



Minsk. Photo: Alexander Kuznetsov / Flickr (Creative Commons)

Getting children out of institutions – alcohol a major factor

In Belarus, more than 25,000 children are raised in various institutions. The Swedish organisation Adoptionscentrum runs projects in the country to prevent boys and girls from being separated from their families – and has found that alcohol is a major contributor to the problem.

Adoptionscentrum's main work is helping families with adoptions, but they also do extensive work around the world to prevent children from ending up in institutions in the first place.

Every year authorities send about 4,000 Belarus children deprived of parental care to institutions. Orphans are only a small fraction of the total number.¹

– We work mainly with adoptions, but in several countries we also run projects aimed at preventing children from being sent to institutions. We know that institutions are a bad environment for children, in many ways. In this work,

especially in Belarus, we have seen that alcohol is a very strong contributing factor to this problem. About 85 % of the children in institutions come from an environment of alcohol abuse, and in order to really change anything we need to work on the issue of alcohol, says Ulrika Öberg, program coordinator at Adoptionscentrum.

Together with a local partner organisation Adoptionscentrum started self-help groups for parents who had been forced to give up their children due to alcohol problems.

– The organisation we cooperated with had

¹ Belarus Digest online (read February 21 2017): <http://belarusdigest.com/story/social-orphans-belarus-alcohol-takes-its-toll-12344>



Ulrika Öberg. Photo: Pierre Andersson

experience of the Alcoholics Anonymous concept but parents were a completely new target group for them.

In Belarus, children who are taken into care first spend six months in a temporary children's centre. During that time parents are allowed to visit while authorities determine whether the family situation has changed so that the children can return home.

– We decided to start self-help groups at these children's centres. This concept was at the time totally unknown in Belarus and it took some time for it to gain acceptance. There is a huge problem with stigma around alcoholism, and even staff members at the children's centres were suspicious at first.

A precondition for children to be able to return to their families is that parents seek help for alcohol-related problems. This was a major motivating factor for parents to attend the groups. Holding the meetings at the children's centres was also helpful since parents were

coming there to visit their children.

One of the key success factors was to train both staff at the children's centres and relevant government officials in alcohol-related issues.

– This helped us a lot. Gaining more knowledge created a deeper understanding about what we wanted to achieve, and our partner organisation got a lot of support from the local government after this. Parents also told us that they experienced better attitudes and treatment from the government's side after this training, says Ulrika Öberg.

After the completion of the project, most of the self-help groups continued on their own.

– We are happy with the results. Many of the groups are sustainable and a lot of children have been able to return to their parents. ■

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