de facto* permanent measure (see pp. 3 and 7).

Finally, whilst one may notice, by addressing this issue, that foster care, as defined by Western societies and the international community, is often not well known, in some countries, it is totally absent from the formal child protection system. Sometimes, it merely exists informally, or it is unrecognised by the population, in which case expecting to develop it requires time and resources (see p. 3). The adoption of the Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children has allowed for considerable progress in this direction. These have been used as the basis for the development, by some, of new legislative and statutory instruments on this issue (see Monthly Review 12/2010). A change in mentalities, in order for this temporary measure of family care to be offered a correct position, or to have it restored, remains to be undertaken.

The ISS/IRC team
October-November 2011

ACTORS

Source: Hague Conference on Private International Law: http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.status&cid=69

- **Armenia, Germany, Ireland:** These States have updated the contact details of their Central Authorities.
- **Senegal:** This State has acceded to the HC-1993 and has appointed its Central Authority.

BRIEF

Ukraine: Amendments to provisions on intercountry adoption in the Family Code have come into force

The Ukrainian Family Code has been amended in July 2011, in particular in order to promote the intercountry adoption of children with special needs, by only authorising the adoption of children over the age of five (except in certain situations relating to groups of siblings, among others). The principle of subsidiarity has also been strengthened, as the search for domestic families has become a priority. Furthermore, according to the Central Authority of Quebec (SAI), the Ministry of Social Policy is now in

charge of intercountry adoptions, and a suspension of intercountry adoptions for a period of minimum two months is expected.

Sources: Secrétariat à l'adoption du Québec, <http://www.adoption.gouv.qc.ca/site/aid=463.phtml>, U.S. Department of State http://adoption.state.gov/country_information/country_specific_alerts_notices.php?alert_notice_type=alerts&alert_notice_file=ukraine_4, Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali, Italy, <http://www.commissioneadozioni.it/it/notizie/2011/comunicato-aggiornamento-sulle-procedure-adottive-in-ucraina.aspx>, U.S. Embassy in Kiev, http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/adoption_10182011.html.

OVERVIEW

Foster care worldwide

As giving an overview of foster care is nearly impossible, this article intends to offer an input to the discussion, by outlining some trends and recent changes in the use of foster care, as well as the perspectives about it in different parts of the world.

Foster care is a measure, which provides children with a family environment when parents cannot care for their children for longer or shorter periods. As stated in EveryChild UK's recent study (1), foster care is used worldwide in many different forms and can be used very flexibly. In the short term, as emergency care; in the long term, as therapeutic placement, respite care and foster day-care. Furthermore, there is no universal opinion as to how foster care is undertaken. Whilst it is a well-implemented measure in many countries, in others, foster care systems have not been widely developed. If children cannot stay with their extended family or community, residential care is often the only option.

Thoughts on different models of foster care

In some countries, foster care is merely a temporary measure leading to adoption (U.S.A. and U.K.). In others, it is used as *de facto* adoption. This is, in particular, the case in African countries, where adoption is culturally not accepted or recognised, but where fostering is regarded as a good alternative. Children are placed with families, with the intention of them becoming permanent family members without severing the legal bond with their birth family. This is the case in kinship care (70-90% of the placements in most countries) but also when community members care for children through or without a court procedure. Countries, like South Africa and Namibia, pay foster grants and evaluate placements, whether in situations of kinship care or in the case of foster placements with court orders. Other countries have initiated the development of foster care systems or standards, including its legal recognition. The

need for alternative family-based care is high and foster care projects turn out to be successful when developed the African way.

In Europe, until the '70s, most children were institutionalised, with foster care considered a *de facto* adoption. This was then followed by a system, in which foster care was always temporary and aimed at reunification. Despite the main focus, in recent years, on prevention and on keeping children with their birth families, children currently in out-of-home placements still seek a permanent alternative family; this has led to strengthened legal measures, such as special guardianship or foster parents being granted legal guardianship and more parental rights. In most European countries, domestic adoption from foster care is rare. However, we see trends discussing granting foster carers more parental rights and responsibilities, as well as the development of systems of open adoption, aimed at offering greater certainty as to where the children will grow up, and therefore also better opportunities for attachment to their carers.

According to many Northern Americans, foster care has failed, as children are often moved around in the system and permanency in foster care is not always supported by the legal system. In many States in the U.S.A., as well as in the United Kingdom, foster care is regarded as a stepping stone towards adoption. After a number of years in foster care, children may be declared adoptable and adopted by their foster parents or specially-recruited adopters whilst, through open adoption orders, the child may also maintain contact with his biological parents. Will this also be the trend in the rest of Europe?

In The Netherlands, for instance, the number of children adopted from foster care is low, but the system makes a clear distinction between foster care as a means of support towards reunification, and therefore for a period as short as possible, and foster care as a permanent option with children becoming full members of their foster family until they are adults. Foster parents may request legal guardianship, whilst maintaining the right to foster care grants and support from fostering agencies.

Foster care, in itself, is meant as a temporary option, which focuses on the reunification of the child with his family of origin, or until his adoption by a permanent family through adoption. However, foster care may also be a permanent option in a number of cases. An important success factor in foster care is the support received by foster parents and children. A breakdown of placements happens too often due to a lack of specialised support in the care of children with many needs.

The impact of family preservation and deinstitutionalisation

Research (2) shows that the profile and typology of children entering care in countries with developed alternative care systems is changing. There are two main causes:

- many children enter care due to emotional and behavioural problems (Bart, Wildfire and Green, 2006), whilst family preservation services tend to keep the “easiest-to-place” children within their birth families.

- there is a changing availability of residential care facilities; children previously placed in residential care are now placed in foster care, thus leading to more challenging placements and an increasing number of breakdowns. This has led to new types of foster care being developed, such as treatment or professional foster care and specialised foster care for children with disabilities.

This is a trend that requires resources and specialised services. The Foster care study in Namibia (MGECW, 2009) evidences that foster parents do not request support, despite the fact that they express a need for it when interviewed. They even rank socio-emotional support above financial support. For many, giving up on their children is not an option they would consider, but both suffer from a lack of support.

EveryChild’s study clearly states that, in the long run, foster care may be cheaper. However, the development of a well-managed system of foster care requires additional resources. Foster parents need to be well assessed and well trained before their first placement and throughout the latter. The U.K. has developed a system of mandatory annual training, with standards for foster carers, thus recognising that foster parenting requires special knowledge and skills. This will be the required trend for the future, in order to really help the children and provide them with a loving home and with parents able to cope with challenges. Furthermore, in addition to support services and training for carers, specialised support services, therapies, discussion groups and the participation of children, whose voices and needs are often not heard nor considered, are also necessary.

Leaving foster care

The U.N. Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children (2009) promote permanent solutions such as family reunification or adoption. Failing this, which is the case for many children worldwide, there is foster care. It is worth emphasising that permanency lasts a lifetime and not only until adulthood. Furthermore, the end of alternative care at the age of 18 is currently being discussed worldwide, given that many foster parents continue to be the parents of their foster children and become the grandparents of the latter’s children. This too requires programmes for its recognition and support.

Foster care may be a viable option, either for short periods or as a permanent option. However, both forms can only develop when support and resources are invested by governments and civil society in the development of the system.

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(1) *Fostering Better Care: Improving foster care provision around the world*, EveryChild UK, 2011.

(2) *How does foster care work? International evidence on outcomes*, Elizabeth Fernandez and Richard P. Bart, 2010.

Jamaica and the particularities of its Foster Care Programme

This article briefly examines the child protection framework in Jamaica, focusing on foster care, its proven advantages and areas for improvement.

The Child Development Agency (CDA) is responsible for solutions for the 5,890 children in need of care (2008 estimate) including, family reintegration, foster care, residential care and adoption. In 2009, the Office of the Children's Advocate published a report entitled *A Study of the Foster Care Programme in Jamaica* (hereafter, the report), revealing that at this time there were 1,189 children in foster care. This short article will pay attention to some of the findings of this study, given that little is published about the Caribbean context and helpful lessons can be gleaned.

Foster care in Jamaica

In Jamaica, families provide alternative care to non-biological children both informally and formally. Only the formal provision of family care with the approval by the CDA is considered to be foster care. The Foster Care Programme (FCP) aims to provide 'a better quality of life for children, who have been abandoned, orphaned, rejected or suffer any other form of abuse and are in need of a substitute family'. The procedure for applying to become a foster family is outlined on the CDA website. According to the Child Care and Protection Act 2004, foster parents must provide food, clothing and shelter, as well as an education for children under their care, where negligence of this duty can be sanctioned. The law forbids children from being sent out to do work to earn an income. Foster families must undertake some training and supervision. Such legal protections ensure that the child is not fostered for child labour purposes and that parents are, in principle, equipped for the task.

Remaining challenges

Notwithstanding such legal safeguards, the report identified administration challenges, including inter alia, better communication between the CDA and foster parents, improved financial and psychological support as well as better preparation for foster children for independent living. One recommendation is that funds be provided for foster children seeking a tertiary education.

The report notes that the main obstacle lies in attracting and retaining a sufficient number of eligible foster parents. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that the stipend offered is inadequate, given that the report divulges that 'foster parents were receiving 8,000.00 JMD (approx 70€) every two months to assist in caring for their foster children. In addition, some parents received some financial support for educational and medical needs.'

Lobbying potential

Despite this clear shortfall for financial aid, the report concluded that the FCP should nevertheless be promoted over institutional care, given its cost effectiveness. Yet the ISS/IRC believes that this option should not be promoted without significant efforts being made to address the existing challenges. Arguably, once such efforts are underway, the proven financial benefits and psycho-social advantages for children of the FCP over institutional care highlighted in the report would be an effective lobbying mechanism for promoting this family care option. As a good practice, the report notes that the CDA is consistently making public appeals to sensitise the Jamaican community about the FCP. Such an active verbal commitment on behalf of the Government is sure to bear fruits for the protection of children's rights, if it is accompanied by their material support.

Converting foster care to adoption

Children in foster care can eventually be adopted after a set procedure has been followed and biological parents consent. The CDA website remarks that 'where the biological parents cannot be found, an advertisement must be placed in the print media for three consecutive Sundays, notifying them of the intention of the foster parents to adopt the child, after which, if no parent comes forward to claim the child or if the identified parent agrees, the child can be adopted after six weeks'. The ISS/IRC insists that any procedure for transforming foster care into an adoption must include an adequate evaluation, preparation and

support of the foster family and the child for an adoption, given the differences in the two projects. The foster care option should never be used as a means of circumventing adoption

procedures, given the permanency of this option and its marked distinctions.

Source: Child Development Agency,
http://www.cda.gov.jm/foster_care_contd.php.

A culture of foster care in Latin America

The Latin American Foster Care Network (Red Latinoamericana de Acogimiento Familiar, RELAF) recounts and hereby shares its experiences in the development of a culture of foster care in several Latin American countries.

RELAF assumes the essential mission of implementing the right of children and adolescents to family and community life, by promoting and supporting the strategies of governmental and non-governmental organisations aimed at the deinstitutionalisation of children and adolescents, the prevention of separation from families of origin and communities, and the promotion of family-type alternative care measures. In concrete terms, it offers its support to Governments and civil society, by providing them with technical cooperation, capacity-building, project supervision and activities with an impact on national policies relating to the fulfilment of the right to family life. As a regional reference centre on this issue, RELAF has experiences in the development of foster care in several countries.

Support for the development and strengthening of foster care programmes

In *Guatemala*, RELAF has been involved in the strengthening of the 'Substitute Families Programme' of the Ministry of Social Welfare. This programme is very important, given that it provides children – whose families, for a number of reasons, cannot be made responsible for their care – with family care. Substitute families act until the situation that has given rise to the family's separation has been solved or until the adoption of the child or adolescent has been decided. There are currently approximately 30 children and adolescents placed in foster care in several regions in Guatemala. This is, in fact, a low number when compared to the nearly 700 children and adolescents, between the ages of 0 and 18 years, who are institutionalised in the *Hogar Solidario*, an institution that violates the children's right to family and community life, and which goes against the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

In *Argentina*, *Ieladeinu* is implementing an example of a successful experience of foster care within the Jewish community. This community is known for caring for its members in the diaspora, for developing its support networks, and for living together with the families in order to preserve their identity practices, for example the weekly celebration of shabat. In the case of *Ieladeinu's* care programme, it intends to place children stemming from families in the Jewish community, who have suffered from serious abuse, with other families in the community. RELAF cooperates by providing technical support to the team that selects, prepares and follows up on the placements and sponsorships.

In *Peru*, RELAF supports Buckner International, which has developed the 'Foster Families' programme on the basis of an agreement with INABIF (National Integrated Programme for Family Welfare). The Programme intends to find temporary homes in order for children, who have been morally abandoned and are at social risk, to grow up and develop within a family that provides them with care and enables their full development for two years, without contact being lost, 'depending on the situation', with their biological families. So far, children between the ages of five and 12, who are placed in INABIF's homes in Lima, are benefitting from the programme. The families that are selected as foster families are trained by professionals of INABIF and the Buckner Foundation, and undergo permanent supervision.

In *Costa Rica*, the non-governmental organisation Casa Viva contacted RELAF. Together with the National Childhood Council (*Patronato Nacional de la Infancia, PANI*), it has managed to place 47 children with families since October 2005, some short term and others long term. This year, it has cared for 23 children. It currently has 30 families that are active or in the

process of being trained to become foster families. It has a team of multidisciplinary professionals, who support the families and the children. It recruits families through local Christian churches, and the church plays a role in supporting the family and the child. 70% of those children, who have left the care programme, have been able to return to their family of origin. Another 15% have been adopted.

Technical cooperation for the deinstitutionalisation of children and adolescents

In *Uruguay*, RELAF supports the activities undertaken by the Uruguayan members of its Latin American Board of Advisers and by the management of Uruguay's Institute of the Child and Adolescent (*Instituto del Niño y Adolescente del Uruguay*, INAU) with a view to promoting deinstitutionalisation practices, with particular emphasis on protection policies that are compliant with the United Nations Guidelines. Indeed, Uruguay faces a challenge marked by Law 18590, approved in 2009, which imposes maximum terms for the institutional placement of children. Likewise, alternatives are being considered, with their core protection issue being the right to family and community life. Following this line, foster care measures and adoption have had a predominant position in the stance taken by the management of the central body in charge of child and adolescent-related policies in Uruguay. Likewise, calls for families appear as an issue that requires reflection. Among INAU's other concerns are cultural aspects and concepts relating to foster families. These must

be taken into account and addressed, as much at institutional level as among civil society. In parallel, support is being provided to organisations in the creation of a National Network for the Right to Family and Community Life.

In *Paraguay*, RELAF has been cooperating, from a technical perspective, with the Foster Care Programme of the Adoption Centre of the National Childhood Ministry. This programme has allowed for the closure of an institutional centre for babies. Families now provide temporary care to the babies and younger children, whilst their situations are being decided.

This overview of the various initiatives undertaken in Latin America reflects a growing trend in the creation and development of a foster care culture, as an essential element for the full enjoyment of the children's right to family and community life.

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Sources: RELAF, <http://www.relaf.org/>; Guatemala, <http://www.relaf.org/mardel/ppp6.pdf>; Paraguay, http://snna.gov.py/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=205:convocatoria-842-acogimiento&catid=46:842&Itemid=84; Peru, http://www.inabif.gob.pe/portalweb/fam_acogedoras.php; Argentina, <http://www.ieladeinu.org.ar/>; Uruguay, http://www.relaf.org/coop_uruguay.html; Costa Rica, http://www.pani.go.cr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=190&Itemid=69.

Foster care in India, an old system still a rarity

In India, foster care, recognised by the national law for the protection of childhood (Juvenile Justice Act 2000) as a measure of rehabilitation and social reintegration for children deprived of a family, has been formalised since 1974. While this system still remains underused, some public and private initiatives have demonstrated its feasibility and effectiveness.

Gradually, various institutional initiatives for the promotion of this measure are emerging in India. The programme *Bal Sangopan Yojana*, for example, initiated by the State of Mahārāshtra in 1995, has enabled many children placed in institutions to find a temporary foster family. Introduced by about ten local NGOs, this programme is a good example of cooperation between state actors and civil society in this field.

Bangalore's Child Welfare Committee (CWC) led a campaign designed for local communities to raise awareness, through putting posters on the sides of buses and in cinemas with the slogan, "Would you like to open your home to a child?". This public initiative has led to a significant number of foster families being recruited.

Guiding principles

In India, foster care is essentially used as a means of temporary protection in preparation for a permanent family solution. For the local NGO *Vatsalya Charitable Trust* (VCT) based in Bangalore, which has been working with foster families since 1990, this system must be studied on a case-by-case basis according to the needs of the child. Sometimes VCT's centre receives infants that, if their state of health allows, can be placed in foster care a few weeks after their birth, based on the principle that the earlier a child is placed with a foster family, the greater the benefits for his development. Since its inception, VCT has been able to place over 600 children in temporary foster care.

In practice

▪ *Recruiting families:*

Let us take the example of *CHESS*, an institution in the town of Chennai, which organises meetings with the neighbouring communities so as to raise their awareness about the increasing trend of children, who are separated from their families. This dialogue encourages the population to become aware and gradually families will volunteer to temporarily foster a child. According to VCT, recruiting families also happens a lot by word of mouth.

▪ *Selection:*

A medical, psychosocial and environmental assessment is carried out to determine whether the couple is able to receive a child in the appropriate conditions. The couples must be financially stable to avoid involvement for their own self gain. They must also be of good standing within their community and have a happy marriage (so, generally, single people are excluded). Their biological children must be over seven years old. According to the NGO *BSSK India*, which has been using foster families since 1979, the challenge lies in this selection in order to prevent failure and to avoid moving the child unnecessarily. The child will stay with his foster family until a permanent solution has been found. One of the major challenges of this

measure remains the term "temporary" or how to make sure that it does not go beyond its allocated time.

▪ *Preparation and monitoring of families:*

Before the child arrives, the selected families benefit from training on hygiene, daily care of the child, the main stages of development, etc. In general, the parents are told about the background of the child they are going to care for.

The foster families benefit from a regular monitoring programme carried out by professionals, most notably when the child is about to leave, where work is carried out to prepare the child and the foster family for their separation, so the transition can be as smooth as possible. VCT created a place where foster

families can talk and exchange experiences, the more experienced foster families are a valuable resource for new families.

In the framework of the programme *Bal Sangopan Yajana* described above, the government provides a grant for the NGOs involved in the project, which covers monthly support for the families and part of the salaries of the social workers, who monitor the families.

CARA (India's Central Adoption Resource Authority) proposes pre-adoption foster care to prospective adoptive parents

The new guidelines governing the adoption of a child by CARA, dating from 2011, provide for the possibility for the adoptive parents to look after the child in pre-adoption foster care under a number of conditions:

- after the applicants accept the proposal of the child;
- the prospective adoptive parents are required to sign a document committing themselves before the child is placed in their temporary care;
- during the period of foster care, the adoptive parents are authorised to travel with the child throughout India as long as they duly inform their adoption agency.

While in India a large number of foster families are often part of the foster child's extended family, an increasing number of families with no links to the child are volunteering, aware of the importance of this placement for the child and his future. This gradual shift by the communities, concerning the care of children without family support, echoes the culture of national adoption which has been established for years in India.

Sources: Workshop on Alternative Forms of Care for Children without Parental Care, Bangalore, 2006, http://mercury.vm135.remotion.nl/websites/kpz_2010/files_content/bangalore.pdf; *Bal Sangopan Yojana*, Report of Women and Child Development Department, Maharashtra, <http://womenchild.maharashtra.gov.in/english/dcmNew/pdf/fostercare.pdf>; *Guidelines governing the adoption of children*, CARA, 2011: http://adoptionindia.nic.in/guideline-family/Part_I.pdf.

‘Conceptual and methodological bases for alternative placement in foster care’: The Spanish model

The Spanish Red Cross, which is an ISS correspondent, shares its lengthy professional experience in the field of foster care. As an essential actor in the implementation of this protection measure, it continually works towards the training of involved professionals.

Foster care in an unknown family is a measure that enables children to be cared for, and to fully develop, within a family and social environment with better conditions of ‘normalisation’ than those potentially provided by residential care institutions. This measure has experienced specific legal developments in each of the countries that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, through the recognition of various means or forms of undertaking it and by establishing the legal and administrative procedures for its implementation. The recent Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children intend to provide specific criteria aimed at ensuring the appropriate application of this Convention to those children, who are deprived of parental care or are at risk of so being.

The development of foster care in Spain

In Spain, given that the public competence in child protection matters is decentralised among the Autonomous Communities, care is usually undertaken administratively, even though it may be carried out judicially, if the parents or guardian do not consent, or object, to it. Placement in an unknown foster family in our country has experienced an incipient development, and its character differs from what could be called the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ model, given that foster families develop as a means, within society, to put their solidarity into practice with children and families, who are experiencing difficulties. This is the true reason why an organisation like the Red Cross becomes involved in these processes. It should also be said that foster families, depending on the Autonomous Community, gain a certain degree of recognition and benefit from technical and financial support in the exercise of their functions.

Our country is currently immersed in an intense process of legal changes in child protection issues, resulting from the report prepared at the end of last year by the Senate’s Commission for

the Study on Domestic Adoption and other Similar Measures (1). Among other suggestions, the report and the subsequent legislative reform proposals (2) are aimed at promoting foster care rather than residential care: giving priority to foster care for children between the ages of 0 and six years, making administrative procedures for its implementation easier, recognising a series of rights and responsibilities for the carers, and putting an end to the possibility for ‘pre-adoptive foster care’ as a step prior to adoption...

The development of tools for professionals

The Spanish Red Cross, through its Programme for Children in Difficulty, plays an important role as a collaborating body for the various administrations. It has an experience of over 20 years, with 23 projects currently set up across the State and interventions in various forms and fields of foster care. In 2008, we edited the *Manual of Good Foster Care Practices* (3), which is the result of an intense process of review, reflection and reconceptualisation among our teams. In the latter, we offer criteria and indicators of ‘good practice’ for the establishment and development of foster care services. In this material, we cover each of the stages resulting from the implementation of this form of alternative care. The publication is aimed at teams of professionals, who manage care projects, as well as at the technicians within the Public Administration, who are those who usually make the decisions relating to the children’s lives, and who intervene in the biological families’ environments.

Further along our life story, we reach the proposal we are currently immersed in. The document, which we have provisionally called *Conceptual and methodological bases for alternative placement in foster care*, will be published at the end of this year. This tool is aimed at supporting social service professionals,

who are involved in the decision-making process of this measure of alternative care. This proposal's concrete objectives are to:

- identify the professionals' reluctance in making decisions in favour of foster care rather than in favour of other care options;
- provide professionals with theoretical and methodological references, that might help them in the decision-making process, in order for it to be reasoned and justified based on the child's best interests;
- analyse the variables that may have an impact on those cases that may be subject to this form of care, and in relation to which a better/worse adjustment of foster care may be foreseen;
- identify those elements surrounding each case that allow for the most appropriate form of foster care to be determined;
- detect those moments and/or those events in the children's and the families' paths that may suggest a change of 'case plan' towards a foster care option.

The first part of the document outlines its objectives, structure and methodological proposal. The second part sets out the conceptual bases for the implementation of foster care, by providing details as to interventions that precede the establishment of the placement and its various forms.

From the heart of our organisation, we welcome the legal changes that are about to happen in our country, as these are aimed at making it easier for a higher number of children to be able to benefit from this offer of alternative care. However, this process must take place in a careful manner, by ensuring the social recognition of the role undertaken by the foster family as a complement to that carried out by the child welfare bodies. Thus, they must be provided with continuous support, given that a commitment to foster care entails, above all, an investment in the solidarity of families helping other families.

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(1) *Informe de la Comisión Especial de Estudio de la problemática de la adopción nacional y otros temas afines* [Report of the Special Commission for the Study on Domestic Adoption and other Similar Measures] (650/000001), 17 November 2010.

(2) Borrador del Anteproyecto de Ley Orgánica de Actualización de la Legislación sobre Protección a la Infancia [Draft Organic Law for the Update of Legislation on Child Protection]. Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality.

(3) VV.AA. (2008), *Manual de Buena Práctica en Acogimiento Familiar* [Manual of Good Foster Care Practices]. Spanish Red Cross. Available electronically: www.cruzroja.es.

READERS' FORUM

Interview with two professionals offering support to foster families

*Two professionals, with legal and psychological backgrounds, introduce us to the programme *Between two families* (Entre deux familles), which they manage for foster families. It includes conference-debates and coffee-meetings, during which various issues are addressed.*

Names and surnames: Daria Michel Scotti, an Ethnopsychologist, and Isabelle Lammerant, a Lawyer

Place of residence and work: Geneva (Switzerland)

Professions/Duties: Members, with Nino Rizzo (a Psychologist, Psychotherapist and Psychoanalyst) of the group *Between-2* (*Entre-2*)

1. How did the idea of organising these coffee-meetings and conferences for foster families come into existence?

In the course of the spring of 2008, the heads of the Genevan Association of Foster Families providing Accommodation (*Association genevoise des familles d'accueil avec*

hébergement, AGFAH) contacted the team at *Espace Adoption*. They were wondering about the possibility of cooperating with this professional association in order to benefit from its experience in supporting parents involved in one or the other of these specific forms of parenthood. On second thoughts, it was believed

that offering a programme of support to foster families within *Espace Adoption* could cause confusion. Indeed, the foster care experience radically differs from the form of filiation created through adoption. It was therefore more adequate to appoint some professionals from *Espace Adoption* to the creation of a 'made-to-measure' project. The initial idea of creating a space for discussion and group conversations, via informal meetings and thematic conferences, grew as it responded to one of the main needs expressed by foster parents: to build upon existing resources by promoting the creation of a support network among existing and prospective foster families, whilst benefitting from a professional legal and psychological perspective as well as evidence.

2. How do these meetings take place?

Thanks to the financial support of the Genevan Cantonal Authority, these meetings, which started in 2009, take place on a monthly basis. They take place one Saturday morning a month, outside school holidays, and last for two hours; they take place in an extracurricular environment, which includes a toy library for children. The number of participants is of approximately 15 persons, most of whom have been foster families for a few years already and come together with their partner. In this context, the *Entre-2* group offers, alternately, coffee-meetings (two or three times a semester) and a conference followed by a debate twice a year. The coffee-meetings are open conversations, led jointly by *Entre-2*'s lawyer and psychologist, and everyone, who is present, may express his current questions or concerns. The resulting discussion makes it possible to pave the way for new issues of reflection, and varied and useful views. Once or twice a year, we invite a member of the local professional network to participate in this meeting and the dialogue that he subsequently facilitates. On the other hand, the conferences that are offered involve a professional speaker, who is established locally or regionally, and who can address a more theoretical issue linked to foster care (for example, parenthood via this form of foster care, the family dynamics in these families, the creation of bonds in children placed with these families, working with a network, etc). These last for about an hour, are always followed by a discussion, in order to link the thoughts that have been suggested with the experience of the participants.

3. From your perspective, what are the fundamental issues at stake in the foster parents' meetings?

In Switzerland, foster placements are undertaken in not-for-profit families, who are compensated for their expenses and supported by the Cantonal Authority. Foster parents must build a representation of their position in relation to the child, in parallel to that of the biological parents, whom the child often maintains periodic contact with. In this context, the existence and content of foster parenthood, as a complement to that of the biological parents, are often questioned. This also applies to the position of the child between these two families, and that of the potential group of foster siblings. Depending on their background and their motivations, foster parents are therefore led, not only to develop their knowledge of the child's development and of the impact of separations on the latter, but also to co-create their particular identity in relation to the child they are entrusted with, and to discover the means to cooperate with the network of professionals around them.

4. Has your professional point of view changed throughout these meetings?

After two years of cooperation with some foster families in the Canton of Geneva and with the AGFAH, we are able to confirm the need to train, provide information and support the various actors involved in foster care. On these grounds, we wish to soon supplement our activities with monthly discussion groups. In a different and more private environment, under the leadership of a Psychotherapist, these will enable those parents, who wish to do so, to go into greater depth in their reflection on their experienced situations, in accordance with a personal development perspective. Furthermore, we welcome the initiative of the Genevan authorities, which, last year, set up a training for existing and prospective foster parents in the Canton, in partnership with the School of Social Work. We believe that this initiative is necessary, as we currently witness the emergence of single-parent families or families without children, for whom foster care is their first experience of parenthood.

5. What message(s) would you like to convey to our readers based on your experience?

We believe it is fundamental that foster families do not remain isolated in their experience – albeit it always being unique. Access to an institutional network of placement and care professionals is essential. The opportunity for meeting and sharing experiences, which are unique within society, appears to offer support to

some families. We also believe reflection on foster care to be of interest to all contemporary families: traditional, reconstituted, adoptive families..., insofar as it refers to the issue of the child's position in relation to the wishes of adults, at times that appear to raise questions as to the 'appropriation' of children.

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, SYMPOSIA AND COURSES 

- **United Kingdom:** *Permanence planning for children under 5*, London, BAAF, 19 January 2012. For further information: <http://www.baaf.org.uk/training/allevts/2012-01-19t000000-0>.

N.B.: Due to IT changes, the publication *Ageing Out of Care – An international analysis of young people leaving care*, published by SOS Children's Villages International, and which was presented in the previous issue of the Monthly Review, is now available at the following address: <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/About-us/Library/Pages/Ageing-out-of-care-international-analysis.aspx>.



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