

EMPOWERING CARE LEAVERS IN EUROPE

Thanks a lot for having invited me to this event and for giving SOS the chance of sharing its experience and recommendations to empower care leavers.

First of all, let me briefly introduce SOS CVI. We are a federation of 118 national organisations working all over the world to ensure children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care do not grow up alone.

As you know, data on our target group are pretty scattered, but the estimation is that 1 out of 10 children in the world grow up without the loving care of their parents.

Through our programmes, we take a holistic approach to child care, starting from the prevention of families' separation and providing programmes to strengthen families, providing alternative care for children and young people when the separation from their families is considered necessary, and supporting them in going back to their family of origin or, when this is not possible, to leave care and to start independent life.

Our work is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the child and by the UN Guidelines on the alternative care of children.

When it comes to young people leaving care, SOS has developed a strong expertise through its programmes and research, in supporting them in this phase of their lives, ensuring they get the right support and guidance to start a successful independent life.

Unfortunately, we know that it is not always easy to start a successful independent life as we could observe through the research we published in 2018 about the employment conditions of care leavers in 12 countries around the world.

Indeed, across the participating countries, a familiar story emerged as young people leaving care appear to be experiencing even more hardships in terms of preparation and participation in social and economic life. For these young people, the transition to adulthood is often more difficult than that of their peers.

Indeed, while legislation is in place to protect children and young people without adequate parental care when they are under 18, the research shows that legislative and practical support falls away dramatically as soon as they turn 18.

At a time where young people remain dependent on their families for longer, due to the growing social and economic insecurity, young people ageing out of alternative care arrangements are required to become fully independent and self-reliant at a relatively early age. In fact, this age corresponds to the end of legal entitlements to child care and support, rather than their actual level of maturity and readiness to step into independent living.

What we have observed is that there is a glaring lack of visibility of young people leaving care as a group in policy terms, which is consequently reflected in the (lack of) data collection and monitoring of the numbers and outcomes after leaving care, and in the support services available to them.

On one hand, the lack of recognition of young people leaving care as a vulnerable group in policy terms often leads to neglect and rights violations.

On the other hand, national data collection is often fragmented or non-existent, making it difficult to have oversight of the size of the population and the unique needs of care leavers.

It also prevents the monitoring of trends, as well as the impact of social protection and care services on the chances of young people, who spent time in alternative care, to develop their full potential for successful integration in society and the labour market.

Overall, the risk of labour market and social exclusion is especially high for young people who have spent time in care, who are often left alone and ill-equipped to step into independent living when their care placements end.

Additionally, in Europe, numerous studies have highlighted similarly that people with care experience are amongst the most socially excluded groups and are at greater risk of poor outcomes in education, health, employment, criminality, mental health and social functioning in general as compared to the wider population.

Leaving the formal alternative care system is an important phase for both young people and the service providers responsible for their care and development.

All the efforts and investments made throughout the child's alternative care path risk being rendered futile if the preparation for leaving care, the transition out of care and aftercare services fail to provide the individualised support the young person needs.

Together with 11 partners, SOS Children's Villages International designed two projects that were granted funding from the European Commission (DG Justice) and that aimed at developing and implementing a state-of-the-art training programme for care professionals who work directly with young people leaving care in order to equip them with the skills, knowledge and tools they need to work with young people in transition.

Creating a supporting network for care leavers as well as awareness raising and advocacy activities were part of the projects as well.

In the course of different project activities, we have listened to the voices of young people with care experience from ten European Union countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Spain.

Through peer-to-peer interviews, these young people have shared what worked for them during the leaving care process, what should remain the same and what should change, as well as what skills, knowledge and experience people who work with care leavers need to have.

The findings tell us that care leavers experience a range of emotions when leaving their place of care: a mix of happiness and expectations of freedom and independence along with feelings of loneliness, anxiety and, sometimes, fear.

Care leavers have concerns about their protection, inadequate levels of support, the unsatisfactory manner in which support is offered, lack of access to services, and insufficient participation in decision-making. They feel their needs and wishes are not being fully met by those responsible for supporting them through the care leaving process.

From these findings the Prepare for Leaving Care Practice Guidance and Training Manual were developed in partnership with CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Children's care and protection).

To date, this training has reached over 1,000 care professionals in the ten European countries participating in the project.

Not only were young people with care experience participating in developing the training material, but they were also co-delivering the training at national level.

This participatory approach gives care professionals the opportunity to hear first-hand how young people are experiencing the leaving care process and to reflect together on how to improve these experiences for future generations of care leavers.

Participants of the training greatly valued the participation of young people as co-trainers and said that *"Now I have new tools for working with young people, and I will use them"* and *'This kind of training has made me reflect out of the bubble.'*

Similarly to the care leavers who collaborated in the project of Agevolando, the young care leavers who took part in the SOS projects, launched, in June 2019 a „Call to Action“ to ensure that NO CARE LEAVER IS LEFT BEHIND

It was really interesting but not surprising to discover so much commonalities between the SOS Call to Action and the recommendations put together by the Care Leavers' network.

The issues of emotional and financial stability, the possibility to easily access to legal and financial support, the continuation of the relation with the family of origin (siblings should not separated because one of them is ageing out of care) or with the caregiver, and the possibility of fulfil their dreams and make mistakes (as we all did when we were in our 20ies) are common elements that we can find in the two calls.

As service providers, we need to ensure that these call and recommendations do not remain unheard and that, through our programmes, we respond to the need of the young leavers and we adjust our actions according to the needs and challenges that have been commonly identified.

Accordingly, in my opinion, two elements are really important to ensure that we are listening and providing the right answers:

- First of all, we need to be flexible in our actions, and be ready to adjust our projects according to the needs and challenges identified by the care leavers.

This is exactly what we experienced when we launched the Prepare for Leaving Care project.

Indeed, in the concept proposal we had flagged the „meaningful participation“ of young leavers, but it was while working with a group of young leavers between 16 and 24 yo that we realised that what we had planned was not really relevant for them, so we had to adjust the first proposal and keep adjusting the project throughout its duration to ensure that young people felt listened and respected, and so ensuring their meaningful participation

- Secondly, and this is strictly connected to the first point, we need to continue to work in partnership, among service providers in order to learn from each other, and share challenges and best practices, and, as already mentioned, with care leavers, in order to better target our actions.

Thanks a lot for your attention 😊