**UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**

**Day of General Discussion, 16-17 September 2021**

**Children’s Rights and Alternative Care**

Montenegro has achieved tangible results in the prevention of family separation, removal of children from large scale residential institutions into safe and caring family environments (deinstitutionalization) and inclusion of children with disabilities in our society, during the past ten years. We have developed special services for families, support parenting program for parents of children with disabilities, psychological support, home visits, small group community programs, in cooperation with UNICEF and NGOs.

Our country has implemented strategic and systematic reform, from harmonizing the legislative framework with international standards, capacity building of professionals from all domains (health, education, social and child protection and justice), to the implementation of awareness raising campaigns. The joint campaigns ‘’It’s About Ability’’ and ‘’Every child needs a family’’ significantly contributed to the change of social norms and raising of public awareness on the importance of the right of the child to live in a caring family environment.

Montenegro has been implemented an intensive reform of the social and child protection system, with the aim to include vulnerable, socially excluded groups and improving access to comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable services provided in the family and community. We are very committed to the process of de-institutionalization of children placed in Child care institutions.

In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Guidelines for Alternative Care for Children, our Law on Social and Child Protection, defined the obligation of all those working in child protection to make every effort to help the child stay in the family, by supporting the family. If it is not possible or not in the best interest of the child, alternative protection is provided through the provision of family accommodation-foster care. The Law on Social and Child Protection stipulates **that a child under the age of three is not provided with placement in an institution**, and that placement of a child in an institution is provided only when all other possibilities have been exhausted. This decision is reviewed at least once every six months.

The implementation of the **Operational Plan for the Transformation of the Children's Home in Bijela** (2020-2024) it’s in progress. The only institution in Montenegro to accommodate children without parental care, in order to reduce the pressure on the institution and return children to their families, has been relocated to alternative forms of protection: foster family or other services within the local community. The transformation of the institution will expand its activities, the development of services to support families and communities, which will result in better care for more children. In accordance with the previous Transformation Plan from 2015 of the Public Institution Children's Home "Mladost" Bijela, the following services are developed: National Children's Telephone Line, Shelter for Protection of Children from Domestic Violence, Day care for children with disabilities, as well as Transitional Housing Community-Program support for children who are in residential accommodation and are preparing to leave the institution.

In parallel with the decrease in the number of children in institutions, there was an increase in the number of children in foster families, especially unrelated ones. Montenegro has traditionally well-developed foster care within the extended family, so we have additionally worked on the development of unrelated foster care.

In 2010, 313 children were placed in family accommodation - foster care, and at the end of 2020, 361 children, which is an increase of 15%.

In 2010, there were 9 children in unrelated foster families, and at the end of 2020, 59 children, which is an increase of 556%.

At the same time, 156 children stayed in the Children's Home “Mladost” in Bijela in 2010 and currently there are 79 children, which is a decrease of 50.64%.

In Montenegro is highly developed kinship foster care. For a large number of children who are without immediate parental care, relatives take care of the child, often without expecting any help from the state. However, this is not enough to provide every child with an adequate family, but it is also necessary to develop unrelated foster care.

Our priority was to relocate children aged 0-3 from institutions by the end of 2017. Currently, only one child under the age of three stays in the Children's Home "Mladost" Bijela. We note that in the past three years were no children under the age of three in the Home for a longer period of time.

These data indicate that activities are continuously carried out to reduce the number of children in institutions through support to the biological family and the development of family accommodation-foster care as an alternative form of protection.

Since 2016, the **“Family Co-worker” project** has been implemented, in cooperation of the Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare with the NGO Family Center, UNDP, UNICEF and the Centers for Social Work. As part of the Social and Child Protection Reform project in Montenegro, additional efforts have been made to develop family support services and reduce the number of children in social and child protection institutions, and to strengthen the potential of families to keep their children in their families. The goal of the "Family Co-worker" project is to build resources that will enable biological families to develop their strength so that children, especially those under 3 years of age, grow up in a warm family environment, in their own family. The specific goals of the project are to:

-Prevent the displacement of the child from his family and improve the functioning of the biological family;

-Assistance in the process of reintegration of the child into his / her family, who was temporarily placed in an institution, foster care or with relatives;

-Timely response to various situations in the family in terms of prevention of violence, neglect and abuse;

-Providing support to the system to provide adequate protection and support to the child and the family, which will be in the best interest of the child.

From 2016 until now, 255 families or 667 children have been included in the service. It is also important to note that a large number of children from the RE population were included in the service.

The service of a Family Co-worker has proven to be decisive in preventing the relocation of children from biological and foster families, in improving parenting skills in high-risk families and in preventing neglect and violence against children. According to the results, 98% of children remained in their biological families. This prevented the formation of more than one institution for children deprived of parental care in terms of the number of children involved. Also, the service proved to be an adequate support to foster families because 100% of children who were included in the service remained in foster families and were not returned to the institution.

During 2020, the family associate service was available in 10 municipalities, as follows Podgorica (3), Danilovgrad (1), Nikšić (1), Pljevlja (1), Bijelo Polje (1), Berane (1), Kotor, Tivat, Budva and Herceg Novi (1), and a total of 9 Family Co-workers were engaged.

The Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare will ensure the sustainability of this service as one of the priorities of the reform, which are crucial for the successful process of deinstitutionalization.

Family support also aims to prevent unnecessary separation of children from their parents and to facilitate reintegration with the biological family after staying in alternative accommodation, particularly for children with disabilities. One of the main goals of the ongoing reform of the social and child protection system is to make sure that no child lives in large accommodation institutions.

The reform is strongly focused on creating a wide range of preventive services and care options as alternatives to the institutionalization of children without parental care and children with disabilities. One of the very important services aimed at preventing family separation, including children with disabilities, is the Day Care Center for Children with disabilities (DC), currently available in 17 of the 24 municipalities in Montenegro. The existence of Day care centers and special education services means that parents and care givers have access to flexible services that would allow them to take a break, which have also contributed to improving their children’s behavior, education and skills. In the context of a very small number of rehabilitation services at the national level, Day services can become a solution not only for children with severe disabilities or complex needs, but also a substitute for multidisciplinary rehabilitation centers for all children with disabilities and children in vulnerable situations in a given place or region. During 2020, the services of Day Centers were used by an average of 268 children.

Since February 2017, the Parents Association, in cooperation with the UNICEF office in Montenegro, has opened **the first national SOS Parent Line** where parents can get advice on parenting, relationships with children and within the family. The line is established within the program "Protection of the rights of the child through positive parenting", which is implemented by the NGO Association Parents in cooperation with the UNICEF office in Montenegro and with the financial support of the EU. This program is part of a multi-year regional initiative aimed at improving the protection of children from violence and social inclusion of children with disabilities and is implemented in partnership between UNICEF, the European Disability Forum - EDF, the EU, and the governments of seven countries in the EU accession process. The National Parental Line provides support to parents in adopting and applying the principles of positive parenting, thus contributing to the prevention and reduction of corporal punishment of children, as well as providing assistance and support to biological families, and thus indirectly contributing to deinstitutionalization.

**The program "Parenting for Lifelong Health"** is implemented in cooperation with kindergartens, health centers, NGOs Parents' Association and the Pedagogical Center of Montenegro in some Montenegrin municipalities and aims to improve relations between parents and children, strengthen parental competencies, and thus strengthen the family in which the child grows up. Our goal is to expand this program in all municipalities in Montenegro.

We will continue with the further strengthening of foster care within the extended family, and the development of standard-professional foster care, with a special emphasis on children aged 0-3. Montenegro will work to provide all the necessary preconditions for the full implementation of the new legislative and strategic framework, and will continue to strengthen cooperation between all relevant sectors in order to prevent the placement of children in institutions. It is important to continue inter-sectoral education for health and social workers in order to prevent institutionalization.

Strengthening the natural family, providing support to mother and child and creating conditions for their greater social and financial independence are some of the priorities for the coming period.

We will also continue to further promote various types of foster care, both in order to adequately support all children who need specific support, as well as in order to improve the position of foster cares.

The Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare will continue to strengthen cooperation with all relevant sectors in order to prevent the placement of children in institutions. Our main priorities in the forthcoming period are:

• Better protection of children without parental care and children whose development is hindered by family circumstances, as well as children with disabilities;

• Expanding the network of foster families;

• Better support for foster families;

• Establishment of Centers for family accommodation - foster care - establishment of a service;

• Qualification of children and youth with independent living in the community;

• Development of a counseling service.

• Home community - improving the quality of accommodation services through changes in the organization of family groups, in accordance with the program for independence and preparation for independent living.

• Licensing and development of innovative community services designed to support children and the biological family