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STEP TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE CHILD CARE: ANALYSIS OF CHILD CARE DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION COMPONENTS (BASED ON THE RESEARCH IN VIDZEME REGION, LATVIA)

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Abstract. A child is the smallest and the most vulnerable part of the society to whom only a family has the ability to provide the most sincere attitude and a personalized approach. However, many children for various reasons still have been left without parental care and are under the guardian of state institutions. An alternative to institutional care is childcare deinstitutionalization. Its objective is to provide a child care as similar as possible to that of a family. It means decreasing the number of children in institutions and increasing number of children in alternative care forms, developing basic services to ensure the necessary processes of child's daily development, child supervision and protection, and supporting parents.

The aim of this article is to examine what basic components of child DI are used in Vidzeme region child care institutions fully, partially or are not in use, using the simulation model in the simulation program STELLA created by Kristine Legzdina in her Master Thesis. To obtain the necessary data, were used methods such as- interviews with the heads of Vidzeme residential care, questionnaires were distributed to the employees of residential care and Vidzeme planning region municipalities having at least one residential care facility situated on their territory. After the simulation model verification, it was validated through an expert validation method.

Key words: Childcare DI; Planning model; Discrete event simulation
JEL code. I3 Welfare, Well-Being, and Poverty**.**

Introduction

Institutional and out-of-family care became more relevant along with the application for the accession to the European Union. A part of the criteria was introduced in 2004. However, deinstitutionalisation (DI) of childcare cannot be regarded as regulated. The topicality of this issue is of cyclical nature determined by the alarming information on out-of-family care published in the media. In 2015, this issue was raised by the study published by the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia on the placement of institutionalised children in psychoneurological hospitals which from the local governments' point of view seemed to be a much more financially viable "type of care", because in such cases it is the state's duty to cover the costs related to these children. Although the physical size of institutions is being reduced, the total number of institutionalised children is still high. According to the data of the Ministry of Welfare, the number of institutionalised children under two years of age has decreased twice during the last two years. For comparison: in 2012, there were 196 institutionalised children of this age, in 2013 — 166, in 2014 — 115, in 2015 — 102, but as of 1 November 2016 — 80 children. These data require additional studies to assess the overall situation, because the data of the Central Statistical Bureau regarding the terminated custody rights indicate a reduction in the number of cases. Overall, as of 1 January 2016, 7200 children under 18 years of age were in out-of-family care in Latvia. Out of those children, 1207 lived in foster care, 3757 were under guardianship and the other 2236 lived in social houses (Ministry of Welfare; Paparde, 2016).

According to the practice of other countries, two directions of development are possible. One of them is placement of children in families. Implementation of this approach is attempted by several Latvian local governments, where it has proven to be rather successful as acknowledged by the Ombudsman. These local governments include Rucava, Priekule, Alsunga, Mersrags, Adazi, Malpils, Krimulda, Beverina, Naukseni, Cesvaine, Rugaji, Baltinava and Karsava (Zvirbulis, 2015). At the same time, some local governments do not include any families prepared to accept a child taken into state custody. Such cases require implementation of the other direction of development proposing to

form SOS children's villages based on family ties. There are only two of those in Latvia — in Valmiera and Islice (amalgamated municipality of Bauska).

Two major issues should be addressed — development of sustainable strategies at the level of decision-makers and change in the attitude of people working on everyday basis with children left without parental care. The first of these requirements arises due to the fact that when the policy changes more often than electoral cycles, it means that the policy is unstable — in such situation, not only residents find it hard to plan for the future, but also childcare institutions have difficulty implementing targeted measures and relying on their sustainability. Thus, the succession is broken.

To develop the Master's thesis, K. Legzdina (Legzdina, 2016) used interviews with heads of childcare institutions in Vidzeme Region as one of her research methods. As a result, these interviews revealed their lack of faith in the DI process of childcare. Certainly, it may be due to a number of reasons; however, the relevant workers need to have a clear vision suggesting that the move towards DI will be inevitable. Several heads of institutions seemed to believe that the DI process could be bypassed. The indecisiveness of decision-makers on childcare issues is implied also by the Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare, Liga Abolina, who claimed at that time (November 2016) that the Saeima was reviewing amendments to the Social Services and Social Assistance Law to determine that children may be placed in institutions only in crisis situations and children under 4 years of age can be held in institutions no longer than six months. The same issue was reviewed in the same way back when the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs still existed (in 2008). The issue was reviewed then and is again being reviewed now which raises the question — what are the factors preventing decision-makers from making a decision? Also, as shown by the practice in Latvia, the average stay of a child in out-of-family childcare institutions lasts 2 to 6 years, but 12 % of children stay in these institutions for more than 10 years (Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 2015).

The second factor requiring immediate action is the change in the attitude of workers. The Master's thesis prepared by K. Legzdiņa revealed that almost a half of the workers surveyed in the institutions of Vidzeme Region believe that the children landed in institutional care are less able than the ones growing up in families (Legzdina, 2016). This is one of the factors tending to prevent families from accepting any form of custody over a child growing up in institutions, and information campaigns and support groups are used as an attempt to overcome this fear. Then why do we try to convince the society of how wrong this statement is if even the workers representing this sector do not believe in that? Furthermore, also orphan's courts have the same attitude problem. The Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia arrived to a similar conclusion in the report of 11.11.2016. The analysis of extracts from the decisions of orphan's courts on taking a child into custody creates an impression that it is also necessary to raise awareness among orphan's courts on child's need for family care and educate these courts on objectives of the DI process and achievable results. The following is one of the many examples included in the report of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia: *"A baby girl (2 months old) together with her brother (15 months old) was taken from their family. The grandmother expressed orally her wish to become a guardian of these children, but she never submitted the relevant documents. The orphan's court concluded that the most suitable way to provide out-of-family care is to place the children in an institution until the orphan's court would find a guardian or a foster family. Both of them were placed together in a state social care centre (VSAC). As soon as the brother reached 2 years of age, the children were separated*

because the brother was placed in a municipal children's home."

If the only people left to care for a child have a negative attitude, then we also cannot expect a positive change in the attitude of children themselves. The child will always be the one to be affected the most by this situation. All parties engaged in this sector must understand that a failure to make decisions and strive towards a life of dignity for everyone is irresponsible. If irresponsible parents are denied the right to their children, particular responsibility must be assumed by decision-making and executive institutions that have been entrusted by the society and state with the duty to care for those who cannot fend for themselves.

Concept of childcare DI

DI concept in sociology is originally a movement that advocates the transfer of mentally disabled people from public or private institutions back to their families or into community-based homes. While concentrated primarily on mentally ill people, currently the concept may also describe similar transfers involving prisoners, orphans, or other individuals previously confined to institutions (Britannica).

There is no single internationally accepted definition of alternative childcare, however, it can be divided into formal and informal. The formal care refers to the care where the child is given the family environment- it can be both public and private sector institutions, such as group homes. The informal alternative care is a care which is not supported by the State, but by the relatives or other families (Roby, 2011). DI is often understood too simply - with closing of institutions (Europeran Expert Group, 2012). The United Nations Children's Fund (or UNICEF) highlights that simple closing of institutions does not mean DI. First of all, DI can be defined as the process of transformation planning, which, by closing or reducing the number of institutions, opens services which are focused on the outcome.

Those standards require that institutional care is one option among others and is used in the best interests of a child- meeting his/her needs and providing adequate living conditions (UNICEF, 2010). However, this definition does not cover everything. It is possible to understand the DE process only by understanding its basic components. To create a childcare DI simulation model, feasibility studies – literature studies- were carried out, as a result of which the childcare DI basic components have been identified.

Since the alternative childcare is a relatively new approach both in Latvia and world-wide, there are no ready-made simulation models, which can be picked up and used as an example. The fact whether the selected criteria can be considered as the childcare DI basic components was verified by the author by carrying out an interview with several experts.

The developed simulation model not only helps to determine the implementation level of the DI process, but also allows taking a look at the components that require or don't require further financial contributions.

Verification of simulation model

Verification of the simulation model shall be carried out in order to avoid gaps in the model, which could affect the real system coverage. The simulation model shall be able to cover the system (Hillstone, 2003). Of course, a well-covered system is a very subjective point of view; therefore the model validation usually takes place after the model verification. During these studies, the simulation model verification was carried out in three rounds.

In all three rounds the model has slightly changed, because functional weaknesses of the model have been found during the verification. The main errors appeared in mathematical formulas of model converters.

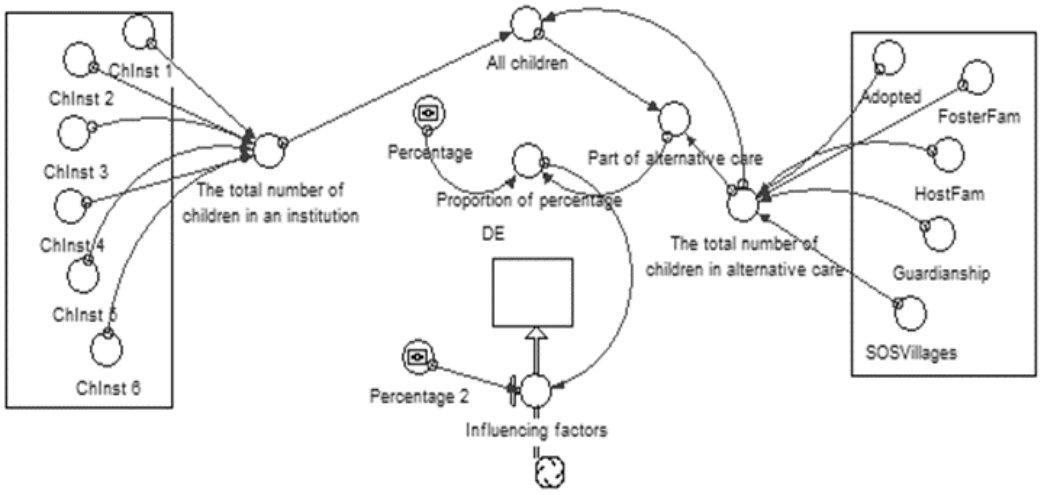

Fig.1 **The upper part of the model**

Since the model is formed in the range from 0 to 1, the data should generate in the same amplitude. At the original version the data was generating also in the minus amplitude. After formula function testing, the simulation model was divided into two smaller parts in order to understand whether they generate accurate data. The lower part of the simulation model worked accurately. In order to verify it, three different values were entered in the converter of each component. By entering "*0.33 Value_education*", in the converted *education* should appear 0.33. By entering "*0.20 Value_education*", in the converted *education* should appear 0.13, according to adopted IF / THEN / IF formula. By entering the value "*0 Value_education*", in the converted *education* should appear 0. Further on the upper part of the model was tested. It could not be maintained in its original version, because it generated "1" in all cases without taking into account whether all of the children were placed in the institutions or only a half or less than a half of them. As the number of children was not in the range from 0 to 1, but was measurable in hundreds, it had to be modified so as to produce a number between 0 and 1.

In the flow "*Institutions",* "*The total number of children in the institution"* was divided by *"All children"*, obtaining a part as a result. This approach turned out to be wrong because there will always be "1" in the reservoir, even if the vast majority of children will be transferred to an institution, which is completely contrary to the DI. As a result, "weight" should be given to the right side- children who are placed in a family environment. Since the theory states that the placement of children in a family environment, such as moving them from an institution to the SOS village, does not mean the DI, but also all necessary services should be developed (the lower part of the model), then the author allocated a percentage breakdown to the upper and lower part. The following model was developed (Fig. 1).

As it can be seen from Fig. 1, two new converters *"Percentage"* and *"Percentage_2"* have been developed, this is the "weight" that is given to the upper and lower part of the model. Since the literature does not provide for the proportion of the "weight" of one part against the other part, the author has set it at 30 % against 70 %. However, the simulation model interface allows changing the percentage breakdown.

At the last or third phase of verification, both parts of the imitation model are combined and as a result the model starts to work. With the help of tables, which show the variables of simulation model, it can be examined whether the model is generating appropriate data.

Simulation model was developed in STELLA program. It is static, determined, based on discrete events and divided into two sectors,

where each of the sectors represents its own childcare DI characterizing block.

Validation of simulation model

In order to make sure that the developed simulation model reflects the main components of childcare DI and that the author's work is useful, the Senior Expert of the Ministry of Welfare Children and Family Policy Department was invited to an interview. Currently this expert is engaged in child care DI process development in Latvia. All in all, five questions were asked.

This interview approved the author's concerns and confirmed the facts found during the literature studies - there is a risk that the answers from the employees of childcare institutions might be not completely true, because of a fear that it might leave some consequences. Therefore, for further use of the developed simulation model the author suggests to use a variety of documents (information about accounting of staff training hours, reports on acquired knowledge, CVs, as w ell as reports of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia and other institutions), and the further research shall be made by a person whose daily life is related to this specific area.

Since the developed simulation model is quite flexible, the expert's recommendations regarding percentage can be easily adjusted. Also this requires further studies and the establishment of clear criteria for correct percentage to reduce the opportunity to manipulate with the data.

Overall, the developed simulation model is recognized to be applicable for further studies. In addition, it can be used both by the local governments in order to control their subordinate institutions, and the Ministry of Welfare in order to track the changes.

Results

The basic components of childcare DI- staff, services, support centers and monitoring

The component "Staff" includes three subcomponents, which are characterized by several criteria set out in the literature. Interface is the program level where the parameters can be easily configured. In total eight sliders have been developed where the characterizing parameters vary between 0 to 0.11 or 0.165 (depending on the variable). The next childcare DI component is "Services". It is characterized by three subcomponents – "Shelter", "Education" and "Daily life". Each of the subcomponents has a number of characteristics- seven in total. Also the values characterizing the subcomponents can be easily configured with the help of sliders. Slider parameters are set from 0 to 0.11 or 0.165.

The third childcare DI component is "Support centers". This component is characterized by five characteristic variables. In the slider it is possible to change the parameters for each of the variables in the range from 0 to 0.2.

The last of the four childcare DI components is "Monitoring". This component offers three variables. It is possible to use a slider to change the parameters for each of them. The parameters can be changed in the range from 0 to 0,33. All sliders display to what extent they are fulfilled during the operation of current simulation model. Also the sliders can be used to change the parameters.

Control panel interface

At the interface level of the childcare DI simulation model, there are two buttons for easy operation of the model and one display for results.

The button *"Run"* provides the opportunity to start the data processing of components after the input of variable data. This is also an easier and faster access to start the simulation model than the one provided within the development of the model. The button can also be used for model verification - after the input of variables it can be checked, whether the model does or does not work correctly. The button "*Start*" is made for user's convenience. Since, at the model-making level, the current childcare DI values are entered, then this button allows resetting original parameters after the changes are made. By

clicking the button "*Start*", previously made changes in the sliders will be extinguished and they will be reset to the original parameters. The display window shows the reservoir created at the model level. The reservoir shows the implementation of the childcare DI components, taking into account the totality of all components. The value of the parameter is from 0 (none of the childcare DI basic components is met) to 1 (all of the childcare DI basic components are met).

Other interface components of the simulation model

Without above-mentioned sliders and control panel, there are also 14 displays for results and two sliders. 14 displays for results show the value of each sub-component, which is not met. Such a display is set up to ease the data monitoring.

Since the components "*Staff*" and "*Services*" are characterized by several sub-indicators, then, in order not to waste time for the calculation of variables, they show the level at which each of the subcomponents is not met. After pressing the button "*Run*", the result will appear both on the DE display and on 14 displays of subcomponents, making it easy to monitor which of the components are met less and which are met more. The two proposed sliders "*Percentage*" and "*Percentage* 2" are the "weight" assigned by the author for the upper and lower part of the simulation model. In the sliders, it is possible to change this breakdown. Of course, it can be set as equal- 50/50 breakdown.

As the "weight" was added to the upper components of the simulation model, it was necessary to establish to which of the converters the given weight shall be added. Therefore several converters were created.

The converter "*The total number of children in an institution"* is the total number of all children placed in the institutions: ChInst_1+ ChInst_2+ ChInst_3+ ChInst_4+ ChInst_5+ ChInst_6.

Similarly, the converter "*The total number of children in alternative care"* is the total number of all children placed in the family environment and alternative care: Adoptees+ Guardianship+ SOSVillages+ HostFam+ FosterFam.

Both converters are counted together and are displayed in the converter "*All children*". In order to determine the proportion of children which are placed in the alternative care, a converter "*Part of alternative care*" was created.

The flow "*Influencing factors*" contains the analysis of all incoming data and transmits them to the DI reservoir, which shows the proportion from zero DI 1, in which the childcare DI is met in Vidzeme region. The flow "*Influencing factors*" is working according to the following formula: (((Support_Centers+ Monitoring+ Services+ Staff)/4)*Percentage_2)+Proportion_of_percentage.

Principles of operation of the simulation model

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the simulation program STELLA offers a number of levels to the user. This chapter describes *Model* level (level where the simulation model is created). The model consists of many converters, containing both the data acquired during the research and the encrypted data and formulas for data processing.

Converters that contain dynamic variables of the model are used for the input of data acquired during the research.

The data necessary for data input were obtained from the out-of-family care institutions in Vidzeme region and the relevant local authorities that have at least one out-of-family care institution in their territory and in their public reports. The responses acquired from the interviews and questionnaires were encoded according to the model-building principles. The model is built in the range from 0 (none of the childcare DI basic components is met) to 1 (all of the childcare DI basic components are fully met); the resulting answers were encoded in the same range. Whereas such studies previously have been performed neither in Latvia, nor in other States, the author considers that each component of the lower part of the model

(see Fig. 2) is equal to 1. Respectively each of the subcomponents forms a proportion of all components.

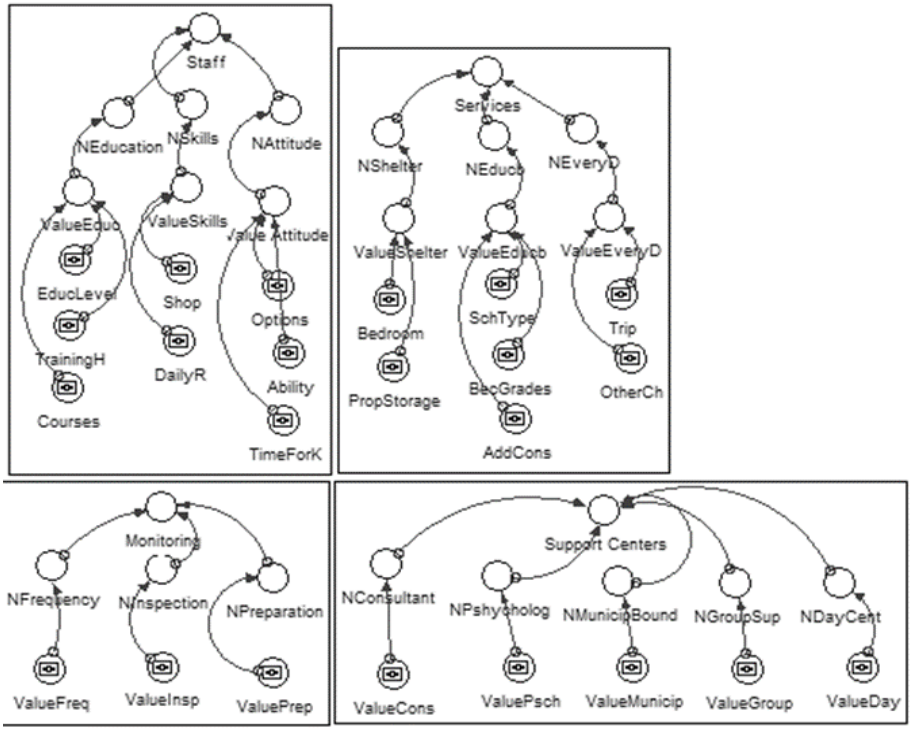

Fig. 2 **Lower part of the model**

The upper part of the childcare DI basic components consists of the number of children placed in the out-of-family care institutions in Vidzeme region (left side) – children who are placed in the institutional care. In the opposite side (right side) - children who are placed in a family environment (foster family, guardian, host family, adoption) and in alternative childcare- SOS villages. The number of children in the institutions was obtained from the interviews

carried out with the heads of the out-of-family care institutions.

The number of children in a family environment was obtained both from the Oprhan's courts of the relevant local governments and from the public reports of local governments.

Findings

From the developed childcare DI basic components simulation model it can be concluded that none of the components is met in full. However, there are a couple of subcomponents that reached the assigned peak value. These are:

- All employees of the out-of-family care institutions believe that the children who are living in these institutions have the same opportunities as the children who live in families;
- In all institutions there are no more than 4 children per bedroom;
- Each child has the opportunity to manage his/her personal things- all of them are provided with an individual cupboard;
- All out-of-family care institutions take care that the children would have the opportunities to attend various events, concerts and go outside the institution;
- In none of the out-of-family care institutions low academic results have been the reason for the child's placement in a specialized school.

The highest level of childcare DI is shown by the component *"Services"*- obtained 0,84 (or 84 %).

The childcare DI component "*Staff*" is met in the amount of 0,69 (or 69 %), which means that it is fulfilled only partially. The component does not reach full implementation because:

- Only a half of surveyed employees has higher education, besides that not all of them have comparable education to the work specifics;
- In Vidzeme region the staff training hours during the last year are considered to be insufficient (the minimum amount of training hours for childcare DI should be 40- which corresponds only to 3 of 21 employees surveyed);
- Although the surveyed employees of the out-of-family care institutions in Vidzeme region recognize that the children in the institutions are provided with the same opportunities as in the children in families, the abilities of children living in various institutions are weaker than those of children living in families (only 8 of 21 the surveyed employees recognized that they don't have enough time necessary for each child);
- The component *"Shopping"* which teaches children to handle finances and to participate in the decision making is implemented only partly.

Only 1 of 6 out-of-family care institutions ensures tutor services in cases when a child experiences difficulties with learning at school.

Childcare DI component "*Monitoring*" is fulfilled also only partly – 0,61 (or 61 %). The component does not reach full implementation because:

- The frequency of monitoring after a child's placement in a new family should be carried out at least 3- 4 times during the first year (surveyed municipalities do that 2 or fewer times a year);
- Not all of the surveyed municipalities carry out inspections of the set out DI factors, such as the children adaptation to a new environment and relations with neighbours. Also there is a risk that the inspections will not be carried out at all- if the parents are not in the sight of a social service.

In 2 of 7 surveyed municipalities not all the children are prepared for a transfer to a new family, which may lead to a situation that a child will be not ready for changes.

All childcare DI basic components together form the value of 0,71 or 71 %.

Conclusion

As a result of this research, a simulation model in the field of childcare DI was developed. Such approach for the determination of the implementation level of the childcare DI has not been used so far before. In the simulation model alternative childcare basic components and subcomponents are included. This model gives a possibility to look at the childcare situation in Vidzeme region.

The first of these requirements arises due to the fact that the policy changes often, it means that the policy is unstable — in such situation, not only residents find it hard to plan for the future, but also childcare institutions have difficulty implementing targeted measures and relying on their sustainability. From the developed childcare DI basic components simulation model it can be concluded that none of the components is met in full. The highest level of childcare DI is shown by the component "Services"- obtained 0,84 (or 84 %). The childcare DI component "Staff" is fulfilled only partially-0,69(or69 %); the same for "Monitoring" component 0,61 (or 61 %). Equally decision-makers need to observe the idea of the other direction of development proposing to form SOS children's villages based on family ties. Last but not least, childcare employees need more training of psihology to avoid thinking that the abilities of children living in various institutions are weaker than those of children living in families.

This simulation model can help both the ministries to review various development processes and local governments to understand the situation in its subordinate institutions. The usefulness of the developed model was also

recognized by the expert of the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia responsible for the children and family policy.

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