



Good Practices in Data Use: Enhancing Social Services for Children with Disabilities in Dondușeni District, Moldova

Background

In Moldova's Dondușeni district, a dedicated team of social workers identified a troubling pattern: children with disabilities were not receiving the support they needed, such as specialized rehabilitation services and inclusive education, to thrive. Recognizing the urgency, they set out to ensure that every child with a disability could access essential services and resources.

The team identified significant disparities in access to social services for these children. Many families struggled to navigate the complex support system, while others remained unaware of the resources available to them. Recognizing the need for a thorough understanding of the issue, local authorities initiated a comprehensive review of the district's demographics in 2022.

Their findings revealed that of the 5,157 children in Dondușeni, 2.5% grappled with disabilities. Among them was Gheorghita (*pseudonym*), a resilient seven-year-old facing severe multiple disabilities, including locomotor and intellectual challenges. Gheorghita's story embodies the broader struggles experienced by countless others in accessing vital support services within their communities.



Working meeting of the social workers; source: DASPF Dondușeni

Addressing the Issues through Data Analysis and Collaborative Decision Making

In April 2022, stakeholders from numerous sectors convened, united by a shared sense of urgency to address the pressing needs of children like Gheorghita. A diverse ensemble of representatives from social services, finance, education, and healthcare assembled to chart a collective course of action based on solid data and evidence. They were supported by the Data for Impact (D4I) project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The findings revealed that despite the availability of support services, there were gaps in both accessibility and the quality of services for children with disabilities. The Directorate for Social Assistance and Family Protection (DASPF) reported that, in 2022 alone, of the 5,157 children with disabilities in Dondușeni, only 34 were beneficiaries of social services. This highlights the need for enhanced identification and early intervention strategies.

The team delved beyond the numbers to uncover the stories behind them. They discovered families facing a multitude of challenges, including poverty, discrimination, and inadequate access to healthcare and education. They revealed intimate narratives of children whose potential remained untapped due to the absence of support and resources. Each statistic painted a vivid picture of the challenges facing children with disabilities in Dondușeni, highlighting the need for immediate action.



The team also acknowledged the importance of disaggregating the data to understand the unique needs of various groups within the community. They discovered that children with disabilities were disproportionately clustered in rural areas, where access to services was frequently limited. By identifying specific communities where the need was greatest, they were able to target their efforts more effectively.

Armed with this knowledge, the team felt a renewed sense of purpose and resolve. Recognizing that waiting for progress to occur on its own was not a viable option, they committed to becoming agents of change. With a clear understanding of the issue and its underlying causes, they were eager to roll up their sleeves and get to work.



Meeting of social services stakeholders from Donduseni district; source: DASPF Donduseni

Through open dialogue and collaborative brainstorming sessions, the team explored potential solutions and strategies for expanding social services to a greater number of children with disabilities. They deliberated on resource allocation, the development of new programs, and the enhancement of existing services to better meet the needs of the community. Together, they laid the foundation for a more inclusive and nurturing environment for children with disabilities, paving the way for transformative change in Donduşeni.

With a clear plan in place, the team began implementing focused interventions to overcome the barriers facing children with disabilities. Social workers engaged in outreach activities to identify and assist families with children in need of support, while educators worked to create inclusive learning environments in schools. Healthcare providers offered specialized services tailored to address the unique medical needs of children with disabilities, while community organizations provided supplementary support and resources. Their concerted efforts aimed to ensure that every child received the necessary care, with none left behind.

Additionally, awareness sessions were organized to inform the community on the range of social services available for children and persons with disabilities.

Transforming Lives through the Creation and Expansion of Supportive and Inclusive Environments

The team experienced firsthand the transformative impact of their work. Children who were previously marginalized and overlooked were now living and thriving in supportive and inclusive environments. Families felt empowered and supported, seeing their children with access to the services they need to reach their full potential. With each success story, the team's resolve only deepened, fueling their dedication to creating a more equitable and inclusive community for everyone.



This was also exemplified in the case of Gheorghita, one of the many children with disabilities identified through data and evidence gathered by social workers. Initially immobile and heavily reliant on support for mobility, Gheorghita experienced significant improvements in his motor skills through systematic interventions facilitated by social workers. Access to rehabilitation and other specialized services, including kinetotherapy, also played a crucial role in his progress. Additionally, his father's employment as his personal assistant resulted in more dedicated care, which was crucial as his mother was unable to assist due to an injury.

The family's referral to the Family Support Service has led to tangible improvements in their overall well-being. This includes renovations to their living space, improved hygiene conditions, and participation in skill-building sessions aimed at navigating challenges and promoting self-care and communication. Additionally, Gheorghita's father's reentry into the workforce as his personal assistant renewed his focus on the child's social interaction and communication needs, further strengthening familial bonds.

Collectively, these initiatives have enhanced the quality of life for Gheorghita, as well as other children with disabilities and their families. They have also promoted broader social inclusion and strengthened community resilience. Through concerted efforts and focused interventions, the ramifications of these actions are poised to create lasting, beneficial change for future generations.

Reflections

The team in Dondușeni remained dedicated to ensuring a sustainable future for children with disabilities. They advocated for policy reform, sought increased funding, and promoted investments in long-term solutions such as capacity-building initiatives and community outreach efforts. This led to updates in referral protocols and established partnerships with NGOs to enhance support services, resulting in tangible improvements for children with disabilities in Dondușeni. Through collaborative decision making, the team broke down barriers to social service access, fostering a more inclusive community. While acknowledging their progress, they remain committed to the ongoing fight for an equitable society that embraces all individuals.

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