



Committee on the Rights of the Child

Day of General Discussion

**"Implementing child rights in early childhood"**

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**Submission by SOS Kinderdorf International**

with contributions from

SOS Kinderdorf International Continental Office for  
CEE/CIS/Baltics,

SOS Children's Villages Bosnia and Herzegovina,  
Home of Books for Children, Albania.

Over the last five decades, SOS Children's Villages has been implementing programs whose primary beneficiaries are children in need and has, in this process, gathered a tremendous wealth of experience of interacting with children in their early years; SOS Children's Villages recognises the critical importance of this period in a child's life during which the most rapid and crucial developments take place.

This status paper presents some of the programmes carried out or initiated by SOS Children's Villages to address the needs of infants and very young children in the CEE/CIS/Baltics. SOS Kinderdorf International is an independent non-governmental social development organisation, which is active in 132 different countries and territories. SOS Kinderdorf International is the umbrella organisation to which all national SOS Children's Villages are affiliated. SOS Children's Villages offers family-based care to children who have lost their parents or who are unable to live with them. The children are usually admitted to the SOS Children's Villages when they are in the age group of 0-10 years, and are then subsequently supported till they become independent. Therefore, training of SOS mothers comprises an important part on early childhood care and education. Besides SOS Children's Villages, SOS Social Centres also offer child care programs aimed at preventing child abandonment.

Throughout the world, 268 SOS Kindergartens have been established in countries where pre-school facilities do not exist or are in short supply. Open to children from both the SOS Children's Villages and local neighbourhood, these kindergartens offer access to early learning and supervised play facilities that are otherwise not available. Currently, 22,000 children benefit from these pre-school programmes and priority is given to children from disadvantaged families. The teaching methods employed and the games used at the SOS Kindergartens are based on the universally recognised didactic models of Friedrich Fröbel and Maria Montessori taking into due account the cultural requirements of the country concerned and also, often on official didactic models. These kindergartens are generally perceived as leading institutions for the quality of education imparted among peers learning centres in most countries.

The SOS KDI Regional Office for Southern Africa has drafted a Kindergarten handbook, which gives some guidance for the functioning of SOS Kindergartens. Among others things, the SOS Kindergartens should:

- identify children's individual needs and encourage each child to develop at his/her own pace;
- acknowledge the advantages of allowing the child to control his/her own learning processes through exercising choices and individual decisions;
- promote learning through play and ensuring a relaxed and non-threatening learning environment;
- promote a creative environment where both staff and children are encouraged to make use of limited resources.

This paper presents selected case studies from the CEE/CIS/Baltics region. The case studies organised under the theme "starting sound practices early" range from pre-school education in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a child's library in Albania and a Playbus program in a few countries of the region. Some recommendations for further development and improvement of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes are also included in an annex.

## **PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**The importance of pre-school education is often underestimated and therefore remains underdeveloped even though it vitally contributes to the development and broadening the range of children's learning experiences. According to a UNESCO policy brief, "studies (...) have documented that children who have received quality care and early educational opportunities perform substantially better academically, whether they are being raised in Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America, or Europe".<sup>1</sup>**

The SOS Social Centre in Sarajevo is located in a dull suburban area with no green spaces, no sports grounds and playgrounds. However, it offers a wide range of services and extracurricular activities people could not afford otherwise. A major initiative of the SOS Social Centre was a pilot project addressing the needs of children coming from socially most vulnerable families. Most of these families suffer from unemployment or have very low income and can therefore not pay kindergarten fees.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, only four per cent of pre-school age children are being taken care of by government pre-school services; seven government kindergartens were closed down during the last six months for financial reasons. The Medium Term Development Strategy (PRSP) highlighted insufficient budgetary support and insufficient inclusion of all children, especially in rural areas as some of the problems of pre-school education in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>2</sup>. According to UNDP statistics, the enrolment of children from poor families (1,1 %) is dramatically lower than the enrolment of children coming from families of higher socioeconomic status (5, 6 %)<sup>3</sup>. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that preschool education in kindergartens is expensive (up to 100 euros per month) and that no facility with free places accepts children of pre-school age whose parents are unemployed. These fees are usually unaffordable for most financially disadvantaged families.

The project targets children aged 3-6 years. This pilot project was used to assess the pre-school educational needs of children coming from families at risk (social, financial and other psychological factors) and families who run the risk of child abandonment or neglect. This project is also meant to provide social and psychological support to families at risk by supporting socialization, creativity, language and speech skills, development of interactive communication, and emotional development... The curriculum is based on monthly themes planned in relation for instance, with the seasons or certain events and in accordance with the needs and interests of the children. The children learn to accept each other; to be together and to work in groups. They are being supported in learning how to recognize and name colours, geometric shapes, spatial relations (left-right)/...

According to local child-rearing patterns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mothers who are unemployed are supposed to stay at home and take care of the children. This might have contributed to the specific needs of younger children not being satisfied since it is generally regarded unusual to support children of that age by any kind of institutional day care setting.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Policy Briefs on Early Childhood, n°18, Dec.2003  
[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file\\_download.php/edcf5d795f3efaada5775d2861f999c1Brief+18+English+ECCE+inequity.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/edcf5d795f3efaada5775d2861f999c1Brief+18+English+ECCE+inequity.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> This paper is available on the website of the Poverty reduction strategy paper in Bosnia and Herzegovina  
<http://www.bih.prsp.info/knjiga/ZA-WEB/english/index2.htm>

<sup>3</sup> These data can be found on the website of UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina:  
<http://www.undp.ba/MDG/education.pdf> (p. 4)

An important aspect of this program was also to work in partnership with parents to create continuity between the home and the pre-school setting. Parents started encouraging their children, as they understood that young children need ongoing praise and reassurance and lots of support and encouragement. A corner of the play room is dedicated to the parents so that they can take part in discussion groups focussing on issues such as family communication, educational problems, and legal advice.

### **The PLAYBUS PROGRAM in CEE/CIS/Baltics**

**The right to engage in play and recreational activities is often underestimated, though it critically supports the child's development and increases the chances of children to fully participate in their own development. The learning needs of younger children are different in nature compared to those of children in the school age range. Children of that age need to learn through play instead of being taught, and the child educators should be sensitive to the ways in which children learn. Play is a central part of learning at this stage.**

The initiative started in Albania in September 1999 during the crisis in Kosovo and at a time when many refugees were still in Albania. It was started as a means of providing rehabilitation to traumatised children and of dealing with the unstable situation. The project was then extended to a few other countries of CEE/CIS/Baltics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine and Romania. The Playbus complements the experience of kindergartens and schools in the region and contributes with additional educational know-how and methodology.

A Playbus can be compared to a “**social center on wheels**” and provides games and materials of all sorts organised by a team of child educators. The bus travels the country and offers recreational activities to children of all ages and particularly younger children through visits to kindergartens. The team creates a temporary playground - indoor or outdoor - in parks, hospitals, orphanages, schools or kindergartens.

The child education objectives of the project can be described as follows:

- The Playbus program gives the children a chance to interact with adults **like equal partners**. By following the children's lead in maintaining a positive attitude and having fun together, adults will help children develop a positive attitude toward themselves and others as play partners. Children learn through social interaction with other adults and other children.
- **Interaction between older and younger children** is an important element of the project and helps the development of younger children. The younger children get inspired by older children whereas the older ones take pride in helping the younger ones.
- **Learning through play**: Playing provides opportunities for exploration and experimentation which are essential to acquire knowledge and develop representational thought. In the early years of childhood, it is especially necessary to offer children uncomplicated activities. The games are pedagogically designed to help children break down communication barriers. The children learn to solve problems in

another way and extend their abilities to communicate ideas and feelings in a variety of ways. Moreover, the children improve their social skills, develop new skills and acquire knowledge in a joyful way.

- **Opportunities to develop independence:** children play in an environment where they can be themselves. Sometimes, young children are overprotected and it is good for them to get involved in activities which challenge them. They can invent their own games and they can change the program of the day by expressing their wishes. For adults, this often involves negotiating a balance between the younger child's struggle to achieve independence and his/her need for ongoing emotional support.
- One of the elements of children's participation is **to give tailored information to children**, and to empower them through knowledge. The playbus team establishes special activities to give clear information to children about issues that are usually poorly addressed (HIV/AIDS, sexual education, racism, prevention of drug and substance abuse) and to inform them about their rights.

An important success factor for this program was the cooperation with the kindergarten staff and, wherever possible with the parents so that they would continue this kind of activities with the children after the Playbus team had left. The program helps parents to understand the importance of play for the development of their children. They receive information about the importance of games, what children learn through playing and how they can support their children by offering games and arts and crafts activities. It is important to note that the project's focus on infants and younger children was developed **with the participation of families and within the community** since they are the central social actors when it comes to a child's growth and development.

### **The HOME FOR BOOKS in Tirana, Albania**

**Research shows that reading and visiting libraries from an early age on can bring clearly benefit children in terms of developing language skills, improving literacy levels and providing a sound basis to future educational achievement as well as introducing young children to the delights of books and reading. It is important to start reading activities early to prevent illiteracy. Reading will then help the children to develop their own vocabulary, to develop their imagination and their creative skills and to respect other cultures.**

In 2000, SOS Kinderdorf International supported the creation of a children's library in the center of Tirana; that support continues to this day. The project was suggested by the Albanian section of **IBBY** (International Board of Books for the Youth)<sup>4</sup> and is run based on the experience of IBBY to promote the pleasure of reading.

Apart from local literature, the library also has a range of books in other languages and offers leisure time activities such as pottery, painting, and computing. More than 1000 children have already registered at the library. In order to reach children in the suburbs, the team uses the system of portable libraries, which consist of large suitcases containing a wide range of books.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ibby.org/>

The library is designed in such a way that it is accessible to younger children. For younger children, a corner was designed based on the tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in order to create an appropriate environment for story-telling, theatre plays and puppet shows. The library is housed in a big room so that younger children can run around and move freely; at home, space is usually limited. An exhibition of children's drawings was organised based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child and according to the following themes: "I am", "My family", "My future", "I have the right to".

Such services should not be considered as a luxury but should be promoted and supported especially in Albania, where the population is younger on average than in other European countries (a third of the country's 3, 1 Million inhabitants is under the age of 15)<sup>5</sup>. The role of introducing children to reading played by such facilities will help support the learning process of children when they start the first years of primary school. The creation of this children's library clearly fills a gap in the capital city and even in the country and is also an attempt to keep the children off streets.

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<sup>5</sup> World CIA Factbook 2002, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its long experience in Early Child Development programmes, SOS Kinderdorf International would like to make the following recommendations:

- SOS Kinderdorf International calls on governments to implement the goals stated in the resolution adopted in May 2002 by the UN General Assembly- "*A World fit for children*": “**to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, for girls and boys, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children**” (39 (a)). Special attention should be given to children from poor and marginalized families. To achieve this goal, governments must “*strengthen early childhood care and education by providing services, developing and supporting programmes directed towards families, legal guardians, caregivers and communities*” (40 (8)).
- SOS Kinderdorf International would like to recall the different **principles** which should be part of early childhood care and education programmes in order to successfully respond to the needs of young children:
  - The children have to **learn through play** and not being taught;
  - The children have to receive information on important issues in a language they can easily understand;
  - The adults must interact with them as **equal partners**;
  - The programmes have to be developed together **with parents and within the community**, as these people remain the central social actors when it comes to child development, especially at that particular age.