



32- 36 Loman Street
Southwark
London SE1 0EE
tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 7849
fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 7700
email: info@bearr.org
www.bearr.org

The BEARR Trust Annual Conference, 20 November 2009

Twenty Years On: Children and NGOs in Russia and the Region

Report by Nicola Ramsden, BEARR Trustee

The theme of this year's conference marked the 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, and also reflected the historic importance of child welfare in the projects supported by BEARR in Russia and the Region. **BEARR Chairman Tony Longrigg** welcomed a distinguished panel of speakers from Britain, Russia and Belarus, leaders of NGOs that have survived the past two decades, who are now in an unparalleled position to reflect on recent experience and future directions. As Tony Longrigg pointed out, the quality of this year's conference programme also demonstrated the effectiveness of the networks built up through BEARR's conferences and seminars, particularly during the recent collaboration with academics from CEELBAS, which it is hoped will continue.

Throughout the day, both speakers and participants described a path of progress towards better child welfare that is highly variable throughout the region, and that in Russia has sometimes taken a circular course as different parts of the administration battle for control of policy and implementation. Nevertheless, the general trend measured by economic indicators of child welfare is positive – with important exceptions. Furthermore, there is evidence that child welfare policy is modernising in Russia, and that the state is slowly moving towards the inclusion of NGOs in the mix of policy-making and service provision, albeit having failed to recognise and incorporate some of the most effective experiments in deinstitutionalisation. The task for NGOs now is to document at Federal level the accumulated experience of the last 20 years in order to demonstrate convincingly the best practices – no mean feat given that many good models of care are only known in regional networks that do not necessarily communicate with each other. The need for collaboration between NGOs to make advocacy more effective was, not surprisingly, a recurring theme.

Dr Chris Gerry, BEARR Trustee and Senior Lecturer in Political Economy at UCL, looked at 'How children have fared over the past twenty years'. Gerry examined trends in child well-being across two decades, 28 'transition' countries and 5 welfare indicators: income, health, education, housing and family. In general, the trends have been favourable and economic progress has had a positive impact on key outcomes such as infant and maternal mortality, though with two caveats. First, there is much diversity both within countries and across the region. Second, economic progress can also have deleterious effects on health outcomes. Indeed, Gerry noted that adolescent mortality, particularly that associated with accidents and suicides, was

highest and increasing in some of the ‘best’ economic performers. This hints at the importance of social cohesion and policy, and to this end Gerry speculated that the recent financial crisis may serve to undo some of the positive progress made in recent years in the social policy sphere.

Joanna Rogers, Everychild Russia Programme Director described some strategies for ‘**Advocating children’s rights and spreading good practice**’. Effective advocacy rests on partnership and cooperation, and Everychild has produced a directory as a resource to encourage this. A campaign of advocacy needs a strategy, a structure, and indicators and goals, just like a project to deliver services. Without these underpinnings there is a risk of producing words but no action. Spreading good practice can only be done by documenting what has happened already – the problem is that experience is embodied in different networks that are not aware of each other’s practice and are reluctant to advertise what they do. The institutional framework in Russia is fragmented, and there is no unified childcare policy.

We then heard contrasting tales of two initiatives in childcare. Both were started in 1994, one in Belarus and one in Russia, and their founders had very different perceptions of their impact and prospects. **Anna Garchakova, Director of the Belarusian Children’s Hospice**, felt that the Hospice had achieved recognition by the authorities and transformed the public’s understanding of what NGOs can do. It had introduced the new concept of palliative care, and established new standards in that area. However, it had also been forced to adapt to a changing environment for NGOs in Belarus. In the early days the hospice had enjoyed much material support (including provision of a building) from the local authorities. As time went on, formal regulation increased, and power shifted from the local authorities to the centre. The hospice had to find money to buy its own building, but responded by becoming the first NGO in the country to employ a professional PR officer and fundraiser - he had already raised a healthy multiple of his salary. Garchakova believed that the Hospice could be funded entirely from domestic sources within five years.

In contrast, **Dr Maria Ternovskaya, founder and director of Our Family in Moscow**, talked about the ‘hidden meaning’ behind her title: **Deinstitutionalisation – an ongoing argument**. Our Family, including the Moscow government orphanage No 19 Foster Care Centre, had previously been mentioned by Joanna Rogers as probably the pre-eminent model of foster care and child support services in Russia. But Ternovskaya felt that having built up a method of providing child and family welfare services under one roof, she now faced the prospect of having to start all over again, thanks to the 2008 Law on Guardianship. In her view, the law had set back progress in child welfare by retaining decision-making within ministries and removing decisions concerning children from carers – a triumph for administrative interests over professionals. There seems to be no mechanism for professionals to advise the administration about a child’s needs. One consequence has been a dramatic fall in children taken into foster care in the past two years. In discussion it became clearer that the law was needed to fill a gap in the legislation (which remains fragmented with relation to child welfare), but its flaws are recognised and it is likely to be amended as the system continues to evolve.

While the Belarusian Children's Hospice had recently discovered the power of PR and professional fundraising, **Irina Menshenina, Development Director of Downside Up in Russia** (founded in 1996 – www.downsideup.org), had already won an award for her achievements in changing public attitudes to children with Down's Syndrome. Her account of '**Using the media and influencing public opinion**' described how families and celebrities were used to highlight the normal family lives of children with Down's Syndrome, as well as their achievements as adults in spheres such as drama and sport. Menshenina said that embedded attitudes in the medical profession would be harder to tackle, but media companies had discovered that TV programmes featuring these children improved their ratings, and they were therefore keen to do more. The next phase of her work will be to carry out professional research on attitudes, and to investigate raising awareness through new social media.

Downside Up is a Russian-British charitable foundation, while **ARC (Action for Russia's Children)**, co-founded by **Sarah Philips** in 1995, is a UK-registered charity. Together with her colleagues **Rachel Smith**, ARC's Secretary, and **Shona McGrahan**, the Moscow Director, Sarah Philips described how ARC has evolved, and how it has faced the challenges of '**Adapting to a changing NGO environment**'. Philips charted ARC's development from a group of expatriates wanting to put something back into their host country, rapidly moving from giving aid to baby houses to supporting new community-based initiatives in childcare. In order to sustain ARC's activities in the framework of a transient group of volunteers and unpredictable finances, the group does not run its own projects, but supports local groups and initiatives in Moscow – thus creating an extensive network of contacts and local knowledge. Its UK registration avoids the onerous administration that would be needed to sustain a Russian registration, and no assets or obligations are kept in Russia. However, it sticks to the principle of keeping its membership and director located in Moscow.

The final talk, '**The next 20 years**', was given by **Marina Egorova, Head of the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children** in Moscow. Looking forward, she made it clear that progress would not be linear. Developments in the last two years (picking up on Ternovskaya's criticism of the 2008 Guardianship Law) had resulted in approaches to childcare being sent full circle before coming back to Medvedev's declared intention in 2007 of keeping children in their birth family wherever possible. She regretted that although the ill-conceived law had provoked a crisis (with newly fostered children being handed back to the authorities because professional support had been withdrawn) which would lead to further reform, the government was still unlikely to take account of the accumulated experience in fostering and caring for children within families. Projects, such as Our Family, may only survive as one among a number of different approaches.

Egorova ended on an optimistic note, pointing to evidence that concern about Russia's demographic problems is forcing the administration to be more open to a system of childcare that includes NGOs alongside state organisations. She cited three positive developments: the creation of independent regional ombudsmen for children's rights; the creation in 2008 of the Foundation for the Support of Children in Difficult Life Circumstances; and finally, earlier in November, Medvedev's annual speech to the Federal Council, which referred to the need to strengthen NGOs as part of civil

society. Egorova predicted that the Civil Code would now be amended to create a more stable environment for charities.

The slides used in speakers' presentations can be accessed on the BEARR website as follows:

[Chris Gerry](#)

[Joanna Rogers](#)

[Anna Garchakova](#)

[Marina Ternovskaya](#)

[Irina Menshenina](#)

[Marina Egorova](#)