

**COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

**2021 Day of General Discussion (DGD), 16-17 September 2021-Geneva**

**Written Statement submitted by Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII**

**TITLE: “Children’s Rights and Alternative care”**

# Introduction

The Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) is an International Lay Association of Pontifical Right with legal status accredited with Special Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2006. The Association is present in 40 countries on five continents. Its members, of different ages and states of life, share life directly with the poor and disadvantaged and are committed to removing the root causes of poverty and exclusion and to being voice of the voiceless through non-violent actions and means.

The Association runs hundreds of family homes all over the world. It runs also emergency shelters, open families, houses of fraternity, cooperatives and day-centres, therapeutic communities for drug users, centres for alcoholics. The Association carries out awareness raising campaigns, micro-credit schemes, services for persons with disabilities, Roma and Sinti, homeless, migrants, elderly, people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, mothers in difficulty and women enslaved into prostitution. Furthermore, the Association has a nonviolent presence in both fronts in war zones to guarantee the respect of human rights and assist populations displaced by the war and carries out activities aimed at combating the trafficking of human beings and assisting its victims.

From its beginning, APG23 has committed tirelessly to “give a family to those without it” (to use the words from our founder). APG23 promotes and supports the culture of welcoming, to guarantee every child the right to live in a family. It promotes fostering and different initiatives aimed at preventing the removal of children from their natural families and protecting children in different environments. We would like to share our experience in this field.

# 2. Promoting alternative care

## Family-homes

The first family-home was opened in Italy[[1]](#footnote-1) (Rimini) in response to the acute need of relationship of those who lived inside residential institutes (i.e. children with disabilities) and it is an answer to the child’s right to a family whenever the natural/extended family fails to care. Throughout the years this experience has been extended in other countries.

A family-home is a substitute family where different vulnerable people are welcomed for a certain period of time. It is characterised by the continual and stable presence of parental figures –mother and father - who choose freely to share life with the needy and open their doors to give a family to those who don't have one. (Orphans, abandoned children, adolescents in difficulty, persons with disabilities or marginalised etc.)

The fundamental and specific characteristics of a family-home may be summarised as follows:

* “parental” figures that are precise, stable, unique and definitive
* heterogeneity of the welcomed people in the family
* an organisation of the daily activities as in a family
* an effective and real integration of the people accepted in the home through the active participation in the social life in all its aspects

# 3. Promoting fostering

As an example, we share the experiences of the Association in Italy that has internally set up two specific working groups on issues regarding minors consisting of operators with multidisciplinary training, who, for years, have been carrying out activities of:

* Promotion of a culture of fostering through constant initiatives such as dedicated meetings, events and information and awareness courses on foster care, with other family associations and in collaboration with social services.
* Activation of training courses for social workers on the issues of protection of minors, and promotion and management of self and mutual help groups for foster families.
* Important and constant collaboration with social services to look for families available to welcome minors, especially for special cases of children in difficulty, even with disabilities, for which social services might non find a family.
* Activation of the "Take me home" project with the Regina Margherita Children's Hospital of Turin and the Municipality of Turin (ITALY), which promotes the reception of severely disabled children or those with health issues and which was created with the aim of helping and supporting families that welcome children needing a high level of home assistance and periodic hospitalizations.
* Implementation of projects for the emergency reception of minors 0/6 years old, collaboration with the Juvenile Court and participation in the working tables on foster care specifically activated in some Italian cities.

Special mention is due to the Confido Project of the Forum of Family Associations of which APG23 is a member, a Project realized with the contribution of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers - Department for family policies.

The CONFIDO Project[[2]](#footnote-2) has the fundamental objective of disseminating knowledge about practices and experiences regarding foster care and adoption of families and aims to accompany voluntary guardians of unaccompanied foreign minors with training and support activities. The intervention aims to dispel some of the most common myths regarding these issues as well as, at the same time, spread the culture of adoption and foster care in a positive way. This project is being developed in 10 Italian regions through courses on foster care, adoption and voluntary protection of foreign minors. APG23 organized many of these courses on foster care.

# 4. Supporting families

APG23 runs many projects around the world aimed at supporting disadvantaged children and families living in poor and deprived social and economic situations: the objective of our projects is to carry out specific actions, also aimed at removing the root cause of marginalization to provide an adequate safety net to children and assistance to parents.

We, as APG23, believe that it is crucial to be close to disadvantaged families and children; working closely with families and promoting parental responsibilities might help in avoiding the exacerbation of critical situations and the removal of children from their families.

## 4.1 Acuarela Project

The **Acuarela Project[[3]](#footnote-3)**, located in the municipality of La Pintana, Santiago, Chile is a prevention program aimed at vulnerable children and families. The Center is open every day from 9 to 18 and assists almost 80 children.

APG23 carries out its activity by cooperating with SENAME, the Chilean National Service for Minors. In particular, the project has been included in the Government's Targeted Prevention Program to help families in difficulty.

Children are often referred to the project by the Court of Justice because they are victims of serious violations of their rights within the family. The goal of Aquarela Project is to work closely with children and their families avoiding, preventing and minimizing harmful situations;

Bearing in mind the wellbeing and development needs of children, a team of psychologists, social workers, and educators work together giving them aid and support; to reach these aims, parenting training courses are provided as well as literacy courses. The project offers several workshops to promote nonviolence and human rights; art workshops are also organized to encourage expression and communication.

## 4.2 La Escuelita

**“La Escuelita”** is a social integration centre, located in Peñalolén, one of the most degraded municipalities in the metropolitan area of Santiago (Chile). The Project has been opened since 1995 and offers educational support and recreational opportunities to at-risk children and adolescents. Besides, through Escuelita program, APG23 is also at the forefront of children’s rights protection in Chile and it has taken part in the creation of a working group to promote collaboration with other organizations operating in the area.

The project assists about fifty minors living in vulnerable and deprived families, and it is open throughout all the year from Monday to Friday.

The Centre offers a safe environment where kids can spend time establishing meaningful relationships through different proposed activities. Children experience care and support which respects their diversity and protect their rights.

The project offers the following activities:

• After-school: the Center guarantees school support to students, helping them to fill the gaps and promoting their positive development.

• Playful-recreational activities: children are involved in extracurricular, socialization and leisure activities to occupy their free time in a healthy way.

• Nutritional support: the Center provides one meal a day for five days a week: breakfast for children attending special classes, a snack and dinner for the after-school children. During the holidays it also offers lunch.

In addition, educators support children’s families with personal interviews, training sessions and home visits to understand their needs, improve family dynamics and prevent violence and abuse of minors. To provide further support, a psychologist and a social worker come to the Center once a week. Moreover, social workers facilitate families in arranging paperwork for health or working problems.

## 4.3 The Village of Joy (Il villaggio della gioia)

In Forlì (Italy), APG23 started a pilot experience 10 years ago called “the Village of Joy” which went in the direction of creating a network around families in difficulty through concrete actions in order to keep families together. The Village consists of three family homes, with three mini apartments connected, and a building with 6 apartments, all facing the same courtyard. In the three family homes it is therefore possible to accommodate other three families. The idea behind this arrangement is that every child has the right to be in his or her family of origin, with his or her parents; foster care, foster homes, or educational facilities come in when families are very deficient or inadequate. The Village develops specific attention to the parental couples that experience difficulties in caring for their children. Starting from the principle that every child has the right to be able to grow up with his/her own parents, there is also the availability to take charge of the parental couple in difficulty, with a comprehensive care of the whole family unit. This certainly happens under certain conditions and with adequate guarantees for the health and growth of the children, since they are the real and main subjects to be protected. It is in order to give the maximum of opportunities to minors that the family unit is taken care of and not vice versa. In a dynamic mixture of autonomy and accompaniment, of coaching / protection and entrusting of responsibilities, of freedom and control, we want to respond to the needs of minors not only by acting directly on them, but also by acting on their parents to enable them to fully play their educational role towards their children.

## 4.4 Solidarity condominium (Condominio Solidale)

The “Divina Provvidenza'' solidarity condominium in Fossano (Italy) offers various services. On the ground floor of the condominium there is the constant presence of the San Paolo Family Home from APG23. On the first and second floor of the solidarity condominium there are 10 lodgings and mini-lodgings (1 four-room apartment, 2 three-room, 5 two-room and 2 one-room apartments), 5 of which are intended for accommodation of persons with disabilities in full autonomy, thanks to the support of the Piedmont Region. Two of the small apartments are currently intended for emergency situations. There is also a youths solidarity cohabitation project involving 6 youth from 18 to 30 years. This project combines the opportunity to experience a period of autonomy with some voluntary activities taking place in the condominium.

# 5. Protecting children

## “Safe – Educating and Welcoming in Safe Environments”

SAFE is a project co-financed by the European Union and led by the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII together with Azione Cattolica, Centro Sportivo Italiano, CiRViS-SDE from the Department of Sociology of the University of Bologna. This project sees the partners engaged in a two-years path from November 2019 to November 2021.

The general objective of the Project is therefore to create a culture to prevent abuses and organize training for the protection of children and vulnerable people through the promotion of safe environments and respectful and responsible interpersonal relationships. The project will combine research, analysis, training and awareness raising activities. By combining these methods, the project will generate a comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the issues examined, providing a solid scientific basis for educational and reception activities with children in social protection, sport and leisure. SAFE responds to the priority of promoting the integration of child protection policies in different contexts and sectors, such as sports clubs and organisations, leisure/recreation clubs for children (including faith led; scouts and girl guides, private schools) both as a means to protect and safeguard children and to provide staff with the necessary training and guidance, in accordance with the “Keeping Children Safe” standards. SAFE is an Italian national project but with a high potential transnational impact. It was developed thanks to the great experience of the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII in dealing with vulnerable and abused children, in close collaboration with experts such as psychologists, pedagogues, social workers, lawyers and academics.[[4]](#footnote-4)

# 6. Conclusions

APG23 is committed to the right of the child to have a family following the principle of the best interest of the child. Therefore, we urge all stakeholders to take into consideration the following recommendations:

1. Promote and support measures necessary to favor foster family care over residential institutions.
2. Raise awareness in the public space about child/family fostering also through dedicated coursesand trainings.
3. Support vulnerable families to develop and improve parental responsibility and increase the quality and safety of the care of their children.
4. Improve child protection system through specific courses to protect and safeguard the wellbeing of children.
5. Invest in empowering the staff who carry out services for minors at different levels such as the juvenile courts, social services, child neuropsychiatry.
6. Work in a network: we suggest better networking between different actors in charge of child protection system and welfare.

On these links below, some videos can be found showing the experience of the family-homes:

<https://youtu.be/gMMsA6Cltp4>

<https://youtu.be/D_kumbhfaaw>

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*Contact person:*

*Ms. Maria Mercedes Rossi*

*Main representative of Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) at UNOG*

*1, rue de Varembè - Case Postale 96, CH-1211 Geneva 20 - Switzerland  
Tel: +41 (0) 22 919 10 42 Fax: +41 (0) 22 919 10 48 Mobile: +39 348 24 88 152*

*Email: mararossi@apg23.org or international@apg23.org*

1. In the Italian context it is important to highlight the Italian law 184 of 1983 that has a title: the child's right to a family. For APG23 this is a very significant title, still very valid today, because it clearly explains the rationale of the law. The title emphasizes that the right of a child placed outside the family of origin is to have another family. When the family of origin is unable to care, it is necessary to ensure that the child has a foster family or a family home. APG23 in the 70s, when institutions still existed, worked in the country, together with other organizations, to arrive at the law that structured the system of protection of minors in Italy. The commitment then continued in collaboration in the drafting of various laws (54/2006, 219/2012, 173/2015) and with Law 149 of 2001, which established the closure of the orphanages by 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://progettoconfido.it/le-associazioni/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. APG23 has been present in Chile since 1994 in two cities Santiago and Valdivia. In 1998, the Association began to develop projects with the National Service for Minors - Ministry of Justice, being recognized as a "Partner Organization". APG23 has put in place a wide variety of social actions in order to protect children through specific projects and structures: three family homes, six open families to welcome children in need. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://progettosafe.eu/safe-project/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)