

Aid & Eastern Europe Conference 14.12.09

Radisson SAS Hotel, Dublin

Hosted by Comber - for a future without orphanages

Panel Notes

Compiled by Emma Mathias

Panel Chair: Mairead McGuinness, MEP

Panel Members:

- Jane Corboy – Founder, First Step Georgia
- John Mulligan – Founder, Focus on Romania
- Brenda Dinsdale – Founder, Chernobyl Continuity
- Debbie Deegan – Founder, To Russia With Love
- Fiona Dowling – Executive Director, Comber
- Dr. Delia Pop – Director of Programmes, Hope and Homes for Children

Mairead introduced the panel members and spoke of the EU's role in encouraging member states to prioritise child care issues. Mairead asked members of the NGOs present at the conference to give the EU the information needed so that it can improve its role.

John gave his background and spoke of his work with Focus on Romania over the years. John noted that in the late 1990s there appeared to be a problem with sustainability in aid projects. John noted that progress in de-institutionalisation had been slow and all NGOs working for this purpose need to eventually put themselves out of business.

Brenda echoed John's sentiment about the need for NGOs working in the area to become obsolete. She felt that many NGOs don't work together or share information enough.

Debbie described her initial plans when she began working in the area as focusing on the renovation of orphanages, but credits her change in attitude to John Mulligan, who argued at the time that this was not the answer. Debbie noted the difficulty in bringing about change in Russia, but some progress had been achieved.

ACHIEVING DE-INSTITUTIONISATION

- Miriam Forde from Chernobyl Children's Project International asked **how success with deinstitutionalization in Romania and Belarus can be fast-tracked.**
- John Sheridan of Comber felt the problem of **adults in institutional care** also needs to be addressed

In response to the first question, Delia suggested that in order to fast-track deinstitutionalization, everybody needs to work together and make sure that it is a political issue. She also emphasised the need to support local state agencies.

Delia pointed out that NGOs are not generally one voice when working with governments and can end up working against each other. NGOs need to make a common agenda. In Eritrea there were only three potential local partners, whereas in some Central and Eastern European countries there are many possible partners and agendas. Delia emphasised the importance of political commitment. Very often NGOs go into countries and work without the support of government.

John noted that in Romania it has been difficult for NGOs to set up there, and he has had to fight with an advocacy group in order to achieve change.

Jane said that because of the economic recession, she feels that in Georgia they have been put back to the stage they were at in 1997 with regards to progress.

Debbie emphasised how important it is that NGOs keep advocating on behalf of children living in institutions.

Brenda suggested that we need to bring service providers into western Europe in order to demonstrate good practice and give them training. Deinstitutionalization needs to be a consultative process, with states having a say in the process.

Jane agreed with Brenda and pointed out that newly trained staff can then go back and train others in their countries. Delia also mentioned that Hope and Homes have brought delegates from nearby countries to illustrate best practice and this can be more culturally appropriate than Western European practice.

- Des MacMahon, First Step Georgia: **How had Hope and Homes achieved such success so quickly in Eritrea, a very poor country, and why it has proved so difficult to achieve the same in Eastern European countries?**

Delia responded to this question by pointing out that the whole process of deinstitutionalization in Eritrea took 14 years altogether. The government of Eritrea had been on board and they had also invested most of the funds for the project. Hope and Homes had been the second largest organisation in the country so it had been well looked upon. The project was culturally appropriate and had been achieved in partnership with local communities.

Maia Ryan of the Genesis Association (Georgia) pointed out that African countries are generally quite open about their poverty, whereas Central and Eastern European countries try to give the impression that they are getting on well. In Georgia, she noted, there is also a high turnover of government officials. Georgia is not in the EU and does not have the resources to change at present.

ROLE OF EU

- Jim McQuaid from School Aid Romania felt that **Romania should not have been allowed into the EU**. One of the reasons he gave for this is that there are no plans in place for deinstitutionalization.

In response, Mairead noted that there are two viewpoints on the issue of EU membership:

- Only take countries into the EU when conform to all standards
- Gently persuade countries to conform once they are in the EU

Mairead said that she personally would be in favour of the second viewpoint.

John said that he would have campaigned for the first viewpoint. He argued that human rights weren't / aren't on the agenda, and that geopolitical interests were / are at play. John pointed out that Bertie Ahern refused to make any statement on the issue, right up to the accession. John said that before the accession he was told that the problems would be solved after the accession, but afterwards was told that they couldn't solve the problems.

Delia took a different stance, and said that the fact that Romania joined the EU will help voices be heard – Delia can now speak freely in her country and if her government won't listen, she can go elsewhere to be heard. Bulgaria has now committed to closing all its institutions, and Delia argues that this would not have been possible without the financial and technical support of the EU.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- Stephen Wilson from ADRA Ireland noted that less than 5% of children in the region are institutionalized. **Should we prioritise community development?**
- Frances Haworth from Comber / Moldova Vision pointed out that it is more accessible to work with children in orphanages than to work with communities. Frances put a question to the panel – **have any of the panelists met resentment over why it is orphans in particular get so much aid directed towards them, and why is so much money put into institutions?**

Debbie said that she had encountered resentment from staff that worked in the orphanages, as they were very poor and their own children were hungry and they felt it unfair that so much money was spent on orphanages and orphans.

Brenda said that she had also met resentment [over the issue of money being focused on orphanages] and that in the past it had been a bigger issue. Brenda pointed out that the children living in orphanages are *social* orphans and not necessarily orphans as such, so they need even more support than poor children who do have families as their support network.

John said that he got around this issue by not putting high standard care homes in poor areas.

Jane said that she had also heard comments from staff, saying that their own children were hungry and asking the aid workers if they will come and look after them.

Delia said that most of the staff in the first group home she worked in had previously been residents in institutions.

Mairead asked if we are too focused on getting kids *out* of institutions than preventing entry into them in the first place?

Delia argued that it is easier to link the closure of institutions with the implementation of other support services. Staff will then still have a job and can transfer their skills in order to work in a different way. It is risky at the moment to separate the two due to budgeting issues.

FUNDING

- Question from floor: **Has funding been reduced due to competition?**

Dr Patty Gray, NUI Maynooth: there are funding sources inside Russia and citizens need to realize this and take advantage of these sources. The ability of local citizens and voters needs to be strengthened.

Caroline McGreal, Tanner Romanian Mission, pointed out that now there is less money available, maybe people will do more of this on-the-ground work, which may be more sustainable than 'projects' etc. Brenda agreed with this and said that, for her, its more about empowering people.

ROLE OF FOREIGN NGOS

Tanya Buynovskya, HealthProm: foreigners coming to the region play an important role in promoting empowerment and advocacy and can show parents how to become active and demonstrate. Sooner or later NGOs will have to leave and they need to leave this knowledge behind through these methods.

John said that in Romania it has been difficult to speak up and this has been left to foreigners, but to some extent this is changing.

Fiona pointed out that because of the passion of many people working in the area, they often tend to rush in and often do not take the time to find local partners etc.

Delia noted that it is important to find local skills and organisations in order to expand your influence [as an NGO] on local families and communities. The ripple effects from this will hopefully help sustainability.

Maia Ryan (of Genesis) said that outside support is still needed. She mentioned particularly the area of street children – many social orphans start out as street children and this area needs to be prioritised.

NGO CO-OPERATION

- Brenda argued that there is **no collusion between groups**. Some get a lot of aid while others were getting none at all. How do we get a balance?
- Frances Haworth, Comber, informed the floor that there was an **Eastern European Aid & Development Network** being set up by Comber and other groups working in the region, and all groups are invited to join this network aimed at **improving communication and practice**.

Debbie said that in her past experience there had been communication difficulties when working with other groups on fundraising projects. She also mentioned the importance of the 'poor orphan' for the purpose of fundraising. Mairead suggested that we re-educate the media as this story can be over simplistic and people are becoming de-sensitized to it.

John said that the key to making the Eastern European Network work is that no one organisation is the 'boss' and that it should be a communication exercise. John also asked if anyone had any ideas for the next decade so that we can avoid the same mistakes and barriers.

Mairead argued that in relation to advocacy, it is easier to deal with one or two groups than with many different ones -it is easier to get ideas across this way.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Jane: By working together we can achieve more – informal contact is important.

John: Agreed with Jane – communication of some kind is needed between groups.

Brenda: Agreed with John and Jane. We need to come together as colleagues and go home as friends.

Debbie: We need to keep going no matter how slow progress may be.

Fiona: Emphasised the importance of local and international partnerships and thanked all the delegates for attending the conference.

Delia: Supports all the initiatives mentioned.

Mairead: There is still more to do and challenges ahead, such as the recession and resistance to change. She said that there are opposing views within the EU. We need to be connected but not take on more work. She would welcome suggestions as to how Europe could become more involved. Working with local groups is crucial.

Closing comments from floor:

- Michaela Ionescu from the Embassy of Romania said that the conference had been very illuminating and that the Romanian government is appreciative of the efforts of Irish NGOs.
- Simon Walsh from Chernobyl Children's Trust suggested that we set up a web-based forum for members to communicate through – groups could say where they are working and what they do. His organisation (working in Belarus) is willing to facilitate organisations.
- Angela Parvu from Moldova Vision encouraged people to keep going with their work, and even if they save one person's or one family's life then it is worth all the hard work.
- Marian Connolly from the Parents of Adopted Romanian Children said that children are still traumatized from living in institutions and that hopefully no one in the future will have ever experienced living in an institution.