

ALFACA II

Improving reception and care for unaccompanied children by structurally increasing the quality and quantity of family based care



SUSTAINABLE RECEPTION FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Lessons learned while building a
sustainable system
of family based care

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Introduction

The Alternative Family Care (ALFACA) II project started in February 2018 and will proceed until July 2019. Its main focus is improving reception and care for unaccompanied children, by structurally increasing the quality and quantity of the family based care that can be offered to them. The project partners are in the following countries: Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Italy. They are supported by the knowledge and experience available at Nidos, the Dutch guardianship institution for unaccompanied children and are leading the project. During the project, practical knowledge about the state of the art on providing family based care for unaccompanied children is collected and shared with the participating countries. By improving the system of family based care, more children can be placed in a family, which is also one of the goals of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a former unaccompanied child put it while being interviewed under this project,

“Most of the former unaccompanied children I know lacked a network when they turned 18.

Reception families play a crucial role in this, as they have a natural relationship with the child which often continues after they turn 18.”

The cooperating partners have conducted expert meetings in their countries, where various actors working with, or aiming to work with, reception in families met and discussed the current situation of family based care and its future developments. The partners used the information gained, together with the results of desk research, to write a country report on the current state of family based care. A SWOT analysis was also done, and recommendations were made on steps that are needed to create a sustainable system of family based care. Although the situation in every country differs, similarities in themes have been found.

The most important recommendations¹ that came out of the project are the following:

Child participation

Taking into account what unaccompanied children think is very important. Therefore, much attention has been paid to child participation by including their opinions in partner meetings, expert meetings and the country reports. Although the importance of child participation is recognised by all partners, it has proved to be difficult to actually put into practice. Privacy legislation, permission refused by the child’s legal guardian, and the idea that involving the child might burden them are all reasons for not speaking to children and asking them for their input, despite a child’s willingness to share their experiences and views. As a former unaccompanied child put it:

“All other unaccompanied children I met were always willing to contribute and to share their views and experiences, which should encourage professionals to reach out to them and take account of their opinions..... When you let children participate, it is important to share with them afterwards what has been done with their input, so they feel they are being taken seriously. They can be disappointed and discouraged if they don’t receive feedback, and might not be willing to participate the next time.”

¹ The country reports provide a complete overview of the state of the art in Belgium, Italy, Cyprus, Greece and Croatia. Find more information about the ALFACA II project here: <https://engi.eu/projects/alfaca-ii/>

Improving the system and the legislative framework

All partner countries have formulated recommendations for legislation on the protection and reception of unaccompanied children. They emphasise the importance of establishing in national legislation the right to reception in families. In Greece, Italy and Croatia, where new laws have recently been adopted, the implementation of legislation is not yet completely ensured. Partners emphasise the need for embedding legislation and good practices in policy, or improving existing policies in order to make family based care sustainable. To support further sustainability, the project partners also address the need to structurally allocate economic resources to family based care.

“However, even without the legislative framework, adoption of adequate implementation mechanisms and the formulation of a child protection system from an alternative family care perspective in policy terms, could also provide fruitful outcomes. Such developments would represent a common understanding on alternative family care and would contest the current model of institutional care. In addition, non-public actors’ experience and best practices in the foster care field could help steer the Greek state in that direction.”

Greece

“Create a clear strategy (plan) for capacity building of alternative care for unaccompanied children.”

Croatia

“The first thing to be done in order to improve alternative family care is to invest in foster care at all levels (national, regional and municipal). The problems are, on the one hand, the lack of resources, and on the other, their allocation. At a national level, more resources should be devoted to the protection of unaccompanied children in general, specifically to foster care. Law 47/2017 is undoubtedly a positive development, but what it lacks is the provision of additional resources to better achieve the protection of foreign unaccompanied children. Unfortunately, the current Italian government has totally different priorities, and is going to decrease the resources allocated to the migrant reception system in general.”

Italy

Developing methodology

All partners have formulated the need to further improve and develop the methodology of family based care in their countries. Adapting and adjusting ALFACA materials to the specific situation in a partner country can help to build a sustainable system in which more children are placed in families.

“Facilitate the harmonisation of processes and activities in everyday practice (support from the mobile team of experienced professionals, including cultural mediators).”

Croatia

“Accelerate foster procedures: for instance, by reducing the waiting list of unaccompanied children that need to be placed in reception families and minimising delays in payment of the foster care allowance.”

Cyprus

Cooperation, networking and sharing good practices

In the country reports, all project partners state their intention to facilitate more and improved collaboration with various relevant actors in the field. Cooperation and sharing at a European level has helped the partners to learn from each other’s challenges and good practices. It has enabled them to see the matter from a different perspective and is therefore to be recommended.

The expert meetings in partner countries that were held under the project brought together relevant professionals who work with unaccompanied children. Not only were these meetings very informative, they also served as opportunities for the professionals to share knowledge and good practices, and this networking resulted in positive synergies. The outcomes of an evaluation of these meetings showed that the participants highly valued the information exchange.

“Cooperation between public entities and civil society should be enhanced to make projects more effective; in particular, public entities could delegate some phases of the fostering process (i.e. training, recruitment or support) to non-profit organisations, according to the principle of subsidiary.”

Italy

“An additional recommendation on this issue would be to consider the adoption of a common framework for optimal networking between all state authorities and collaborating actors, with a special focus on a clear division of duties and labour, and the perfection of cooperation protocols, in order to facilitate the coordination of procedures.”

Greece

Academic involvement

The project partners stated that cooperation with universities to evaluate, improve and develop the system, policies and practices is valuable for building a sustainable system of family based care. Scientific research is recommended, not only to further develop family based care, but also to convince policymakers that family care is better for children than institutional care.

“Scientific research in the field: HFC can establish a research collaboration with several universities that could, in turn, lead to further scientific research in the field of alternative family care in Cyprus. Making assessments and analysing needs could help provide breakthroughs or suggestions for improvements to the foster care system in Cyprus.”

Cyprus

“The continuation of scientific research on family based care is of great value for improving the quality of the support or guidance offered by foster care agencies.”

Belgium

Raising awareness and recruiting families

The country reports stress that the recruitment of suitable reception families and promotion of family based care require ongoing attention. To do so, it is necessary to raise public awareness and educate society on unaccompanied children and their needs. Not only to recruit more families, as recommended in Greece, Belgium and Cyprus, but also to achieve acceptance, social inclusion and cultural diversity, necessary in Croatia and Italy.

“On a national level, there is an ongoing need for reception families for unaccompanied children. The foster care agencies therefore recommend continuous awareness-raising activities to inform Belgian citizens about family based care for unaccompanied children. Recruiting more reception families is the most important recommendation.”

Belgium

“Public sensitisation on the concept of alternative family care. Promotion of the programme among ethnic communities.”

Greece

Supporting reception families

All partners formulated recommendations on training and support for reception families. The main goals of this specific guidance are to better equip the family for the daily care of the child and to prevent breakdowns of placements. This is done by providing information about the background and position of unaccompanied children.

“Enhancement of peer support for former and current foster parents and eligible foster families. A mix of experienced and inexperienced foster carers in the training and information sessions could provide opportunities for good practice sharing and support mechanisms.”

Cyprus

“For Flanders, there is a strong recommendation to implement more trauma-based care, creating a specific form of guidance for the unaccompanied children and the foster families. The use of cross-border networking should be improved and increased; contacting and involving the biological family of the child is of great value to the guidance. The agencies also need to create the possibility of a ‘support family’ for the foster family of the unaccompanied child, so the upbringing can be shared and the foster family can sometimes have a break from the child but still continue to care for them.”

Belgium

Capacity building of professionals

The country reports describe the need for further improvement of the knowledge and skills of professionals working with reception families. This can be done, for example, through training and peer support.”

“As to human resources, the professionals at public social services need training that will build on their skills and expertise (e.g. intercultural or legal skills), in order to adapt their psychosocial and educational interventions to unaccompanied children’s special needs. Non-profit organisations operating in the field of child and family care should also upgrade staff skills, if necessary.”

Italy

“Further improvement of cultural competences, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural, child-friendly communication.”

Croatia

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