



Improving childcare

Review of achievements in promoting systemic childcare improvements in Albania, Armenia, Belarus, North Macedonia and Ukraine

April 2025



SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES



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Led by Hermann-Gmeiner-Fonds Deutschland e.V./SOS-Kinderdörfer weltweit, the project is implemented in five countries: Albania, Armenia, Belarus, North Macedonia, and Ukraine, by the respective member associations of SOS Children's Villages International.

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About the project

The project *A Right to Family – Deinstitutionalization to Reform Child Protection Systems in Albania, Armenia, Belarus, North Macedonia and Ukraine* aimed at supporting deinstitutionalization and alternative childcare system reforms in the five countries, promoting respect for child's rights and dignity and contributing to equal opportunities for growth and development for all children.

In the project countries, thousands of children grow up without family care. Many are placed in residential institutions and even more do not enjoy loving, respectful, stable, and safe environments to nurture their talents and potential. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children insist that it is in the best interest of the child to reduce institutionalization, develop family-based care and community-based preventive services.

The project was our joint effort to contribute to these ideals. By working with decision makers, institutions, professionals, families, communities and the society at large, we sought to achieve sustainable systemic changes.

Our key goals were to:

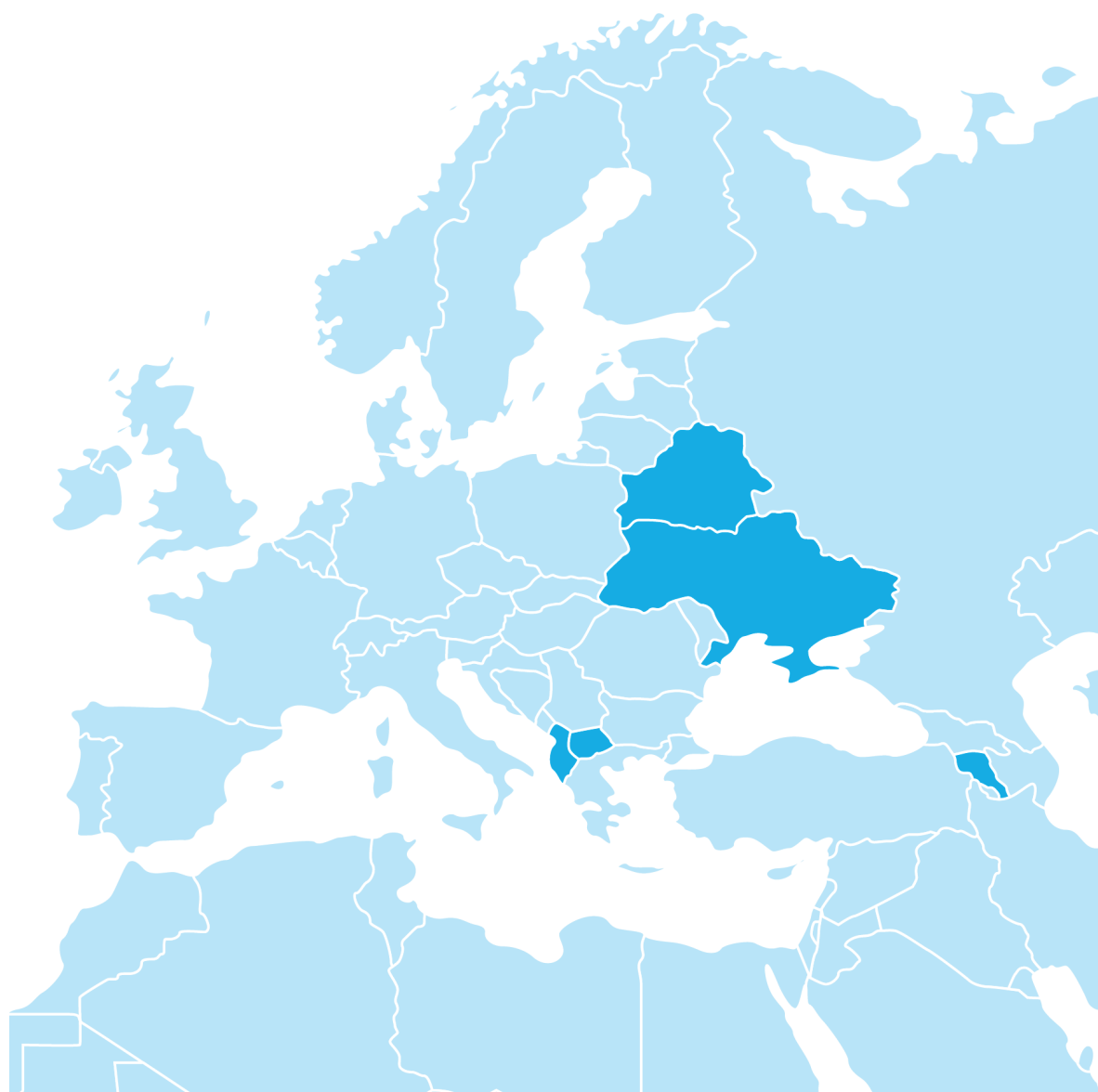
- Align national childcare systems with international standards and principles, prioritizing family- and community-based solutions over institutional care.
- Raise awareness about the benefits of community-based and family-based care.
- Train professionals to improve the quality of their care and services.
- Improve access for children without parental care, or at risk of losing it, and their families to high-quality, community-based and family-based care services.

We used a variety of methods in our work: advocacy and lobbying, awareness raising and campaigning, capacity building, including update of professionals' working methodologies, and direct service delivery.

Albeit difficult to summarize three-and-a-half years of committed work across five countries, our key achievements include:

- Improved national childcare legislative framework and public policies, aligned with international standards.
- 7.3 million people reached through awareness raising campaigns.
- Over 7,000 policy and decisionmakers and professionals bettered their knowledge and skills on a variety of childcare issues, specifically selected in line with their needs.
- At least 18 new working methodologies and tools developed and promoted among childcare professionals, promoting personalized and multidisciplinary approaches.
- Over 6,000 children and over 5,000 parents supported through high-quality, community-based and family-based services in 18 municipalities and regions across the five countries.
- Enhanced collaboration both within and between countries to foster joint efforts and share best practices in child welfare reforms.





Funds in the amount of over 5.8 million Euros were provided by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The project was implemented from October 2021 to April 2025.





Albania

Albania is a country in southeast Europe, situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The country has a diverse landscape, which ranges from sunny beaches to snow-capped mountains. Recent economic progress has led to a significant improvement in the living standards for many of its 2.8 million people. However, many children, young people and families are in need of extra support.

SOS Children's Villages has been supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it, in Albania since 1995.



**SOS FSHATRA
E FËMIJËVE
SHQIPËRI**

The project in Albania

Aiming to align Albania's childcare system with international standards and best practices, the project focused on promoting family-based care for children without parental care and on strengthening community-based efforts to prevent family separation. This dual approach directly supported the country's ongoing deinstitutionalization reforms.

The initiative was welcomed by the Ministry of health and social protection, which appointed SOS Children's Villages Albania as a member of the national steering committee for deinstitutionalization and partnered closely with the organization throughout the project's implementation.

In addition to its established presence in Tirana and Shkodra, SOS Children's Villages expanded its work to the municipalities of Vlorë and Korçë, which were selected by the Ministry as pilot locations for transforming public care institutions into community-based services.

Key achievements

Improved legislation and public policies

- The first national youth care model, establishing standards to support youth in care and those transitioning out, was formally introduced in 2024.
- Promoted foster care costing methodology.
- Foster care registry model was developed to improve tracking, monitoring, and planning of placements and services in four municipalities.
- Case management guidelines and standardized tools to support vulnerable children and families were formally adopted by decisionmakers in Tirana and Shkodra and submitted for enactment by the municipalities of Vlorë and Korçë.



Awareness raising

- Over 860,000 people were reached through the foster care promotion campaign *Lots of Love Under One Roof*, using radio, social media, TV ads, and public events. The campaign drew parallels to Albania's tradition of kinship care.
- 1,563 citizens attended 43 community events to learn about the possibilities and requirements for becoming foster families.
- 423 participants received in-depth information on how to begin the foster care process.
- 16 potential families initiated the application procedure to become foster carers.
- 5 new foster families registered by authorities by the end of 2024, providing care for 5 children.
- 7 families undergoing legal procedures to become foster families.
- 10 journalists provided with in-depth information on foster care, the challenges involved, and the importance of highlighting this vital issue in their reporting.

Capacity building

- 131 professionals trained in case management and family reintegration.
- 122 professionals trained in the implementation of parenting programmes.
- 88 professionals and 5 young people with care experience trained in *Prepare for leaving care* methodology, aimed at supporting young people transitioning out of alternative care.
- 80 stakeholders from 4 target municipalities enhanced their knowledge and skills in foster care.
- 14 national and local decisionmakers participated in a study visit to North Macedonia, gaining insights into the country's experience in promoting and implementing foster care.
- 40 decisionmakers and professionals participated in an exchange meeting to share best practices and lessons learned in deinstitutionalization.





Access to quality services

- 4 community centres in Tirana (2), Vlorë and Korçë were transformed into safe and stimulating environments for learning, growth, and development of children and parents.
- 421 children benefited from psychological support, speech therapy, physiotherapy, summer camps and after-school educational support.
- 213 parents and 113 children trained in child development, and learned effective, non-violent discipline techniques to create a nurturing home environment.

Our best practice

Community centre for child and family support

Starting point

For decades, Albania's childcare system was based on residential care. Generations of children without parental care grew up in large, 'grey', segregated residential institutions without the love and care of a family to help them thrive. As elsewhere, such institutions provided limited opportunities for children to develop their talents and potentials, burdening their future inclusion into society as active and contributing citizens.

Community-based prevention services for families at risk of separation were limited and largely relied on civic initiatives and donor funding. In addition, the lack of foster care options, aside from occasional kinship care, left vulnerable children highly at risk of institutionalization. Many childcare professionals were resistant to change, as they had limited access to modern, rights-based, and person-centred approaches that focused on empowering families and children.





Finding the right path

Building on its long-standing experience in preventive and protective services, SOS Children's Villages Albania has supported the development and operation of community centres for child and family support, designed as multidisciplinary social service hubs. These hubs provide integrated preventive services, promote foster care, and strengthen the capacity of caregivers and social service professionals.

Tailored support is offered to both children and adults: children receive psychosocial counselling, recreational activities, and after-school programmes, while caregivers can access parenting classes, family therapy, administrative support, employment assistance, and home-based care.

The centres actively promote foster care through awareness campaigns, community outreach, and training for prospective foster parents guiding them through the integration process within the child protection system.

With over 30 years of experience in childcare in Albania, SOS Children's Villages has learned that meaningful reform requires strong cooperation and coordination with all stakeholders. These innovative community centres use a multidisciplinary, case management-based approach to translate needs into coordinated support for children and families, in partnership with public and private institutions.

On the road to change

Two new community centres for child and family support were established in Vlorë and Korçë as part of the transformation of residential care institutions in these locations. Two existing centres in Tirana, operational before the project, continued to serve as models. Local governments provided public buildings—previously used for other purposes—for the new centres.

SOS Children's Villages Albania partnered with local authorities to renovate and upgrade the facilities, which now include classrooms, therapy rooms, play areas, staff offices, and meeting spaces.

Professionals were trained in case management, foster care promotion, evidence-based parenting programmes, and other relevant methodologies. In addition to providing direct support, they advocate for family-based care models.

In partnership with municipalities, local institutions, and civil society, the project launched public awareness campaigns to promote family-based care. Ongoing communication and community engagement have been key to building public trust and acceptance of the new model.

Destination: Betterment

Although the community centres for child and family support began operations at different times, their impact on the lives of children and families has been significant.

Children and families now have improved access to a wide range of tailored services. The centres monitor their well-being, advocate for citizens' rights, and offer administrative assistance to empower clients. After-school support includes classes in English, Albanian, and mathematics. Parents can enhance their parenting skills, while prospective foster



families receive help with procedures and psychological assessments for legal processes. Information, training, and mentorship are also offered—all in one place.

The centres are proactive in identifying needs early and providing timely interventions. A structured referral protocol connects clients to appropriate services, fostering cross-sectoral cooperation and ensuring holistic care.

Each multidisciplinary team typically includes a coordinator, social workers specialized in family empowerment and parenting education, psychologists, and home support staff—serving families both with and without members with disabilities. A foster care specialist is also part of the team to ensure quality support for family-based care.

The centres are fully managed by their respective municipalities and integrated into local administrative structures. Each is overseen by the municipal directorate of social services, reinforcing local ownership, long-term commitment, and sustainability.

Multidisciplinary services like these should be accessible in every municipality and at the regional level, in line with legal requirements, to support families and provide alternative care for children at risk or without parental care. These centres represent a vital step toward that goal.

These model centres demonstrate how best practices and lessons learned from initial implementation can support replication in other municipalities.



Our learnings / To fellow travellers on the path to change

Partnerships with central and local authorities, along with active community engagement, have proven essential for sustainability. These collaborations enhance service delivery, ensure long-term impact, and promote local ownership.

Strategic, culturally sensitive awareness campaigns play a vital role in shifting societal attitudes. While mindset change takes time, consistent awareness efforts help build more inclusive and supportive communities.

Listening to and amplifying the voices of children and families is not only a core value—it is a necessity. Their lived experiences must guide every intervention to ensure meaningful, lasting change.

The community centres for child and family support have become a leading model in Albania, demonstrating how innovative, multidisciplinary, and personalized services can effectively meet the diverse needs of children and families.



”

[SOS Children's Villages] brought not just expertise, but real dedication - especially when it came to leading the costing process for alternative care. That kind of work doesn't always make headlines, but it's essential, and we deeply appreciate it.

I'm especially thankful for the support in making three foster care cases a reality here in Vlorë. These might seem like small numbers, but behind each one is a child whose life has changed for the better—and that's what truly matters. It shows what's possible when we work together with a shared vision for children growing up in safe and loving family environments.

These last years have also been a time of transformation for us. I'm especially proud of how we've reimagined and repurposed the old residential care institution. Today, it's no longer a place of separation, but a warm, welcoming community centre for child and family support - a place full of life, activity, and hope for families in need.

Ms Irena Stasa, director of social services in the municipality of Vlorë



Armenia

Armenia is a mountainous, landlocked country in the Caucasus, with a population of around 2.9 million. The capital, Yerevan, is home to approximately one million people. Between 35-40% of Armenians live in rural areas. Armenia faces challenges with high unemployment and labour skills that do not match the jobs available. The government has addressed some of the income inequality seen in earlier decades. However, more recently the country has seen rising poverty rates and an increasing vulnerability of children, young people and families.

SOS Children's Villages has been supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it, in Armenia since 1988.



The project in Armenia

In support of deinstitutionalization, the project aimed to reduce the number of children in institutional care and increase access to prevention services, community-based care, and support—including family reintegration—for children without parental care or at risk of losing it. Key measures to achieve these objectives included aligning national legislation with the UN Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children, raising awareness about the importance of foster care, and building the capacity of professionals.

While some project activities were implemented at the national level across all regions of Armenia, the family strengthening services were primarily focused in Yerevan City and the Shirak region.

Key achievements

By the end of 2023, the government reported¹ a 25% decrease in the number of institutionalized children, with a growing number of children being reintegrated with their families or placed in family-based care.

Preventive measures and community-based care services also expanded, despite the 2023 humanitarian crisis, which brought over 100,000 displaced persons—including 30,000 children—from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

¹ https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/2c1f6e50692f92df376290b6a4ec5121.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com p.68





Improved legislation and public policies

- Recommendations on guardianship, kinship care, adoption, social service standards and monitoring, and service procurement were developed and submitted for enactment. All proposals were aligned with leading international standards and best practices.

More than 20 roundtables, seminars, and meetings were held to improve the professionals' skills in recognising child abuse, violence, neglect, developing intervention options and understanding the impact on children's well-being

- More than 20 roundtables, seminars, and meetings were held to ensure stakeholder participation in the development of these proposals and to promote their acceptance.
- Study visits to Austria and Albania were organized for representatives from eight institutions and SOS Children's Villages Armenia, focusing on child protection, alternative care, and family support.
- Over 20 government representatives participated in a workshop on North Macedonia's deinstitutionalization experience, identifying key lessons to inform Armenia's next steps.

Awareness raising

In cooperation with state decision-makers, Yerevan state university, the Child protection network of Armenia, and other organizations, a national awareness campaign was launched to promote foster care and deinstitutionalization.

- The campaign reached nearly 370,000 Armenian citizens, over 12.5% of the total population.
- More than 80 articles and videos were disseminated through TV channels, newspapers, partners' official websites, and social media platforms.
- A total of 652 people attended various campaign events.

Capacity building

The project provided training to decision-makers, childcare professionals, and other relevant specialists across the country. Training topics and participation numbers included:

- Gatekeeping: 590 trainees
- Case management: 250 trainees
- Prevention, identification, and response to child abuse, neglect, and violence: 220 trainees
- Trauma-informed care: 31 trainees, including 6 trainers and 2 co-trainers
- Foster care: 27 trainees
- Children's rights and the benefits of deinstitutionalization: 32 journalists trained



Additionally, 76 parents and 102 children from at-risk families completed a 14-week family strengthening course.

The project also developed, distributed, and published online a guide on reporting and referral of children's cases to mandated agencies.

Access to quality services

- 682 children and 597 parents benefited from preventive services.
- 131 children received reintegration services, 109 of whom were successfully reunified with their biological families.
- 597 care givers received psychosocial support (individual or group).

Our best practice

Multi-faceted approach for systemic changes in child welfare

Starting point

For years, the Government of Armenia has demonstrated a strong commitment to deinstitutionalization reform by promoting family-based care, expanding day-care services, and



strengthening the foster care system. However, inadequate alternative care standards have led to continued reliance on institutional care, disrupting family bonds and failing to provide sufficient support for vulnerable children.



On the road to change

Improving childcare standards through legislative reforms and capacity building was recognized as essential for promoting family-based care and achieving better outcomes for children. SOS Children's Villages Armenia faced the challenge of driving systemic change in child welfare by adopting a multi-faceted approach that included legislative and policy development, capacity building, and direct intervention.

These efforts were further complicated by the humanitarian crisis in 2023, which underscored the urgent need for effective foster care solutions. Despite the challenges, our partnership with the Government of Armenia remained strong, with a shared focus on expanding family-based alternatives for children in need. The crisis was seen not as a setback, but as an additional catalyst for meaningful and lasting change.

Destination: Betterment

We initially introduced comprehensive training programmes for social workers and caregivers, with a focus on family reunification and support. By operationalizing the signed Memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of labour and social affairs, we were able to train over 980 state professionals, enhancing their knowledge and skills in delivering quality support services to vulnerable children and their families. The training programmes covered national legislation, social service standards, case management, alternative care, and gatekeeping.



Within the scope of this project, SOS Children's Villages Armenia invested in developing and maintaining a strong and effective partnership with the Ministry, ensuring its active participation and ownership in efforts to improve child protection legislation. A ten-member working group was formed, which included the Deputy Minister of labour and social affairs and key department heads. This group was tasked with developing legislative and policy recommendations.



Early in the project, the working group participated in a study visit to Austria, gaining valuable insights into the Austrian legal framework and practices related to alternative care and quality family support services.

As a result of these cooperative efforts, we developed amendments to the Family code and other relevant legal acts to align with the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care for Children. These recommendations were informed by comprehensive research and analysis of existing child-care policies, legal frameworks, and the specific needs of children, families, and caregivers. Notably, regulations governing the Guardianship and trusteeship child protection committees (GTCs) were significantly improved.

Additional areas of improvement—addressed through amendments to both primary and secondary legislation—included: out-of-home placement decisions, supportive guardianship, kinship care and adoption, service delivery standards, monitoring systems, and public procurement in the field of child protection.

In recent years, public resources have been reallocated from institutional care to family- and community-based services, supporting reintegration efforts and the development of family-based care models.

Simultaneously, the project delivered preventive and reintegration services in local communities, generating practical insights that informed the proposed legal reforms.

Collectively, these efforts contributed to a reported 25% decrease in the number of institutionalized children in Armenia. This improvement in child well-being and family stability was supported by enhanced professional capacity among caregivers and frontline professionals, which played a critical role in the effective implementation of new legislation and policy measures.





Our learnings / To fellow travellers on the path to change

Apply a multi-faceted approach to promote systemic change. In our experience, combining advocacy for legislative and policy development with capacity building and service provision (i.e., direct intervention) proved highly effective.

Engage early and consistently with key government stakeholders to build mutual understanding and trust. While we formalized this collaboration through a Memorandum of understanding, we also maintained open and continuous communication throughout the project.

In advocacy efforts, identify shared goals with government officials and remain committed to achieving them. Co-create legislation and policy measures, enabling government representatives to take the lead in ensuring the practicality and enforceability of proposed solutions.

Use capacity building to strengthen relationships between state and non-state childcare professionals. Involve both groups in joint training sessions to foster trust and collaboration. Facilitate the exchange of experiences and expertise—this is an effective form for building capacity and advancing shared goals.

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The input of the working group has been very effective and appreciated in advancing the reforms.

Tatevik Stepanyan, Deputy Minister of labour and social affairs

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We will never let our children feel abandoned again. We know we can overcome all hardships together.

two parents, clients of reintegration services

”

This programme has provided us with invaluable knowledge and practical skills that we can immediately apply in our daily work. It's a significant step forward for child protection in our country.

Arman Grigoryan, a participant and director of a local care facility

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The longstanding collaboration between SOS Children's Villages Armenia and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is essential for the advancement of capacity building.

Vanand Karapetyan, Head of the National institute of labour and social research

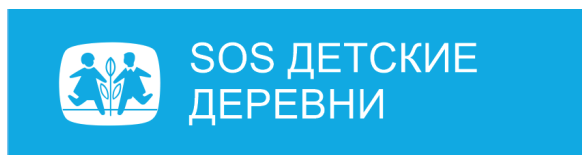




Belarus

Located in north-eastern Europe, Belarus is home to nearly 9.5 million people. Less than 20% of the population are under the age of 18, making it a country with one of the lowest birthrates in the world. Many of these children and young people need support so that they can grow up safely and have a future to look forward to.

SOS Children's Villages has been supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it, in Belarus since 1995.



The project in Belarus

Aiming to decrease the number of children placed in long-term residential institutions, the project sought to improve access to preventive and community-based services for vulnerable children, strengthen professionals' capacity to apply proven, up-to-date methodologies, and raise public support for deinstitutionalization efforts.

While many activities were conducted at the national level, implementation was focused on the Minsk and Mogilev regions.

Key achievements

The number of children placed in residential institutions dropped by almost 6% from the start of the project in late 2021 to the beginning of 2024. Of the total 13,756 children without parental care in the country, 1,672 children (12.2%) were placed in institutions—down from 2,750 in 2022.

Improved legislation and public policies

- Proposals to strengthen the childcare system at both national and local levels were accepted by the Ministry of Education and included in the National Action Plan for the Improvement of the Situation of Children and the Protection of Their Rights for 2022–2026.
- The national mechanism for assisting minor victims of sexual violence and exploitation was developed in 2023, with the participation of SOS Children's Villages. Improvement proposals were submitted in 2024.





- The methodological recommendations for child welfare authorities on the creation and monitoring of foster families, issued by the Ministry of Education in 2024, reflect some of the key learnings accumulated during project implementation.
- Proposals were submitted to the authorities in late 2024 regarding the public commissioning of specific social services, such as intensive residential rehabilitation for biological and foster families in crisis, shelters for women in crisis situations, supervised independent living for care leavers, and more.

Awareness raising

Approximately 20% of the population—nearly 2 million people—were reached through two awareness-raising campaigns: one on the need for deinstitutionalization and the promotion of foster parenting (2022–2024), and another on preventing social stereotypes against vulnerable children (2023–2024).

Capacity building

- Delivered seven new or improved tools and methodologies to childcare professionals:
 - * Updated case management guide
 - * Practical experiences and recommendations for improving family-like care
 - * Developed algorithm for strengthening intersectoral cooperation and recommendations for key regional actors involved in family prevention work
 - * Monitoring tool for assessing the quality of care and foster parents' professional and parental competencies
 - * Evaluation checklist for implementing quality service standards
 - * Tools for assessing the needs of target groups (field professionals, biological and foster families)
 - * Personal Documentation Guidance for managing files of children in alternative care
- Developed seven new training programmes for professionals, foster parents, and vulnerable children and families:
 - * Training course for foster parents of children with special needs
 - * Training course for foster parents on developmental psychology and age-related care considerations
 - * Social rehabilitation support for biological and foster families in crisis
 - * Reintegration support for children separated from their families of origin
 - * Alternative care approaches for infants (children aged 0–3)
 - * Alternative care for children with special needs
 - * *I'm a Parent* mobile application for parents





- 521 decision-makers, professionals, and other stakeholders participated in professional development and experience exchange events.
- 3,544 professionals participated in case management and/or evidence-based parenting programmes.

Access to quality services

- 774 children without parental care received high-quality alternative care, including 44 infants and 91 children with disabilities.
- 1,048 children at risk of losing parental care received psychosocial support.
- 2,185 parents and foster parents improved their parenting skills through educational courses, self-help groups, experience exchange clubs, forums, and similar activities.





Our best practice

Comprehensive professional development for childcare professionals Starting point

Child welfare professionals—working in education, social protection, healthcare, and law enforcement—play a vital role in protecting children at risk or without parental care. However, in Belarus, ongoing socio-economic challenges have left the child protection system underfunded, understaffed, and lacking adequate infrastructure and tools. Legal reforms, weak interagency coordination, and limited training opportunities further hinder professionals' ability to provide effective support or implement key reforms such as deinstitutionalization.

Burdened by excessive paperwork, large caseloads, and rigid procedures, professionals are often unable to make case-specific decisions. Continuous exposure to trauma—combined with insufficient emotional support—leads to high levels of stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction, all of which negatively impact the stability and quality of services delivered to vulnerable children.

Finding the right path

To tackle these challenges, SOS Children's Villages Belarus, under the deinstitutionalization project, developed a holistic support system for professionals based on three pillars: Learn – Share – Care. This system includes flexible, practical training, user-friendly tools, and consistent psychosocial support through strong professional networks.

The selected approach is grounded in human-centred principles, such as the best interests of the child, mutual respect, diversity, non-violent communication, and the creation of safe learning spaces. It also promotes self-care, peer support, and actively challenges harmful stereotypes about vulnerable children.

On the road to change

The capacitating and transformative circle, designed to comprehensively foster the development of childcare professionals, included several interlinked elements:

- Development and distribution of comprehensive training curricula:

Thorough needs assessments helped identify the most pressing topics, based on which we developed curricula and materials for a variety of basic and advanced training courses. Topics included trauma, domestic violence, behavioural disorders, mental health, family conflict, and soft skills, as well as the Strong Parents – Strong Children programme, Trauma-Informed Care, and various state-certified professional retraining courses. The suggested methods of training delivery were diversified and included single- and multi-session formats, workshops, masterclasses, and consultations.

- Peer-to-peer learning and supportive networking:





We initiated and facilitated communities of practice, roundtables, dialogue platforms, and experience-sharing public events. Regional, national, and international (virtual) study visits enriched our exchange efforts, alongside social network-based thematic groups and communities. Young professionals were supported through structured mentorship programmes.

- Technology-driven solutions and digitalization:

Leveraging modern technology, we provided remote supervision and counselling—especially for professionals in remote areas—ensuring that no one was left behind. We launched an e-learning platform on trauma-informed care and trauma-specific practices for psychologists, as well as an online resource library. Through new mobile applications, professionals gained quick and easy access to materials on crisis intervention techniques.

- Emotional and psychological support:

To help professionals manage daily work-related stress, we shared mindfulness practices, self-care strategies, and cognitive-behavioural techniques. Peer-led Balint groups addressed burnout, compassion fatigue, and work-life balance. Confidential individual and group counselling and therapy were offered to those needing support in processing difficult cases and emotions.

- Methodological support:

We adapted and localized international evidence-based methodologies and service standards and developed clear monitoring and evaluation tools. In collaboration with professional associations, we promoted the use of a case management approach for families in crisis and for foster families.

- Strengthening interagency collaboration, and community and family engagement:

We regularly organized meetings to foster a shared understanding of issues and to encourage integrated service delivery. Professionals were trained to collaborate effectively with families, community leaders, organizations, and local companies. We also encouraged partnerships among academia, legislators, and practitioners to develop and refine both practices and policies.

To go far, we walked with others

Such a complex undertaking was a cooperative effort involving many actors. Government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education and municipal departments, supported policy development and coordination. Educational institutions and civic organizations contributed to the co-creation and delivery of training, while private sector partners provided volunteer support and resources.

We used memoranda of understanding and clear action plans to define shared goals and clarify roles. Regular communication, progress updates, and a flexible approach helped maintain trust and ensure lasting impact.

Destination: Betterment

Among the 3,544 professionals reached through our capacity-building activities, we collected feedback on the impact of their newly acquired knowledge and skills in their daily work. The interventions led to: improved child well-being and the creation of safer, more





nurturing environments; stronger families with better access to support and parenting tools; empowered professionals with enhanced capacity, motivation, and reduced burn-out; and improved collaboration among all involved actors.

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I used to think helping was just about following protocols. But SOS Children's Villages taught me that real support means relearning every day. Intervisions where we unpack tough cases without judgment. Dialogue spaces, practical trainings, and masterclasses that shift your perspective. Colleagues who become more than mentors — a true support team and close-knit community. Now I'm certain: even the hardest stories hold hope.

Olga, social pedagogue, Minsk

”

Walking professionally alongside SOS Children's Villages transformed my entire approach to helping children and families. Here, I learned to go beyond textbook solutions—to truly listen, analyse, and find ways forward, even in the most complex cases. Supervision sessions, trainings, and peer exchanges became my constant professional 'reset button.' Now I know for sure: even in crisis, there's always room for change. And the most rewarding part? Seeing children get a real chance at a happier childhood, and parents gaining the strength and skills to make it happen.

Alena, educational psychologist, Mogilev

Our learnings / To fellow travellers on the path to change

Supporting frontline professionals is key to building a resilient child protection system. Sustainable change requires ongoing investment, evidence-based practices, and cross-sector collaboration. For those pursuing similar goals, the lesson is clear: start with people, remain flexible, and build together.

The tools, training programmes, and materials developed under this project can be adapted and scaled to other contexts to help more professionals support children and families effectively.

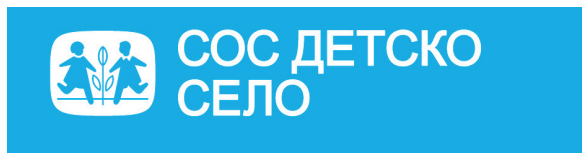




North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a landlocked country in south-east Europe and home to 1.8 million people. The country has an ethnically diverse population, including 58% Macedonians, 24% Albanians, 4% Turks and 3% Romani. Children make up 19 percent of the population, constituting around 400,000 individuals. With a relatively high rate of unemployment - over 12% - many people have left the country and moved abroad for work.

SOS Children's Villages has been supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it, in North Macedonia since 2002.



The project in North Macedonia

In 2019, as part of the National deinstitutionalization strategy, North Macedonia abolished residential institutions for children and introduced social licensing and contracting.

The project of SOS Children's Village North Macedonia was designed and launched to support the continued implementation of this strategy and to complement the development, promotion, and support of community-based services, such as foster care and care for children with complex needs.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the National institute for social activities, the agency responsible for the continuous development of social protection professionals and caregivers, were key partners and appointed representatives to the project's steering committee, along with members from relevant civic organizations.

A significant portion of the activities was implemented at the national level, with a particular focus on the Skopje and Pelagonija regions.

Key achievements

Improved legislation and public policies

- Draft modifications of bylaws were submitted to the authorities for enactment, ensuring the systematic introduction of Trauma-Informed Care across the social protection system.
- The Trauma-Informed Care training programme was accredited by the National institute for social activities.





- The Trauma-Informed Care approach was included in the official curriculum of the Institute of social work and social policy at the state university in Skopje.

Awareness raising

- An estimated 1.38 million people were reached through the national foster care promotion campaign. In relative terms, more than three-quarters of the population were informed via TV, radio, online, and social media.
- Around 2,700 people attended 45 public events held in all major towns across the country to learn more about foster care; 434 individuals expressed interest in becoming foster parents.
- 35 newly trained and certified foster families are now caring for over 40 children.



Capacity building

- 111 social protection professionals from across the country were trained in motivational interviewing.
- 69 professionals and 56 foster parents received training in Trauma-Informed Care, and 16 Trauma-Informed Care trainers were developed.
- 16 professionals from SOS Children's Village North Macedonia, the State psychiatry clinic in Skopje, and the Bitola Clinical hospital were trained in dyadic developmental psychotherapy.
- 13 professionals were trained to deliver specialized training to foster parents caring for children with disabilities.
- 32 foster parents were trained and licensed as specialized caregivers for children with disabilities.





Access to quality services

- An innovative counselling service for children and families at risk was established. Preparations included the renovation and equipping of the premises. A sensory room was made available for children.
- A total of 49 clients were supported through 774 sessions with a special educator and rehabilitator, and 619 sessions with a psychologist.

Our best practice

Building an effective system for addressing childhood trauma

Starting point

Modern research² shows that approximately 46% of children experience some form of trauma, often resulting in deep and lasting emotional scars. These traumatic experiences may include physical or sexual abuse, the loss of a loved one, natural disasters, accidents, or growing up in an unsafe or neglectful environment. Even everyday stress—like lack of love and support at home—can have serious consequences.

Trauma affects children's ability to regulate emotions, concentrate, build relationships, and maintain physical health. Studies show that 15% of girls and 6% of boys develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), manifesting symptoms such as anger, anxiety, poor concentration, sleep disturbances, and changes in appetite.

Childhood trauma also impacts brain development and increases the risk of chronic illnesses such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and even cancer. These effects can persist throughout life, making early intervention and trauma-informed support essential.

SOS Children's Village North Macedonia, with over 20 years of experience, reports that trauma is even more frequent and intense among children without parental care. Simply relocating children from residential institutions to family or family-like care is not enough to heal the effects of early trauma.

Finding the right path

Recognizing the urgent need to address these issues, SOS Children's Village North Macedonia introduced the Trauma-informed care (TIC) approach into the social protection system. TIC focuses on raising awareness among professionals and strengthening the support system for vulnerable children and families. Its integration into the system was designed to be holistic—by building the capacity of professionals to apply TIC in their daily work, supporting service providers in incorporating TIC into their organizational development plans, and proposing appropriate legislative changes.

The initiative was aligned with the National strategy for preventing and protecting children from violence 2020–2025.

² Un Sun Chung - Department of Psychiatry, Kyungpook National University Children's Hospital, School of Medicine, Kyungpook National University





Destination: Betterment

SOS Children's Village North Macedonia identified all relevant stakeholders and formed a working group to ensure institutional acceptance and to draft legislative improvements.

Capacity-building efforts extended across sectors and levels—from national policy to local service delivery. A train-the-trainer model was introduced to strengthen professionals' ability to transfer knowledge, ensuring sustainability. Training was also provided to foster families to help them better understand trauma and support the children in their care.

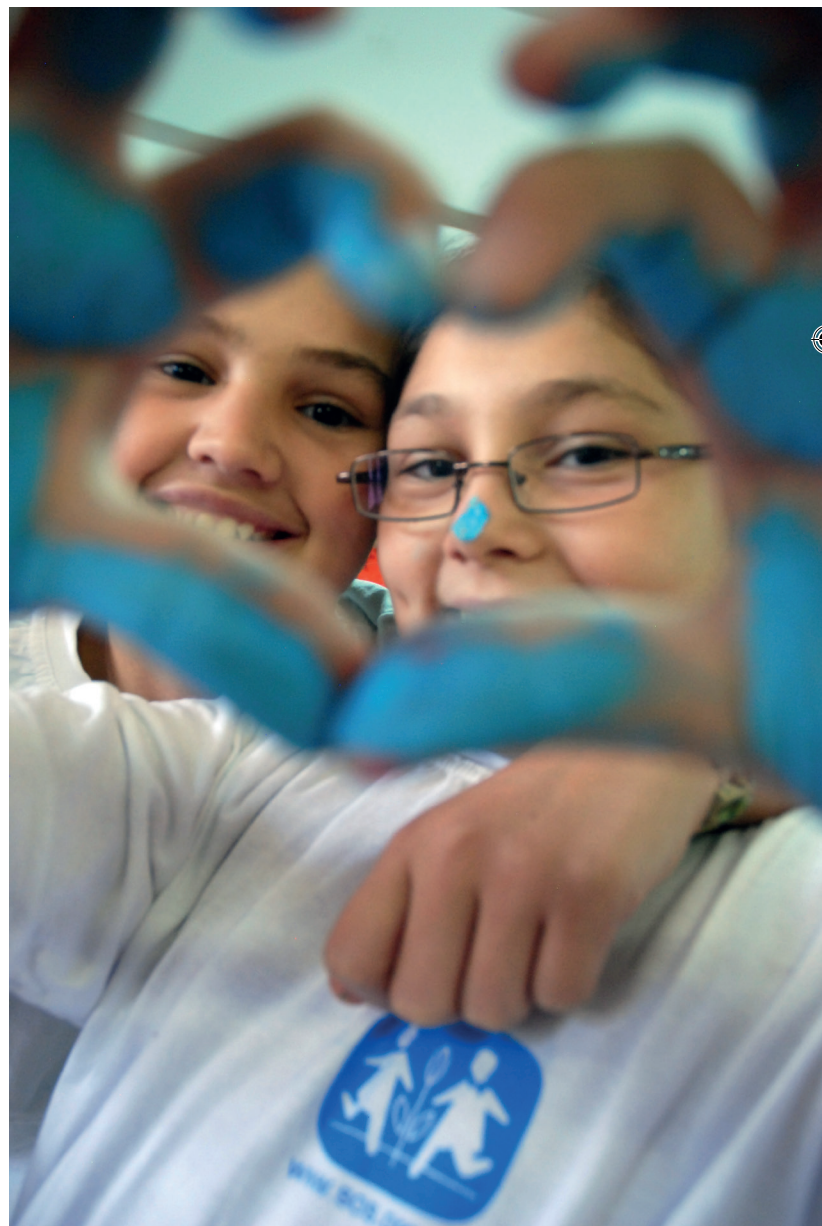
Young people who grew up in care were actively involved in the training process, sharing personal stories and participating in case study discussions. Their contributions made the training more relatable and impactful, while also building their own capacity to engage with trauma-related issues.

The programme was officially accredited by the National institute for social activities in Skopje.

Workshops were conducted at foster care centres, including SOS Children's Village Skopje and four state childcare institutions in Skopje and Bitola, to support organizational development and the implementation of the Trauma-informed care (TIC) approach. These efforts led to the creation of operational plans and changes in internal regulations, further embedding trauma-informed practices into the social protection system.

Legislative improvements were drafted in cooperation with representatives of national institutions. The recommendations support the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees every child the right to live free from violence, abuse, and neglect in all settings—home, school, and care institutions. They are also aligned with the EU's strategic approach to mental health, as outlined in COM(2023)298, which emphasizes access to preventive care, high-quality treatment, and reintegration into society.

Recommendations for the improvement of two bylaws on social services were prepared and presented to the responsible ministry for enactment.





Our learnings / To fellow travellers on the path to change

The initiative to build an effective system for addressing childhood trauma brought together professionals from various sectors and encouraged cross-disciplinary dialogue. This collaboration fostered a deeper understanding of trauma and generated commitment to effective, coordinated action. While involving diverse actors requires significant resources, energy, and time, our experience demonstrated that it fosters shared understanding, alignment around common goals, and a strong sense of ownership.

By promoting cross-sector collaboration and investing in training, practical tools, and mindset shifts, SOS Children's Village North Macedonia laid the foundation for long-term, sustainable change.





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The Trauma-informed-care training allowed me to gain deep understanding for how trauma affects the psychological and physical health of the people, and how that can influence their behaviour. In my daily work, I began to implement strategies which include adapting my approach to the clients. For example, I became more sensitive to their reactions and needs which allowed me to create a safe and supporting environment. I began to mind my communication manners, like avoiding accusatory and overly authoritarian attitudes, as well as using language that is clearer and supportive. I learned to recognize the clients' signals of stress or overload, and to offer them strategies for self-soothing or shifting resources for additional support. As a result, my ability to create trust and safety with the clients has improved, which made the work process more effective and more suitable to their individual needs.

Aleksandar Mitanoski,

representative of state-run institution for children with challenging behaviour

”

The Trauma-informed care Training of Trainers was an excellent combination of important subject, modern and current views and approaches, and excellent trainers. ... Since then, almost all my professional readings were, and honestly even now, two years later, still are on the topic trauma.

[The training] made initial, but significant changes in the approach and service for the clients through increasing the level of sensitivity to trauma, recognizing the signs, being supportive of the change with positive language, including the mental health and the care of the mental wellbeing in our documents.

With this, I and the other trainers became agents of change and influence in the field of trauma.

Jasmina Kochankovska,

representative of state-run Centre for support to foster families, Bitola

”

What makes the training especially useful is the fact that they are based on knowledge that was already successfully implemented in work very much resembling ours. Meaning, the trainings are not theoretical, but very practical. We discuss specific life situations we've encountered with the children, but where we lacked sufficient understanding for the situation itself, the reasons that lead to it, as well as the right approach and finding successful solutions.

Mite Goshev, foster parent

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I met new people, but I came across something even more important – I realized that for a long time I was running away from the topic of trauma. The truth is, sooner or later, everyone must face their demons. Thanks to the training, not only did I stop hiding from the truth, but I also completely came to my senses.

Marija Samardziska, care leaver

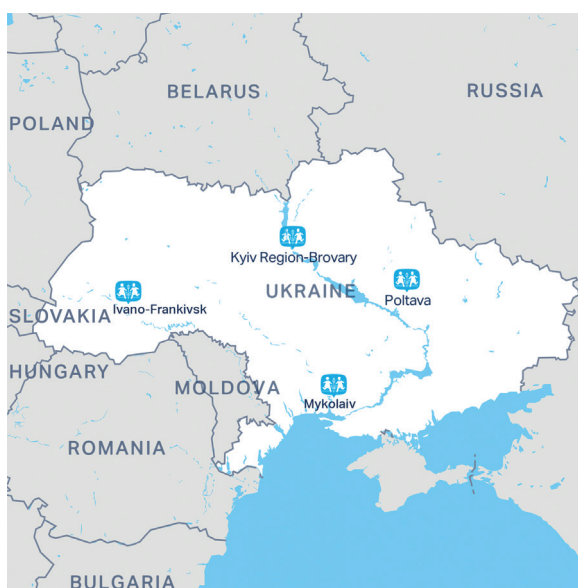




Ukraine

Europe's second largest country, Ukraine, is home to roughly 43.8 million people. When the war with Russia began in February 2022, an estimated 14.3 million people were displaced from Ukraine within the country and to countries across Europe. While some have returned to the country, more than 7 million people remain internally displaced in Ukraine. Most of those who have been displaced are women and children, nearly a third of whom have been displaced more than once before, and almost 1 in 10 have been displaced three times or more.

SOS Children's Villages has been supporting children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it, in Ukraine since 2003.



The project in Ukraine

The launch of the Russian Federation full-scale invasion on Ukraine rapidly changed the context. In response, the project was adjusted to support the development of growingly needed community- and family-based social services for children and families in need, and building societal consensus on the need to implement deinstitutionalization reforms.

The project focused on two regions covering the following communities:

- Kyiv Region: Boyarka, Borodianka, Irpin, Fastiv;
- Ivano-Frankivsk Region: Horodenka, Kolomyia, Ivano-Frankivsk

Key achievements

Improved legislation and public policies

- SOS Children's Villages Ukraine, along with other civic organizations, took part in shaping Strategy for Ensuring the Right of Every Child in Ukraine to Grow in the Family Environment for 2024-2028, which ensures every child's right to grow up in a family environment.

The reform of the child protection system through deinstitutionalization is not only a matter of social policy - it is crucial for strengthening Ukraine's economy, and human capital. By investing in family-based care and community support systems, Ukraine lays the foundation for long-term social cohesion, inclusive development, and the well-being of future generations.





Deinstitutionalization also plays a vital role in the country's European integration. It reflects Ukraine's commitment to aligning with the values and standards of the European Union, particularly in the areas of human rights, child protection, and social inclusion. As such, the successful implementation of this reform is both a national imperative and an essential step on the path toward full EU membership.

Awareness raising

- An estimated 28 million people were reached through the national campaign titled *All children are ours*. The campaign aimed to support the approval of the new deinstitutionalization strategy, promote the development of family-based care in targeted communities, and raise awareness of social services that help prevent or overcome difficult life circumstances—ultimately enabling children to remain in their biological families.
- A total of 370 individuals attended five public events titled *Open hearts day* in targeted communities, where they learned more about social services and family-type care, including foster care.



- 381 decision-makers and stakeholders participated in roundtables to share experiences and models of excellence in community needs assessment and inter-agency cooperation, with the goal of acquiring new knowledge.
- 9,369 participants attended 47 webinars organized for foster parents and state professionals.





Capacity building

- A total of 210 decision-makers and stakeholders from the target regions participated in trainings and acquired new knowledge—91 on needs assessment and 119 on interagency cooperation in the best interests of every child.
- 70 decision-makers and stakeholders were trained in planning and budgeting at the local levels.
- 381 decision-makers and stakeholders participated in roundtables to share experiences and models of excellence in community needs assessment and inter-agency cooperation, with the aim of acquiring new knowledge.
- 502 professionals in target regions and communities (and beyond, through online training opportunities) were trained in effective techniques: such as the case management approach, early intervention, foster care counselling and training, and evidence-based parenting programmes.

Access to quality services

Five Social Service Centers were renovated and equipped. As a result:

- High-quality alternative care services were provided to 807 children without parental care in the targeted municipalities.
- Innovative, high-quality community-based support and prevention services were made available to 2,651 children at risk and 2,366 parents across four communities.

Our best practice

Shifting mindsets and changing practices for the wellbeing of all our children

Starting point

Before the full-scale invasion, 96,577 vulnerable children were living in institutional care in Ukraine. As elsewhere, this form of care violates children's rights. It often fails to provide a child-friendly environment, contributes to significant psychological distress and social marginalization, and hinders the developmental potential of the children affected.

Since beginning its work in 2003, SOS Children's Villages Ukraine has virtually eliminated the placement of children in institutional care in Brovary, a local community in the Kyiv Region. This was achieved through the promotion of foster care and the provision of preventive services, in close collaboration with the local community.

Building on this experience—and convinced of its scalability—we reached out to other local communities, all of which were facing similar challenges: substandard services for vulnerable children and families, population increases due to the war, insufficient funding, outdated knowledge and skills in childcare and related fields, and continued reliance on obsolete frameworks and familiar practices. Despite these challenges, we shared a common vision: to improve the lives of children.





Finding the right path

The project was originally launched in three regions in central and eastern Ukraine: Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, and Kyiv. However, the full-scale invasion in February 2022 forced a shift in focus from the [occupied] Luhansk Region and [frontline] Zaporizhzhia Region to safer areas in the west of the country.

In 2022, six local communities were selected, only one of which—Brovary in Kyiv Region—already had an established SOS Children's Villages presence. The remaining locations were Fastiv and Borodyanka in Kyiv Region, and Uzhhorod, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Lviv. In 2023, the project replaced Uzhhorod and Lviv for four additional communities: Irpin and Boyarka in Kyiv Region, and Kolomyia and Horodenka in Ivano-Frankivsk Region.

Needs assessments were conducted using a new methodology introduced by the Ministry of Social Policy and made available to the seven target communities, as well as regional authorities and NGO partners working at the community level.

The assessments revealed that many Ukrainian professionals continue to apply outdated methodologies that no longer reflect current scientific knowledge. Their practices remain largely shaped by the former residential care-based system. All communities identified the need for their professionals to be trained in modern, effective techniques, including the case management approach, reintegration of children from alternative care in families of origin, strengthening parental capacities, and needs assessment.



Destination: Betterment

Horodenka is a local community in the Ivano-Frankivsk Region, comprising 40 settlements and a total population of 45,700, including approximately 5,500 children. Traditional family values and faith play a significant role in this largely rural area, where the local population historically demonstrates strong awareness of community issues. This context provided a unique opportunity to enhance local engagement and foster active involvement.

Following the full-scale invasion, the community was overwhelmed by an influx of internally displaced people and the accompanying health, social, legal, educational, and other challenges. The most urgent need was triage support, in which SOS Children's Villages played a key role.





In collaboration with the local community, a needs assessment was conducted, resulting in evidence-based decisions and actionable plans. While emergency measures were immediately implemented, long-term development actions—such as investments in facilities and capacity building of local staff—were also undertaken. The community recognized the importance of both approaches: emergency actions addressed pressing needs, while development measures ensured long-term sustainability.

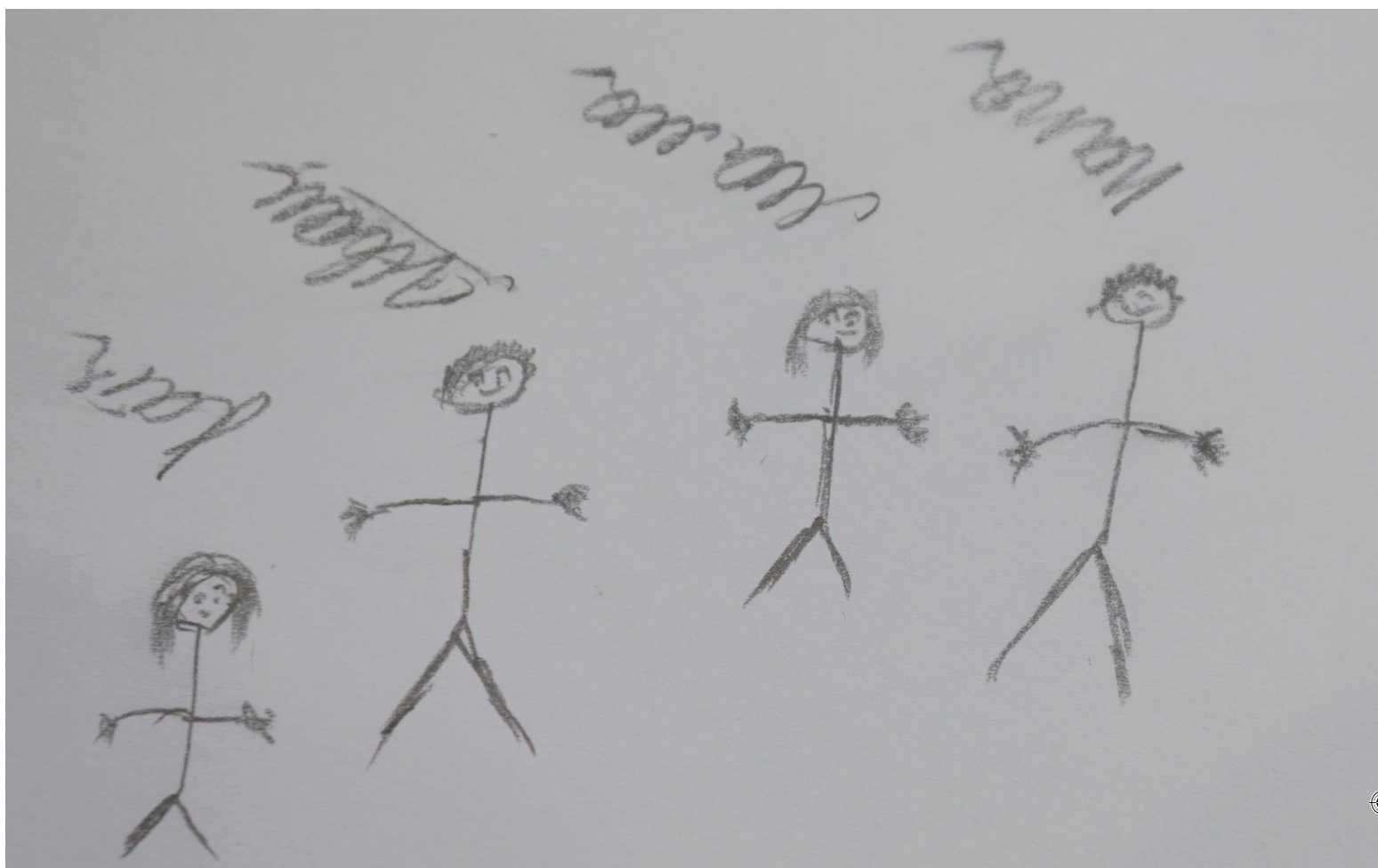
As a direct result of the needs assessment, a Centre for social support of children and families was established, offering psychological counselling, social support for families in difficult life circumstances, support for families with orphans and children deprived of parental care, emergency (crisis) intervention, and other services. A Day-care centre for children with disabilities was also launched.

SOS Children's Villages committed to a five-year period of monitoring and continuous training, while the local community was entrusted with managing daily operations and staffing of the facilities.

A series of online and in-person trainings were conducted to address identified capacity-building needs. These sessions improved the knowledge and skills of local professionals in areas such as the provision of social and preventive services, reintegration methodology, case management, and evidence-based parenting programmes.

At the direct request of local communities—who expressed limited understanding of the legislative framework and how to apply it in practice—a training on planning and forming local budgets was conducted. This training covered all stages of the budget process, including tools for social service planning, legislation governing local government responsibilities, costing methods for social services, and the structure of the territorial community budget.





Training on cross-sectoral cooperation helped break down siloed working approaches, offering much-needed stress relief and practical strategies for prioritization, delegation, and collaboration. It enabled professionals to deliver tailored intervention packages for vulnerable children and families.

In Horodenka and the other six target communities—as well as in additional communities indirectly involved in the project—the number of vulnerable children placed in residential institutions did not reach the planned 10% reduction target. At the national level, however, the number decreased by 7.1%, from 96,577 (as of January 1, 2020) to 89,797 (as of the third quarter of 2024).

This target, however, was set before the full-scale invasion. In the context of an ongoing war, this achievement is a testament to the fact that perseverance and commitment can drive improvements in child protection and social services—precisely when they are most urgently needed.





Our learnings / To fellow travellers on the path to change

An expected, though unofficial, outcome was the networking and exchange of experiences among representatives of the local communities.

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These trainings have united many communities, as there is always someone to exchange experience with. Further inspiration came from the work of SOS Children's Villages both as direct service provider and partner in designing a big social package capable of responding to all needs of vulnerable children and families.

Andriy Tsiumpala, the first deputy head of Horodenka council

The acquired knowledge and skills are already giving results.

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With this project, we were able to unite professionals from different communities, inspire them to make decisive changes to ensure the best interests of children. This training set, research, study visits were conducted, and 5 centres were launched, where people receive the necessary support. I am sure that this network will exist even after the project is completed.

Antonina Zahrotska, project manager





Bridging knowledge, inspiring change

Cross-country learning and exchange on childcare reforms

Transforming child welfare systems requires shared learning, collaboration, and fresh ideas.

Through this project, state and non-state professionals from five countries came together to exchange experiences, explore innovative approaches, and strengthen their expertise and commitment to improving the lives of children and families.

Learning and exchange in figures

- Over 300 professionals from all project countries benefited from various cross-country learning and exchange activities.
- 8 study visits to five countries – Albania, Armenia, Austria, Georgia, North Macedonia and Uzbekistan – involving 81 state and non-state decisionmakers and professionals from four countries – Albania, Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine.
- 14 online webinars and exchange meetings on 8 selected relevant issues.
- 3 exchange meetings in Albania, Germany and North Macedonia for project staff.
- 7 editions of the project newsletter Bridging the gap.
- 4 technical support visits to Albania and Armenia by regional project staff.
- Established virtual resource library regularly updated with relevant international, regional and national studies, analyses, research reports, and legislative and strategic documents.
- Developed common methodology for planning and implementing awareness raising campaigns.

Learning and exchange activities provided valuable opportunities for decision-makers, policymakers, and childcare professionals to explore diverse childcare systems and reform efforts. Sharing experiences with colleagues enabled hands-on learning about best practices, common challenges, and potential solutions.

Exchange topics were selected in a participatory manner. Experiences related to social protection reforms, deinstitutionalization, the transformation of residential institutions into community-based services, social service costing, licensing and contracting mechanisms, as well as strengthening foster care and prevention systems, generated broad interest across the five countries.

Participants actively engaged in learning about each other's legal frameworks and policies, innovative programmes promoting family-based care, independent living support for young people, and training systems for child protection professionals. They explored the role of local self-governments within national social service systems, funding models, interagency cooperation practices, and case management procedures designed to ensure holistic family support.





Special focus was placed on cross-country professional exchanges around newly introduced methodologies, such as parenting skills development, strategies for identifying foster families, and trauma-informed care.

These learning and exchange opportunities were more than discussions—they were moments of inspiration, connection, and transformation. They empowered professionals to rethink their approaches, adopt new tools, methods and methodologies, and bring renewed hope to children and families in need.

By sharing lessons learned, good practices, and challenges, participants inspired action beyond borders. We are now more convinced than ever that by learning from one another, we can build stronger social service systems—and a future where every child can thrive.

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We learned how the social system in Albania works, how social services are delivered and funded, and about the services of SOS Children's Villages in Albania. We talked about demographic challenges and the system of cooperation between municipalities and non-governmental organizations. It was valuable to hear frank answers to questions about challenges and difficulties in work.

municipal representative from Ukraine on a study visit to Albania

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We hope that our national ministry will take note of all the important points of the deinstitutionalization process here, as a basis to achieve change in our country!

state institution representative from Albania on a study visit to North Macedonia





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