

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion

Nidos – importance of scientific research to improve the practice of providing alternative care to unaccompanied children

Introduction

The role of Nidos

[Nidos](#) is a certified youth care organization in the Netherlands. Nidos is responsible for legal guardianship for all unaccompanied and separated children that arrive in the Netherlands. Nidos is appointed as guardian by the court and guardianship is exercised by professionals who ensure proper accomplishment of the care provided to the child. Depending on various factors such as age, gender, vulnerability and level of independence, children are placed in different settings of alternative care. Aside from arranging appropriate shelter and living circumstances, Nidos is also responsible for protecting the children, intervening when their development is at risk of stagnation, acting in their best interest and legally representing them.

Unaccompanied children

When children (are forced to) migrate and embark on a dangerous journey without their parent(s) or guardian(s) they often experience a lot of uncertainty and hardship. Although these unaccompanied children in the Netherlands form a distinct group with shared experiences, vulnerabilities and strengths, this group is far from homogeneous. Diversity is not only encountered in terms of age, gender, origin, or reasons to migrate, but also in terms of perspective for the future, migration goals, qualities, strengths, and difficulties. Therefore, there is no such thing as a one size fits all approach in attending to the needs of these children.

Importance and necessity of research

To adequately protect and attend to the needs of these children it is of great importance to have insight into their backgrounds and specific needs. As an organization, Nidos is distinct from other organizations in the Netherlands as we work with a group of children that requires a unique and specialized approach. The implication hereof is that there is no other specialist who could provide us with the necessary information, thus creating a need to develop, gather, and share specialized expertise through research and innovation.

Changing groups and their needs

One of the challenges associated with working in the field of migration is that it is everchanging. Due to differences in nature and duration of conflict in the countries of origin, cultural practices, and challenges encountered along the way to the Netherlands, each new group of children that arrives has their own specific vulnerabilities and needs, and therefore require a different approach. In practice, we often encounter that the arrival of a new group of children shines a light on skills and expertise that we have yet to develop and improve, which can initially pose a challenge for the professionals involved.

Changing legislation and policy

Another component that is unambiguously associated with the field of migration is the influence of the political climate on legislation and policy. Which in turn affects the context, living modalities, and possibilities of these children. For example, in 2001 migration policy regarding unaccompanied children was changed and henceforth, children who are not granted asylum have to enter a trajectory with the purpose of returning to the country of origin. These changes had rigorous implications on the methods of working with these children and required an adaptation in which the sensitivities of dealing with return are duly considered.

To be able to provide the best possible forms of alternative care, it is imperative to have an understanding of the needs, cultural contexts, and backgrounds of these children. Furthermore, to adapt and improve it is necessary to have insight into the extent to which the provided care matches the needs of the children. Therefore, it is important to innovate, monitor and evaluate, and to create expertise and gather best-practices.

Contributing to expertise

The way in which Nidos contributes to strengthening empirical, theoretical and practical expertise is twofold. On the one hand, through collaborations with prominent academic institutions, Nidos provides data and ensures access to data collection. One of the ways in which this is facilitated is by the foundation and funding of an endowed chair at the University of Groningen since 2012. Monika Smit has been appointed professor by special appointment of Psychosocial Care for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees at the University of Groningen since 1 July 2018. In this role, she conducts, leads and supervises research into the situations of unaccompanied children.

On the other hand, throughout the years of working with unaccompanied children, Nidos has developed a considerable amount of expertise. In addition to the academic research that is conducted amongst the unaccompanied children under guardianship of Nidos, the organization is continuously initiating internal research and evaluation. Working with task-forces, work-groups and participating in various European and national projects allows us to keep up the standard of providing care in a rapidly changing field. In addition to the many Nidos professionals who have a migration background themselves, a department of Intercultural Mediators (ICM) was founded to expand and deepen the intercultural expertise. Their input is exceptionally valuable in the development of new concepts, pilots and internal innovation.

When facilitating the collection of research data among the unaccompanied children under guardianship of Nidos, most important is the careful consideration of the expected outcomes compared to the burden that might be experienced by the children.

Expertise through research projects

The dynamic and changing nature of migration was experienced once again when in 2015 a sudden influx of Eritrean unaccompanied children was seen. The difficulties that were initially experienced when working with this group quickly exposed the need for a better understanding on how to attend to the needs of these children. To accommodate to this need, the Resilience project (see contribution II) was set up in collaboration with a research institute specialized in psycho trauma and migration. One of the activities in this project was the study into factors that influence the development of unaccompanied refugee children from Eritrea. Based on this research, a toolkit was developed to provide practical recommendations that guardians can use in their daily work. Additionally, Nidos facilitated an academical research among Eritrean unaccompanied children into the concept of trust and how their environment contributes to feelings of trust and distrust. These research efforts

enhanced understanding of the nature of the conflict, cultural context and needs of these children, which led to improved methods of working.

The implication of legal guardianship is that the legal basis for involvement of Nidos will be concluded when children reach the age of majority. Therefore, one of the missions of Nidos is to assist and prepare children to reach a certain level of independence at the age of 18. This is challenging in itself, but is often further complicated by the fact that most children are 16-17 years old upon arrival in the Netherlands. This means that there is often little time to build a relationship of trust and to establish familiarity with the country and bureaucratic systems and to prepare the child for the transition to adulthood. Therefore, a longitudinal study executed by a PhD-candidate has recently been initiated to examine the pathways and trajectories of reaching adulthood.

Congruent with article 20 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nidos strives to ensure that when children are temporarily deprived of their family environment, there will be a sense of continuity in the child's upbringing and special attention to their ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background. Therefore, one of the living modalities that Nidos proudly works with is cultural family placement whereby children – depending on their age and needs- are placed in families with similar cultural backgrounds. Specialized Nidos professionals are involved in the matching, placement and evaluation process. Nonetheless, a necessity was experienced to have an academic and empirical study to evaluate the working methods and learn more about factors that might influence the family placement success. The results of a PhD-study into these placements confirmed the practice of placing children in families with cultural similarity. Additionally, the results also indicated that there was a difference in perspectives of children, foster parents and guardians with regard to factors that would predict a successful placement.

One of the latest challenges that is experienced in our work is related to working with children who have often been roaming around Europe and arrive into the Netherlands with no perspective to obtain legal residence. This means that, upon reaching the age of majority, they no longer have the right to remain in the Netherlands. As an organization, we are in the process of learning what it is that motivates these children, how to establish a relationship of trust, and how to find ways to contribute to future perspectives of these children. In this process, the living modality *Perspectief Opvang Nidos* (PON, Nidos shelter focused on Perspective) was specially developed to accommodate to the needs of this group (see contribution II). To evaluate the efforts, Nidos invited an independent migration researcher to study the effects and essential components. Furthermore, a PhD-candidate with a similar background to many of these children is currently executing a qualitative study into the different mobility patterns these children have and how these patterns shape their motivations, identities, conditions and transitions into adulthood.

Quality and ethical considerations

As mentioned before, Nidos strives to achieve delivery of the best possible care to unaccompanied children. Although this can be facilitated through use of research results, we must balance the aims of the research with the wellbeing of the children. Therefore, it is imperative that there is a strict evaluation of the necessity of research and minimization of exposure to and/or participation in research. In addition to the extensive ethical considerations weighed by the researchers and the Ethics Committee of the academic institution, Nidos is the gate-keeper in all data driven collaborations to ensure that the best interest of the children is the primary consideration. Hereby, special attention is

paid to aspects such as distrust children might experience toward strangers or researchers, the emotional sensitivity of the topics, the discontinuation of contact once the data collection has been completed, and the balance between what participation brings them and what it costs them.

Use and dissemination of acquired expertise

Aside from using the expertise for enhancing the quality of attending to the needs of these children and improvement of policy, Nidos also values sharing knowledge with local and European partners. A [website](#) has been developed to provide information about the projects set up in collaboration and/or by coordination of Nidos.

Nidos founded and is leading the [European Guardianship Network](#) (EGN). EGN, funded by the European Commission, is a network of guardianship authorities and agencies, (local) authorities and international and non-governmental organizations. EGN aims to promote guardianship and improve guardianship services for unaccompanied and separated children in the EU Member States by exchanging good practices, expertise and other relevant information and sharing ideas and cooperation on common challenges and cross border work.

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