Including Children’s Voices: 
Romanian NGOs as Advocates for Recognition of Children’s Issues

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“Our current political culture…is grounded in the exclusion of children.” (Kulynych, 2001). In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) granted children a wide variety of legal, social, and civil rights. However, in a political context it is generally accepted that, due to a competence criterion required of voters, children cannot be afforded some basic democratic rights of decision-making and self-determination. In fact, the CRC explicitly stopped short of providing children rights of political participation; the convention briefing document stated the “very status of a child means in principle that the child has no political rights.” (Kulynych, 2001). Yet when one looks at the wide range of problems children face, it is undeniable that the experience of childhood is politically relevant.

Most consider children’s parents an appropriate vehicle for the representation of children in a political context. However, because many children come from families who are politically disenfranchised or are without a family altogether, societies must think of other ways of addressing the needs of children. As a result, other bodies often represent children as stakeholders in the democratic process. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have an ability to represent the interests of children at both the local and national level. Worldwide many “operational” NGOs that have typically provided social services now consciously accept an advocacy role (van Tuijl, 1999).

In Romania, the needs of children and the lack of political representation through family ties are particularly acute. After the 1989 revolution, the world was confronted with images of a child welfare crisis in Romania. A sea of institutionalized children (“orphans”) and an emerging street child population were created by the combined effects of rampant poverty and a number of communist-era social policies. These policies included the systematic relocation of families and communities, promotion of institutional care of children, and pronatalist policies based on negative constraints rather than incentives. While aid efforts in Romania have focused on institutionalized children, help for children in families has decreased (Zamfir & Ionescu, 1994), and Romania has faced rapid growth of the number of children abandoned due to poverty. Thus, Romania remains a country in crisis. This poster presentation will examine Romanian NGOs’ perceptions of Romanian child welfare policy, their relationship with local government entities, and their role as advocates for children in the process of policy development.

The poster presentation will present preliminary findings of a study conducted during 2002-2003 by a Fulbright Junior Research Scholar, funded by the US-Romanian Fulbright Commission of the US Department of State. The study examined the strategies NGOs use when providing services to children, and the ways in which NGOs influence local and national social policy in Romania. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with thirty-four staff members from twenty NGOs in fifteen communities in Romania. The interview questions were designed using a semi-structured format and were very general in nature in an effort to solicit the participants’ own experience rather than support or opposition to issues identified in literature. Interviews were conducted with both Romanian citizens (twenty individuals) and foreign nationals (fourteen
individuals) working and volunteering with NGOs in Romania. Persons interviewed were solicited using a purposive sample and were contacted via e-mail or post. NGOs contacted included members of the ProChild Federation, those listed in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or Soros Foundation databases, recipients of a United States Peace Corps Volunteer, and those used as practicum placements by the University of București School of Sociology and Social Work. NGOs then contacted the researcher if interested in participating in the study. The NGOs that participated were registered in Romania (twelve NGOs), abroad (four NGOs), or both (four NGOs). The target populations of the NGOs included street-living and street-working children, children with HIV/AIDS, institutionalized children (“orphans”), handicapped children, low-income children, and minority children. Many NGOs served multiple target populations. Thirty-one interviews were conducted on the premises of the NGO, while three interviews were conducted over the telephone with NGO staff conducting business outside of Romania. Interviews were conducted in English (twenty-five interviews), Romanian (five interviews), or both languages (four interviews) based on the preference of the person being interviewed.

The study’s findings indicate that the NGOs studied are active advocates for policy change, with particular success in agency advocacy. Numerous NGOs were able to represent their target population to local government agencies and influence policy at a local level. The politics of European Union accession also has played a role in local government entities’ receptiveness to advocacy efforts and willingness to partner with NGOs in developing policy and providing social services. The findings have implications for social development both within and outside of Romania, as NGOs and political institutions worldwide are confronted with the similar challenge of advocating for children’s interests in the process of policy development. In particular, many emerging democracies are struggling to create new social policy systems. Communities are thus challenged to find ways to ensure that the rights and interests of their largest and most vulnerable population are respected at a political level.

