

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM AT THE TERRITORIAL LEVEL IN BIHOR COUNTY BETWEEN 2010-2016

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Abstract: *The development of the child protection system is part of the strategic policies of the Romanian Government and takes into account the financing of services and of complementary activities, as well as of the specific social services at the level of national and local authorities through involving the entire society. The aim of the present paper is to present the system of social protection for children at the regional level in Bihor county by looking at its development in the period between the years 2010-2016 and also by looking at the specific characteristics which deal with the wide range of the provided social services, as well as the resources allocated for such services. The paper also discusses the social effects of the social protection system and the possibilities of improving the effectiveness of its financing.*

Keywords: *Child protection; social services; resources; financing; Bihor County.*

JEL Classification: *H30; G18.*

1. Introduction

Ensuring the measures of social protection provided for in the Constitution of Romania is a permanent task of both legislative and executive forums. The governmental strategy proposes that by the year of 2020 they will realize investments in child development and welfare, based on a holistic and integrated approach that should be accepted by all competent state institutions and authorities, which have as their main purpose the concrete and full exercising of children's rights, meeting the child's needs in a universal and non-restrictive way.

The principles laid down in the strategy aim at promoting and respecting the child's supreme interests, without discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities and the involvement of the entire society in child development and welfare, but the essential responsibility belongs to the parents, and then, at a secondary level, to the state authorities as well as to the civil society. State authorities have the obligation to contribute to the ensuring of the necessary resources for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child through the proactive approach of family supporting measures in order to prevent the separation of the child from his/her family where her/his rights can be exercised. Ensuring the promotion of children's rights, of their rights of development, participation and protection is one of the main responsibilities of the Parliament and the Government.

The central bodies of power, in consensus with international regulations, are drawing up normative acts in the fields of defending and promoting children's rights as well as regarding the system of organization and functioning of the state authorities designed to provide and carry out the measures for their protection. Moreover, these also regulate the range of granted social benefits, the levels of such benefits, as well as the requirements for the accreditation and licensing of social services at the level

of the mandatory minimum quality standards, together with the incurred standard costs.

At the same time, they establish and provide the predominant means and sources of funding both for the entire system of child protection and for the system of facilities and benefits granted to those involved – families, private providers of social services, employers.

Also, the central authorities regulate the criteria of admission into certain categories of beneficiaries of social benefits and special social intervention services.

At the level of local authorities, public services of social assistance have the role and the mission of preventing child protection measures, of establishing plans of services and of carrying out individual protection projects, of granting benefits and facilities to those involved, and they also have the role of informing the competent institutions whenever the laws regarding children's rights are broken.

The established measures as well as the efforts made in the system of child protection have the purpose of preventing the separation of children from their parents, of reintegrating children into their own families, or in foster families in accordance with all protection measures.

Exercising the rights of the child can be realized primarily through the involvement of the parents and of the extended family, as a legal obligation, and, alternatively, through the involvement of state authorities and of the civil society, through providing support in preventing the separation of the child from its parents, as well as regarding the child's participation in the educational process and healthcare. In cases of vulnerability and abuse, as well as neglect, exploitation, and other special situations, children benefit, by default, from special protection measures, as a matter of urgency, and they also benefit from legal representation of their interests by persons appointed by the law. In such cases parental rights are suspended. The Chapter of Introduction should refer to the context of the research.

2. Social services provided

As a result of the protection measures taken by the competent authorities, the child benefits from specialized social services in a residential system or in day-care centers, according to her/his needs. Parents can benefit from information and counselling services, as well as from parental training. The purpose of child protection measures is children's social and professional reintegration into the community, and, implicitly, in society.

Ensuring the basic social services is one of the main responsibilities of the Government. Contracting out services to non-profit agencies is adequate when it is the service and not the profit that is viewed as the ultimate objective (Colby 1990). At the same time, the private market is a means of increasing the quality of services. A market of social services that allows many private providers to offer such services, not only would reduce the costs of such services, but would also contribute to the increase of their quality levels. In the recent decades, communities have developed programs that proved to be not only innovative, but were also able to mobilize local and community resources to a large extent.

It is not a coincidence that the research regarding public-private partnerships and NGOs has rapidly increased, and some approaches became important themes of social innovation (Arpinte et al., 2006). An analysis of the institutions requires an

integrated approach of all elements, all existing regulations in society, of all values, principles, of promoted rules and routines (Onica-Chipea 2007).

Based on the aforementioned considerations, the objective of this study is to investigate the ways of optimizing child protection services in Bihor County, in the context of the available resources. The results of the research show that the conditions of granting services to children in need of placement are significantly different in the different time periods. The analysis has identified the dimensions according to which children benefit from an improvement of the services' quality through the increase of financial resources, and also through attracting a wider range of participants in the system of child protection.

Social solidarity, subsidiarity, and decentralization require the involvement of the fundamental factors of society, such as: the family, the state – through its central and local structures, civil society –which, by their organizational ability to mobilize and attract resources, define the administrative capacity of the child protection system.

The scientific field, the benevolent and voluntary participation of private persons in order to achieve child protection, the complementarity of other institutions – all of these influence in a decisive way the institutional capacity of child protection in Romania, as well as the performance and the strengthening of the system's strategic and tactical approach at the regional level.

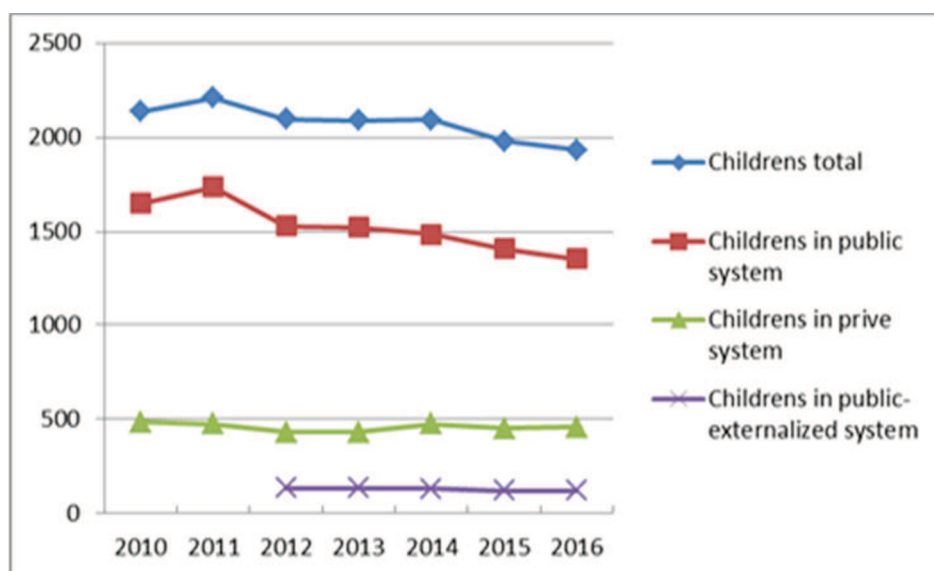


Figure 1. The number of children benefitting from the system of protection in Bihor County, between 2010- 2016

Source: *Activity Report General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Bihor*

In the period between 2010-2016 the evolution of the number of beneficiaries in the system of child protection in the county of Bihor knows a significant decrease of about 9% compared to 2010 and of 11,45 from 2011 (from 2209 to 1933 children), that is, a decrease of 276 persons of the average annual enrolments of approximately 250 children. This situation demonstrates that, in every year, around

300-526 children have left the child protection system, so that they have been reintegrated either in their natural, or in foster families, thus have been reintegrated into society.

Analyzing the tendencies regarding the structure of the providers of social services one shall observe a significant decrease of the number of children in the public system, of 18% (1650 to 1355 children), but still there is a slight oscillation in the evolution of the number of children from the system of protection granted by private providers (NGOs), between 430 and 480 children, with slight tendencies of growth over the last two years.

Measures of outsourcing, subcontracting of services for child protection from the public to private providers since 2012 have resulted in a decrease in the number of beneficiaries of the policies of protection in both the public and private sectors.

The number of children in the externalized special protection presents a relative stagnation which determined, together with the relative stability of the private system, a more accentuated decrease of the beneficiaries in the public system – an aspect that can be appreciated as being positive, since it allowed the realization in the public system of quality standards and, implicitly, the obtaining of operating licenses for all the organizational structures.

In this context one has to mention the savings in the public budget through entirely alternative financing, and, respectively, the overwhelming proportion of costs by the private providers of social services, as well as the consistency of the additional providers of externalized social services which have been undertaken by contracts.

Regarding the partnerships concluded with private providers of social services for children it has to be noted that they use an important alternative resource in order to overcome the budgetary constraints in the public system, that is, the use of volunteering, attracting donors, sponsors, etc. Also by the relations of cooperation as well as through the contractual arrangements, private partners bring a contribution to the development of professionalism in the system and new perspectives in the formation of the market of social services.

3. The regional context in the development of social services

The strategy for the years 2012-2016 established by the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Bihor (DGASPC), approved by the Decision of the County Council of Bihor no. 290/21.12.2012, considered the establishment of guidelines and a coherent institutional framework in order to create, at the level of Bihor County, a system of social services capable of ensuring social inclusion for all vulnerable groups, as well as capable of contributing to the improvement of the quality of life (Strategia DGASPC Bihor 2012-2014). The main objective is to permanently improve the quality of social services and the level of cost effectiveness of such services in the context of the private sector. In the development of implementing public-private partnerships in the social field, we can observe an increase of the formulas of social contracting. (Lambriu and Mărgineanu 2004)

Analyzing the operating expenditure of social services offered in residential centers for children and adults, one has to note the failure to comply with the cost standards approved by the law H.G.R. no. 23/2010 and Decision no. 978/2015 regarding the approval of minimum standards of costs for social services. The administration of social services being undertaken by a private social service provider has also brought about the fact that staff costs will be supported by the private supplier at the

price set in the contract. Moreover, cost standards represent the minimum cost of the annual expenditure needed for providing social services, calculated for beneficiary per type of social service, according to the minimum quality standards or to the criteria laid down by the law, and they also represent one of the basic criteria according to which public suppliers outsource social services to private suppliers.

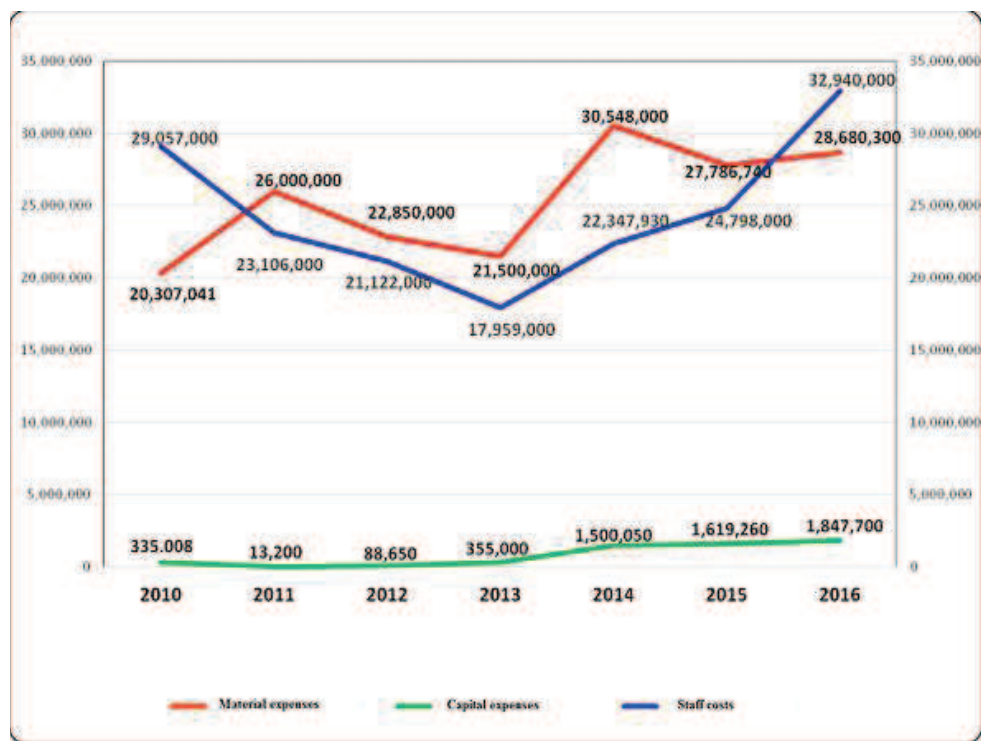


Figure 2. The costs of social services 2010-2016

Source: *Activity Report General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Bihor*

As a result of outsourcing social services both the public administration and the private sector of service providers gain advantages. Such potential advantages of the public sector are the following:

- reducing costs for the public sector in phases of implementation and maintenance of a public service;
- risk-sharing – such risks could include: increase of the costs of social services, the inability of meeting the deadlines of service delivery, the insufficient coverage of production costs as well as the costs of providing some services
- increasing or maintaining the level of providing services – the private sector can introduce new methods of providing a certain service, and this can lead to the decrease of costs and/or the improvement of the quality of the public service;

- revenue-increasing – partnerships offer the possibility of using some extra-budgetary sources that would not have been available in case of production and service delivery by the public administration;
- efficiency in implementation – as bureaucracy becomes reduced one can use more flexible forms of contracting and acquisition, the approval for the use of capital is faster, decision making is more flexible and simplified.

Law no.292/2011 (the Law of Social Assistance) sets out the objectives that have to be achieved through contracting activities with private providers of social services, both in order to outsource the service that are, at a certain point, in the administration of DGASPC, and in order to offer quality services to the beneficiaries in the framework of an effective and efficient management.

By analyzing the statement of expenditure in the budget during 2010-2016 according to Figure 3, one can find a permanent decrease of costs in the first four years, while the situation becomes worse in 2011 due to the budgetary constraints, when the number of beneficiaries presented an increase from 2135 to 2209 children and the budget appropriations decreased by 7.927 thousand lei.

A serious problem of social protection, frequently mentioned in the studies of the specialized literature, is the shortage of specialists, insufficient human resources, and the low percentage of qualified personnel both at the levels of primary services and of specialized services. Florin Lazăr and Vlad Grigoraş argued that over 60% of the personnel who should carry out prevention programs have not acquired studies in the field of specialty (Lazăr and Grigoraş 2013).

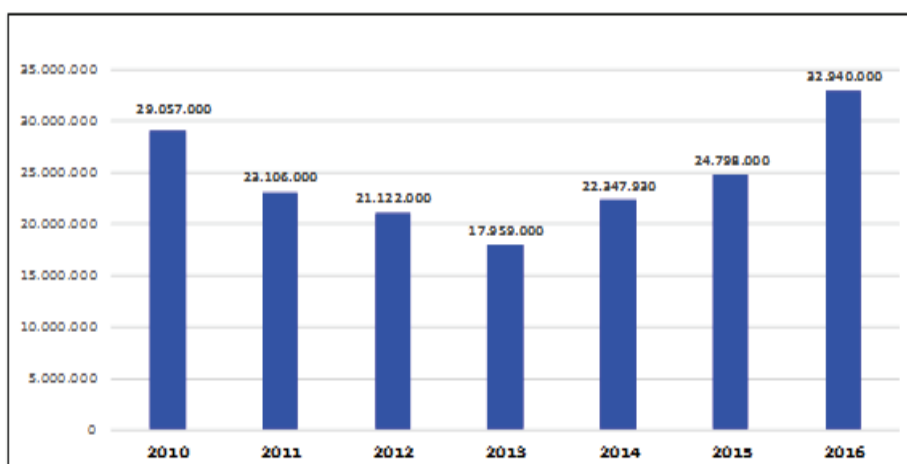


Figure 3. Staff costs 2010-2016

Source: Activity Report General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Bihor

In the past decades, programs of community development have demonstrated not only innovative approaches, but also an incredible capacity of mobilizing local and community resources. “It is no coincidence that the public-private partnerships and the subject of NGO became quickly and widely spread, since these are among the most important approaches in the field of social innovation” (Zamfir 2009, p.18).

The solution of externalizing and the maintaining the partnerships with NGOs regarding the granting of social services has produced significant savings to the budgetary expenditure in the recent period.

By analyzing the structure of expenditure from the public system of child protection according to Figure 4, one can find that up to the middle of the period there was a drastic decrease of staff costs, of about 40%, especially on the basis of staff reduction and frozen vacancies, which has led to the loss of several specialists already trained in the system. The issue of human resources in the system of social protection should be given more attention, in terms of professionalism, through increasing the employment of specialists and through the continuous training of staff, but also through avoiding overloading the staff with tasks (Marc and Oşvat 2013).

From 2013 until the end of 2016 one can observe an increase of staff costs of about 83%, a situation which was created by new employments as well as by the increases of earnings – work has been better rewarded also as recognition of the importance and of the value of the particular job. One can observe the growth of staff costs due to the relative reduction of material expenses.

The material expenses according to the charts show oscillations, the lowest values appearing at the beginning of the period, then one can see a significant increase of about 42% in 2014 as opposed to 2013. In the next period one can see values that stand for the recovery of some arrears in the provision of some necessary equipment and of functioning among the adequate parameters in terms of social services.

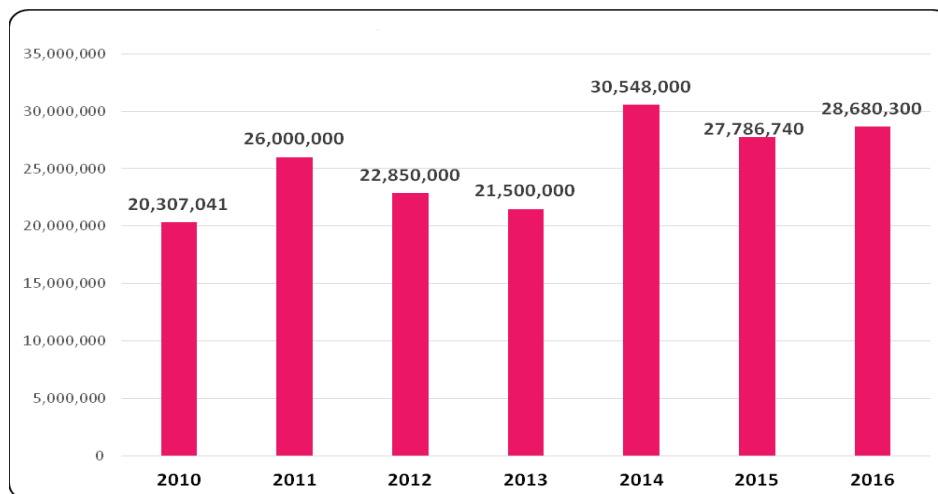


Figure 4. Material expenses 2010-2016

Source: The strategy developed by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Bihor

A significant role in the implementation and development of social services is played by capital expenditure, Figure 5, which in addition to the improvement of the living conditions of the beneficiaries has as its aim to reduce the current operating costs. As one can see in the charts provided, there is a significant increase in the capital expenditure which provides a more efficient perspective of development of the child protection system at the regional level.

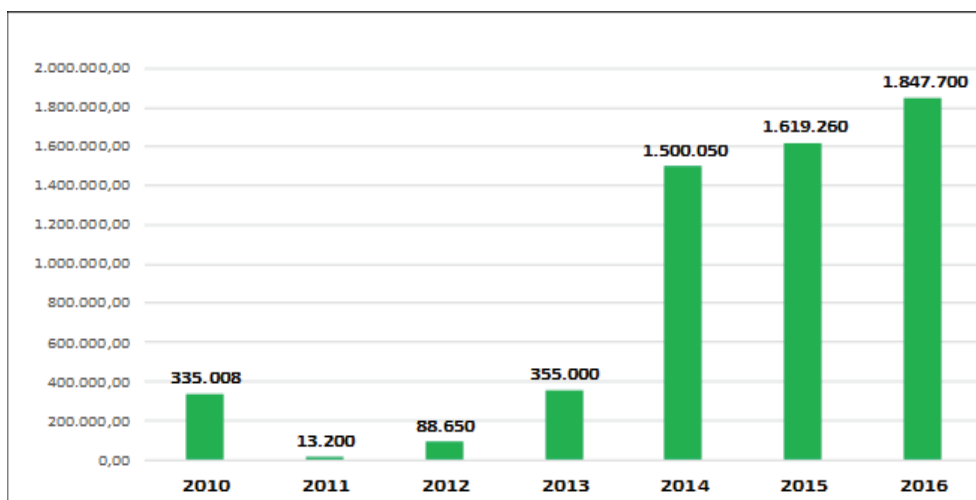


Figure 5. Capital expenses

Source: DGASPC Bihor - The strategy developed by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Bihor

The financial sustainability of the public system of child protection is largely ensured by financing realized both at the central level and that of the county council's level, as well as by the complementary participation of civil society which has led to the fulfilment of minimum standards of quality and the continual obtaining of the licenses for the functioning of the structures for providing social services destined for the promotion and protection of children's rights at the level of the DGASPC Bihor.

As the result of the research shows, based on the annual progress reports of the DGASPC Bihor, one can conclude that the national strategy on child protection in the period of 2014 - 2020 is in the process of deployment with appreciable positive results.

In the near future, the problems awaiting support and solutions in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child are those concerning: behavioural disorders, addiction, abandonment in hospitals, school abandonment, neglect, abuse, domestic violence, poor development of parenting skills in many natural families.

The general desire, and, at the same time, the ultimate objective of social protection of the child is the socio-professional integration which is currently facing difficulties also taking in consideration the new challenges and the hierarchy of priorities, so I consider that there is a need for the development of the services of child protection in terms of providing specialized services which are currently missing, such as: the development of skills for independent living, services that would prepare persons for entering the labor market, services for preventing and treating addiction, for children who commit criminal deeds and cannot be held responsible, services for juvenile mothers, for developing parenting skills, and, last but not least, granting services of coordination and monitoring of the activities of the public services of social assistance

Conclusions

The contribution of professionals in the field and the access to the sources of financing by the interested parties, by the NGOs and by the local authorities that are important providers of services for children and families, could influence the change of attitude in the field, and could even formulate a new paradigm regarding the identification of needs, preventive measures, as well as granting social services.

I argue that the child protection system is still insufficiently developed regarding that type of support which attempts to keep the child in a family environment, to ensure her/him normal conditions of life, the development of skills for independent living and children's socio-economic integration. Therefore, there is a need for more efficient mobilization of political forces, of the specialized institutions at both central and local levels, of the civil and scientific society according to the following principles:

- Establishing a more stable and more stimulating legislation from a social point of view as well as allocating possible resources;
- Improving the educational system and the vocational training;
- Developing therapeutic as well as vocational services and activities, and ensuring preparation for an independent life and family life;
- Stability and professionalism of the staff, that is, creating a motivational system for specialists in the field;
- The involvement and exploitation of the potential of professional organizations, of the social environment and of the scientific domain, as well as of the positive experiences in the field both at international and national levels.

In the end, I believe, however, that the principles of subsidiarity and decentralization, the way the child protection system is conceived should ensure the real identification of the needs of child welfare at the level of local communities, and should offer the possibility of fulfilling the child's needs. The development of the systems by the institutions being competent in promoting the rights and in the protection of children, of systems based on inter-institutional, as well as national and international relations, is realized through various projects and brings about the prerequisites of a scientific basis in the field, as well as the strengthening of the strategic and tactical approaches.

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