

EVALUATION OF THE RED CROSS PROGRAM OF SAVING THE CHILDHOOD OF WAR AFFECTED CHILDREN FROM EX-YUGOSLAVIA IN GREEK FAMILIES

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, separation of constituent republics of Yugoslavia led to a civil war. In the following years, Serbia went through a social, political and economic crisis, and UN sanctions. To support children that were most affected by these conditions, a comprehensive Program of children recovery in Greek families was created. Children from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska were sent to Greece for recovery during holidays and for schooling (six months stays). In the period 1993 – 2011, there were 21.648 children (7-16 years of age) that were hosted in families all over Greece. The recovery Program was overseen by the ministries of health, education, social care and foreign affairs in both countries. The aim of this paper was to explore the evaluation of this complicated and complex community-based psycho-social intervention. Qualitative evaluation was based on the available Program documentation, press-clipping, documentary films and semi-structured interviews with participants – ex-children (17), teachers (three), Red Cross people - employees and volunteers (two) and Greek host families – parents (five). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Due to the extremely sensitive situation of the children and overall uncertainty and ambiguity, great care was devoted to the process evaluation that entailed continuous monitoring of children by teachers, physicians, families, Red Cross professionals and volunteers. All children went through the before/after medical checkup. Those that went to school in Greece were assessed by their teachers. As part of the process evaluation of the overall Program, the stay of every group went through outcome evaluation. Teachers, physicians and Red Cross people reported about children's psychophysical health, adaptation and development at the beginning, during and after their stay. Findings were used for improving the stay of the following groups - dealing with selection of children and Greek families, activities with children and caring for their wellbeing. Most important benefits for the children were living in good conditions and safe places, attending school regularly, participating in family life, and shifting their focus from disasters of war. Positive experiences from the perspective of all the stakeholders led to enlargement of the Program. In the period 2021-2024 we performed qualitative evaluation of the Program. Decades later, memories of all the participants were extremely positive. Grown-up children had vivid memories of peaceful life, warmth, peer-related positive emotional memories, memories of sun and sea, and Greek culture. Safety, warmth and abundance were the key memories that were in strong contrast to war related memories. Ties between "ex-children" and Greek families are still strong. Staying with Greek families also had a strong impact on career paths of some children. Positive impact of the Program inspired long-term media attention over the years in both countries. Unique, long-term evaluation shows that however specific, restoration of routines was of critical importance for trauma recovery and resilience-building among war-affected children. The stay in Greece could not heal all the wounds but it helped children be children.

Keywords: *Programme theory evaluation, war affected children, Serbia, Greece.*

1. Introduction

Year after year, children are exposed to war (according to UNICEF over 473 million of children live amid the war or armed conflict), yet empirical research findings on the interventions aiming to protect children and support their recovery are still scarce (Masten et al., 2015). In the early 1990s, after more than 70 years of living in the same country, constituent republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia separated. Unfortunately, numerous unresolved problems led to a civil war. In the following years Serbia went through a social, political and economic crisis, and UN sanctions. Consequently, the Red Cross was

faced with large numbers of displaced persons, missing persons, refugees, orphans and children that lived in poverty. To support children that were most affected by these conditions, a comprehensive Program of recovery of children in Greece was created.

Children from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska were sent to Greece for recovery during holidays (Christmas, Easter and summer break) and for schooling (six-month stays that were organized three times in the period 1994 - 1996). In the period 1992 - 2011 there were 21.648 children that were hosted in families all over Greece. Children were 7-16 years of age. These were children that lost one or both parents (or they were missing), refugees from Ex Yugoslavia, displaced children from Kosovo and Metohija, children living in poverty. Program ended in 2011 due to the economic crisis that hit Greece. It should be noted that children went to Greece for recovery as part of other arrangements as well (in cooperation of municipalities, Greek Orthodox Church, and various organizations of civil society).

Psychosocial Recovery Program was both a complex and complicated intervention planned and overseen by the ministries of health, education, social care and foreign affairs both in Serbia and Greece. One of the main dilemmas before the start of the Program was if the war-traumatized children should be taken away from the close ones to a completely unknown environment that could traumatize them additionally. Due to the extremely sensitive situation of the children and overall uncertainty and ambiguity, the aim of this paper was to explore and discuss evaluation of this specific program. Process evaluation focuses on social processes and mechanisms during the implementation of a program, and at the same time develops building blocks for the later evaluation of outcomes (Fridrich et al., 2015).

2. Method

Evaluation was explored based on the available program documentation, press clipping and interviews with participants – children, teachers, Red Cross people (employees and volunteers) and Greek families. In particular, process evaluation was carried out as digging into the past based on Red Cross documentation (e.g., Yugoslav Red Cross, 1995) and interviews with participants. Documents that were analyzed included procedures, agreements, status reports, press clipping, and films that were created during the realization of the Program.

Outcome evaluation was carried out in the period 2021-2024 as qualitative evaluation of the program with those that participated as children, teachers, Greek host families and Red Cross people. We conducted semi-structured interviews with various participants of the Program: 17 adults that participated in the Program as children, three teachers and five members of Greek families. Outcome evaluation also included two films that were created after the program ended. Video material included Euronews documentary (Popovic, 2023) and documentary about the realization of the Program at the Greek Tinos Island (Kojic, 2024). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

3. Findings

Great care was devoted to the process evaluation that entailed continuous monitoring of children by teachers, physicians, Greek families, Red Cross professionals and volunteers. All children went through the medical checkups before travelling and after returning from Greece. Those that went to school in Greece were evaluated by their teachers (they had regular classes in Serbian and they were learning Greek). As part of the process evaluation of the overall Program, every group of children went through outcome evaluation. Teachers, physicians and Red Cross people reported about children's psychophysical health at the beginning, during and after their stay, adaptation and development during the stay. These findings were used for improving the stay of the following groups dealing with selection of children, selection of Greek families, activities with children and monitoring their wellbeing. Most important benefits for the children were living in good conditions and safe places, regularly going to school, participating in family life, and shifting their focus from disasters of war. Positive experiences from the perspective of all the stakeholders led to enlargement of the Program. As early process evaluation and immediate outcome evaluation based on the one-month stay of children from Banja Luka on the Kos Island gave positive impressions and results, Greece shared positive experience with representatives of European capitals inviting them to join the Program, but other European countries stayed silent.

As part of the long-term outcome evaluation, decades later, memories of all the participants were extremely positive. Grown-up children had rich memories of warmth and peer-related positive emotional memories, memories of sun and sea, and Greek culture. Safety and warmth were the key memories that were in strong contrast to war related negative memories. Some of the memories of impressions were "We completely forgot about the war." (girl). "We were so carefree" (girl). "They reset us" (girl). "They (children) forgot about the war" (teacher). "Children were so relaxed, as if they did not suffer all those losses at home" (teacher). "Six months stay on the Greek island Tinos saved my childhood" (boy). Children

were also strongly impressed by abundance in everything: “there was abundance of laughter, joy, food, toys...” (girl). “We were so happy when they took us for a whole week on a cruiser” (girls, boys). The impressions are quite similar and each could be signed by more than one person.

Memories show “As a child I had my heroes, but they were wiped out by the war. Then, at Tinos Island, I got my new heroes from my Greek family” (boy, 9 years old at that time, lost father in war). There are still strong ties between ex-children and Greek families. These ties are even passed on to new generations (some of them visiting each other for weddings, baptisms, graduation ceremonies). Also, some connections were lost, mainly due to relocation of children or economic hardship. A grown-up boy who lives in one of the EU countries, unannounced visited his Greek family in a village close to Thessaloniki for the first time 25 years after staying with them. His Greek mother took him to his room and gave him the pyjamas he forgot there a long time ago. She kept it under his pillow waiting for him all those years. She said: “I knew you would come back one day”. Greek hosting families were families. Members of hosting families took on their family roles of mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Thus, they could create the much-needed healing environment.

From the career management perspective, it is important to note that Program influenced the careers of children in a number of ways. Learning Greek language and getting familiar with the Greek culture led them to jobs in hospitality and tourism, translating, and teaching Greek language. Some turned to careers which they first met in their (extended) Greek families (e.g. architect, plumber, physician) or about which they learnt during the Program (e.g. footballer, priest). Career paths could be regarded as an unintended outcome.

The Program gained strong media attention over the years in both countries. Positive impact of the Program inspired documentaries “A century for the future” (Red Cross of Serbia, 1994), “House of warm souls” (Vujasinovic, 2001), film and TV series “There where someone is waiting for you” (Popovic, 2023). The premiere of the film “Saving the broken childhood” (Kojic, 2024) took place on Tinos Island. Thirty years earlier Tinos hosted the author of the film together with 90 children and four teachers from the Republic of Srpska. Several of them went to Tinos for the premiere. Due to economic hardship, for some of the “then-children” that was the first time they returned to Tinos and reunited with their Greek families.

4. Discussion

There is a striking gap between the exposure of children to war and evidence based on evaluating interventions developed to support war affected children (Masten et al., 2015). Evaluation presented in this paper lists great immediate effects on children's mental health and well-being, in some cases extremely quickly visible, as well as positive long term outcomes. Safety, abundance, warmth and bonds with Greek families helped children to forget about the war, to get back to the mode of carefree childhood and build grounds for future development. Long-term emotional bonds between the children and Greek families who hosted them, moreover between families from Serbia and Republic of Srpska and Greece, still play an important role in the lives of all the participants.

What were the key levers for the success of the Program? On one side, it was thoroughness, comprehensiveness and multidisciplinary approach in designing and implementing the Program. Moreover, on the other hand, it was the charity and sacrifice of the Greek hosts, not only families and schools, but also organizations and entire local communities all over Greece. Thinking of the context, we should be reminded of a deeply touching episode in recent Greek history. In 1948, at the peak of the Civil War, tens of thousands of children were evacuated from their homes to be protected from the war (Danforth & Boeschoten, 2011; Mircevska 2014). As part of two programs, children were taken to orphanages in Eastern Europe (including Yugoslavia) and children's homes and foster care in other parts of Greece. Less than half a century later, wishing to save them from the war, Greeks opened their hearts and homes to neighbouring children. A favourable Greek recovery context proved to be essential for children from ex-Yugoslavia together with specific restoration of routines away from war, in an unknown but warm family with children of similar age, welcoming community and cultural setting. In addition, for children that stayed longer and went to school in Greece, restoration of routines was also under specific circumstances – unknown school and peers (with opportunities for integrating and learning the unknown language), where classes and communication with the teacher and other children was in their mother tongue.

For such a complex psycho-social intervention, applying the context, process, and outcome evaluation model proved to be extremely useful (Fridrich et al., 2015). From the perspective of the long-term evaluation, we would like to add that outcome evaluation could be perceived at two levels. On the first level, immediate outcomes were assessed after children returned from Greece. On the second level, evaluation was carried out two-three decades after children and other participants took part in the Program. Although, exploring memories about the past can be regarded as a limitation of the retrospective studies, in this case, we believe that it adds an important layer to the immediate evaluation. As there are so many

deeply moving stories and anecdotes about staying with Greek families, for future exploration of the effects of the Program we plan to apply a storytelling approach. Memories of the Program and what it meant to participating children are deeply ingrained in who they are today. As one of the little girls at that time said “At that time we were not aware of the privilege we had by being taken to Greece. We did not understand how much it meant to us as we understand today”.

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