STAND BY ME

SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES
FOR CARE-LEAVERS INCLUSION
THROUGH PARTICIPATORY POLICY MAKING

D2.10 Working Protocol

Supporting the paths of boys and girls leaving alternative care systems.
An outline of work for a shared commitment.

Final Version
June 2020

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Forward – Bringing the Future Forward

We are living in a time of great transformation. Every day we find ourselves faced with challenges that erode our certainty about what our way of living the bonds that tie us together is, about what work is and what it will be, about living, about living in a city. We find ourselves experiencing a transition, which is also highlighted by the serious health emergency related to the Covid-19 pandemic, where words such as health, wellbeing, and security have assumed different meanings, which no one expected. It is a transition in which we have started to question many things we once held to be true, and many things we question, remain unanswered. We cannot limit ourselves to just reacting to problems; we are asked to change our approach by bringing possible scenarios forward. The *Stand by Me* course of action has developed its thought by working in close contact with young care leavers, professionals and policy makers alike. With the experiences of boys and girls leaving protection and care services used as the starting point, the fundamental concept revolves around seeing the elements of vulnerability that affect them as talent and potential. In this regard, care leavers' need to make crucial choices about their lives well before their peers have to, motivated us to consider them as "young people who are bringing the future forward".

Stand by Me tried to adopt this model of "bringing the future forward" to stimulate a discussion about the approaches and everyday behaviours exhibited by all those involved. For the professionals and policy makers, the challenge was to put aside solutions and services devised for children and teenagers – renowned and therefore reassuring strategies – to reach new interpretations and new ways of thinking. This important effort has opened up the possibility of building policy and procedures that are truly cohesive with the life stages and life stories that deserved specific attention.

Listening to and constantly interacting with young care leavers, enriched by methodological experimentation centred around gaming and playful learning, has given us strength and enthusiasm during this paradigm shift. Their stories, their thought, and their perspective have showed us clearly that reflecting about the future allows you to increase your awareness of the present, as well as training resilience, creativity and trust, both as individuals and as a community. The young generations are laying vital requests at the feet of European policy makers, and *Stand by Me* has taught us that the rare and precious contribution of thousands of young care leavers can give our society the tools it needs to live through the challenges and transformations that tomorrow has in store for us with trust and proactiveness. It is a simple, decisive teaching that we owe to the ones who bring our future forward.

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1. Introduction

Stand by Me is an international capacity building project operating in the field of the rights of the child and young people. It was launched in 2018 by the Metropolitan City of Milan – in partnership with a network of organisations active in civil society in Milan (Italy), Gothenburg (Sweden), Brașov (Romania) and Nicosia (Cyprus) – thanks to co-financing from the European "Rights, Equality and Citizenship" Programme.

The aim of *Stand by Me* is to improve the efficacy of policies and interventions aimed and young boys and girls who are about to leave residential care or a foster family and who, when they become of age, do not live with their biological family because of a judicial court order (called care leavers).

In the first phase, more than 60 people who create and shape policies for infants and young people were consulted, as well as 90 professionals who work in the sector. We also spoke to more than 80 girls and boys between the ages of 14 and 26 who have experienced or are currently experiencing alternative care. This is an incredibly mixed working group: it is intergenerational, intercultural and multidisciplinary, and a group which, with an extensive course of endorsed action-research, questioned themselves about the efficacy of accompanying practices and about their capacity to generate wellbeing and independence, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of local systems. The international convention that took place in Brașov (Romania) in May 2019 provided space to compare ideas among the four national delegations and enabled the group to offer shared recommendations and working hypotheses.

In the second half of 2019, the project evolved along three trajectories: offering training pathways aimed at professionals in the sector; working with local policy makers to strengthen policies and services aimed at care leavers, which started with an explanation of the priority trajectories of work; and a constant awareness campaign aimed at young people and adults, who have used a gaming platform built with the young people and adults consulted during planning.

This document summarises the main findings formed by the international group in the course of the months spent working together, and reproposes them as suggestions and trajectories of work to inspire local action to develop policies, services and experiments aimed at young girls and boys leaving care and protection systems.

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2. The European Context

The term 'care leavers' is used to describe those boys and girls who are leaving, or have already left, a residential home or foster family, usually because they have become of age or are moving towards an independent life.

To give an idea of the scale of this phenomenon, suffice to say that, according to a recent estimate, there are 2.3 million minors in residential care across the world ("The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World", UNICEF, 2017), in addition to all those who live with different families than those they were born with. It is a difficult phenomenon to quantify, largely because we lack reliable data about minors who live away from their biological family from 55 of 197 total countries. Even at a European level, there are no reliable estimates about the number of minors in alternative care or about the number of those who have just become of age and are leaving it.

What all the studies show, however, is that care leavers are more vulnerable than their peers. In the European Union, young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are the group most at risk of poverty and social exclusion: 30.6% were at risk in 2016 in EU countries (Eurostat 2016) and, on average, European youths do not leave their parents' home before they turn at least 26 years old (Eurostat 2017).

There are five main international regulatory reference points in relation to the condition of care leavers.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20th November 1989), with particular reference to the Preamble (which sets out the need to fully prepare the child to lead an individual life in society), Art. 12 (States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child) and Art. 20 (A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State).

The **"Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children"**, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations with Resolution 64/142 (2009). These guidelines, closely connected to the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, were designed to implore national authorities to fully implement said Convention, as well as other legislative instruments to protect the rights and wellbeing of children who live in alternative care. A specific section (articles 131 – 136) had been dedicated to the preparation, accompaniment and monitoring of their routes out of care.

The comments of the **United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child** and in particular, General Comment No. 6 (2005) (Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin); General Comment No. 12 (2009) (The right of the child to be heard); General Comment No. 13 (2011) (The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence);

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General Comment No. 14 (2013) (The right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration).

The **Recommendation of the European Commission** "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" (2013) and the particular reference to the "quality support" for transition to adult life.

The **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** (2000/C 364/01), with reference to Art. 24 (In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration), Art. 34 (everyone residing and moving legally within the European Union is entitled to social security benefits and social advantages in accordance with Community law and national laws and practices. In order to combat social exclusion and poverty, the Union recognises and respects the right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices) and Art. 41 (the right to good administration).

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3. The Local Context

In ITALY, there are more than 12,000 children in residential homes, which is around 1.3 children for every 1,000 residents of the same age group, a figure supplemented by the more than 14,000 children in residential foster care (Ministry of Work and Social Policies, QRS 40-2017). Adding those who have left youth residential homes and those who are no longer in foster care and leading an independent life or living in semi-independent accommodation to those returning to their own family at the end of care, displaying in such a context a need for independence, and excluding only those that are sent back to a different care home after having previously left one, the estimate for care leavers aged between 15-17 years old is 1,500 people. Including those aged 18-21, for whom the so-called "prosieguo administrativo" (administrative continuation) was issued, the total estimate of care leavers aged 15-21 years old reaches around 2,600.

In Italy, child protection is overseen by the Juvenile Court, established in 1934 (Royal Decree 20/7/1934 No. 1404) as the specialist judicial body competent in the field of criminal, civil and administrative proceedings. The Constitution of the Republic, which came into force in 1948, contains important regulations with regard to the right of the family and the child (Art. 2, 10, 30-32, 34, 38). In particular, Art. 30 specifies that when faced with the manifest incapacity of the parents, the State must provide: the Republic protects childhood. In 1956, Law 25/7/56 No. 888 deeply modernises the administrative authority, otherwise named "re-education", for children who are "irregular by conduct or by character", focused on a double order of measures: entrusting the Ministry of Justice (established in 1962 with Law No. 1085) with responsibility for the social service, and placing children in re-education homes. In 1967, Law 5/6/67 No. 431 introduces special (today, legitimate) adoption of abandoned children and broadens the civil authority of the Juvenile Courts, for whom a specific body is established, with concurrent independence compared to a court of law (Law 9/3/71 No. 35). In 1975, the reform of family law (Law 19/5/75 No. 151) broadens the Juvenile Courts' authority for children (Art. 38 Provisions for the Implementation of the Civil Code). In 1977, the authority responsible for children subject to legal, civil and administrative proceedings is moved from the Social Service of the Ministry of Justice to local Social Services (Presidential Decree 616/77, Art. 23).

In 2017, Law No. 205 Art. 1 Clause 250 focuses explicitly on the condition of care leavers, allocating a fund for boys and girls who "upon coming of age, do not live with their biological family because of a judicial court order". The aim of the intervention, initiated as an experimental method, is to prevent poverty and social exclusion, strengthening journeys of growth towards independence and promoting experimental interventions aimed at young girls and boys aged between 18 and 21. These interventions establish a component of economic support, the "Fund for Independence", and accompaniment by professionals following a plan specifically devised for that individual. The individual plan is compiled for each care leaver by the relevant social service responsible for children and is the product of a collaboration between beneficiaries, the Tutor for independence and those who play a role in its development and execution. The plan sets out, starting with the needs and expectations of the care leaver, the objectives and results needed to reach independence, activating the child's talents and abilities, and the support of the services and resources of the community.

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In SWEDEN, in 2018, there was around 48,000 children and young people (aged up to 20) who were benefitting from alternative care measures. Half of the young people in alternative care were placed with foster families, while the remaining half were welcomed into open and closed residential homes (Socialstyrelsen, 2019). The open residential homes are called "homes for care or residence" – HVB is the Swedish acronym – and they house the majority of young people in residential homes. There are only 1,000 young boys and girls in closed residential homes, where staying is mandatory and transitional. They are intended for young people who have committed crimes (structures like LSUs) and young people with acute problems linked to the consumption of alcohol and substance abuse (LVMs). The closed residential homes are managed by the "National Board of Institutional Care", an independent government agency which creates tailored intervention plans for children and young people with psychological or behavioural problems, and for adults who abuse narcotic substances.

In 2018, around 30% of the children under the responsibility of the alternative care system was made up of unaccompanied foreign children. For them, the most common measure is to house them in a community home (HVB), followed by placement with a foster family.

National legislation emphasises the importance of maintaining meaningful relationships between children, their biological parents and their extended families, and removal orders are intended as temporary solutions to utilise, with a view to successfully re-joining their families later. Despite this explicit positioning, the data shows that, for eighteen-year olds leaving the system, the average time spent away from their family is 4 years (Socialstyrelsen, 2007).

Research conducted in Sweden dwells on the strains felt by young people leaving these systems, who find themselves having to experience the challenges of independence well before their peers do, and with fewer resources at their disposal. The research largely deals with young girls and boys who come from vulnerable families, which cannot offer them enough support during the delicate transition phase to an independent adult life. The literature highlights a series of specific risk factors for care leavers, and a greater incidence of critical situations linked to the home, school and employment. Their transition towards an independent life is described as an "accelerated and compressed" path (Biehal and Wade 1996; Stein 2012), which drives them to an "immediate adulthood" (Rogers 2011). Compared to their peers, the rate of psychic and psychiatric disorders is higher, the suicide rate is higher, and the probability that they commit a crime is greater.

In order to better understand the Swedish context, we have used two pieces of qualitative research conducted in some of the country's largest cities.

One study carried out in Stockholm and Gothenburg reveals an interesting cross-section of how the Swedish alternative care system works (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2009 - Young people leaving care in Sweden). 10 young boys and 6 young girls, all between the ages of 18 and 22, took part in a semi-structured interview. Eight of the 16 interviewees had been placed in foster homes, whereas the other 8 had been placed in different types of homes. Ten of them had been removed from their families because of situations linked to their parents' mental health or risk factors linked to their consumption of alcohol and substances, three following strong family conflicts and three following acts personally committed. At the time of the interviews, ten of them had left the

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system in the previous twelve months, while six were preparing to leave in the course of the following sixth months. Of these six, only one was placed in a foster family, three were living in semi-independent apartments called "halfway apartments" (structures designed for young people when legal proceedings are underway) and six in other types of housing. The average time that the sixteen interviewees had been in the system for was 9.5 years, with a larger figure for those who had been placed in foster care (11.5 years) and a lower figure for those who had been placed in care homes (6.3 years). A distinctive trait common to all was an increased degree of instability, with a majority of the young people having changed their location and living situation more than three times.

Almost all of the interviewees had expressed a strong concern about financial issues, starting with the day-to-day management of money, and thus many of them had asked for support for precisely those financial issues, from paying bills to managing savings. There were many other sources of worry, such as housing and school life, with frequent failures and neglect. A final area that this study investigated was related to the links to and support of parents. Six out of sixteen said they received some form of emotional support from their own biological parents, but with intermittent contact and complicated relationships. All of them said they received some form of support from their foster parents or educators at the care home, support generally taken for granted, with the belief that the relationship would be maintained even after leaving the system.

Another study of great interest, which took place between 2014 and 2017, analysed the strategies put in place by twenty young care leavers to manage the most complicated phases of transitioning to adult life (Bengtsson, Sjöblom & Öberg, 2018- 'Well, it's up to me now' – young care leavers' strategies for handling adversities when leaving out-of-home care in Sweden). Starting with a theoretical reference outline focused on the concept of resilience, this study highlighted three crucial dimensions, of which two are linked to the "interior world" of each boy and girl, and one in relation to the "outside world". The first dimension regards giving their own journey a new meaning, or rather critically re-reading their own history and, in particular, the period of time they spent in the alternative care system. The second dimension regards their trust in themselves and includes self-esteem, their sense of effectiveness and the feeling of being ready to face adult life. The third area is the restructuring of their own social networks, and includes key questions linked to their relationship with their biological families, their positive relationship with their peers and maintaining meaningful relationships with adult figures during their previous life. This evidence seems to confirm the hypotheses formed by previous literature, which highlighted that key resilience factors are stability (Jones et al. 2011; Stein 2012), the possibility of gradual steps towards adulthood (Wade and Dixon 2006), direct participation in decisions regarding their future (Stein 2012) and accessing formal and informal social support systems (Wade 2008).

Hypotheses and reflections of this sort about risk and resilience factors pervade our endorsed research-action path, and our constant dialogue with care leavers, policy makers and professionals in the sector, making up the framework of our Ten Commandments which we will present in the next section.

In ROMANIA, the system for protecting children has undergone radical changes in the last twenty years. The journey prior to accession to the European Union, followed by the full framework in EU

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policy-making processes, have led to a complete revision of the system originally structured during the socialist era. The main trends of change regard the growing intervention into the prevention of child abandonment, the development of a tailored and professionalised system and the growth in favour of smaller structures or family-based solutions over large public institutions. Thanks to these interventions, the number of children welcomed into care homes decreased from more than 53,000 to around 13,600 between 2000 and 2018 (https://insse.ro/cms/) and the National Strategy for the Protection of the Child provides for the permanent closure of all old "orphanages" by the end of 2020. In contrast, the number of children welcomed into foster families, extended families and substitutive families has risen to 35,600, and an extensive network of "maternal assistants" who are able to take responsibility and care for a growing number of boys and girls has been developed across the whole country (https://www.unicef.org/romania/sites/unicef.org.romania/files). Out of a total of 3.65 million children, there are therefore around 50 thousand children who benefit from forms of special protection, which allows them to stay somewhere outside their biological family.

Romanian legislation establishes that all children temporarily or permanently separated from their own families must receive special protection intervention until they are 18, in services like a foster home or care home. The tailored pathways aim to ensure that each child's needs are satisfied, guarantee full access to services, promote expert training courses and guarantee full involvement in the life of the community. Upon turning 18 years old, an agreement can be made to continue the protective service until they turn 21 or 26 years old.

Law 272 of 2004 stipulates that if a boy and girl intends to continue with their studies, they must send an extension application to the Commission on the Protection of the Child – established in the setting of the Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC), on a provincial basis – or in the Children and Family Court. If the request is approved, they will have the right to receive all services set out by the "special protection" regime until they turn 26 years old. If a child who has just come of age decides not to continue with their studies, they can receive – upon request – an extension of the protection for a maximum duration of two years, designed to facilitate their social insertion into a state of independence. These two years include support searching for a house or a job – offered by DGASPC – and advisory and consultancy services offered by the Provincial Employment Agency. If the boy or girl loses their job for reasons attributable to them, the special protection system expires.

It is very difficult to establish total estimates for the number of care leavers in Romania. The lack of a standardised procedure at a national level prevents us from discovering the number of boys and girls leaving the system and there are many complex elements – including the large number of young people who leave the country once they exit the care and protection system – which makes the construction of longitudinal data sets and mid-term monitoring procedures an arduous task. According to the data provided by the Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection, established on a provincial basis, at the end of 2018, there were 4,000 boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 26 still in the care of the national protection system (https://www.unicef.org/romania/sites/unicef.org.romania/files).

According to a study by the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoptions in 2017, the average time spent by a child within the protection system is 7.5 years,

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equal to 65% of their entire life. The same investigation shows that among youths aged between 15 and 26 in *alternative care*, one in five have spent their entire lives in the system, and one in three more than 90% of their lives.

Among the most prevalent social categories, there are some particularly vulnerable groups, such as children of the Roma ethnic group, children with disabilities, boys and girls who live in vulnerable conditions heightened by de-institutionalisation, and boys and girls who drop out of school early (World Bank, UNICEF, ANDPCA. Study: Romania – Children from the Protection System, Bucharest 2016).

The reports and literature referred to clearly shows that boys and girls leaving the system are faced with more critical situations than those experienced by their peers. As in all other contexts, the most critical elements are those related to the home, continuing their studies, looking for a job, the fragility of their relationships and their greater exposure to situations that put them at risk. Other specific factors linked to the networks of crime and sexual exploitation, phenomena which affect Romanian children to a greater extent than their peers in other European countries, also supplement these issues (Encyclopaedia of Social Work, 2016, edited by George Namtu, Polirom Publishing House).

Parallel to the working guidelines common to all four countries, endorsed research activities conducted in the area of Brașov have highlighted the demand for interventions aimed at rectifying specific gaps in the Romanian system: a more precise and effective system for collecting and analysing child protection data; the simplification of procedures; a more efficient use of resources and experimentation with forms of managing individual public structures' budgets independently; experimentation with services and structures explicitly dedicated to the transition phase to an independent life; the greater involvement of families – if positive links have been maintained – as boys and girls leave the system.

In CYPRUS, the National Policy on the Rights of the Child underlines the role of the Commission on the Rights of the Child in guaranteeing the implementation of the International Convention of 1989 at a national level. The Commission, an independent institution appointed by the Council of Ministers, deals exclusively with the rights of the child and its competencies are established in a dedicated law, in effect since June 2007 and strengthened by further legislation in 2014.

On an operational level, the protection of the rights of children and adolescents is under the control of the Social Welfare System. The main role of this service is to support vulnerable families, enacting preventative measures designed to avoid the separation of the family unit. Interventions at home, the use of day centres, after-school clubs, food aid and specialist mental health services are just some of the services that have been used to achieve this. In extreme cases where the parents are deemed unfit for guaranteeing the safety and integrity of the children for whom they are responsible, the Family Court (the only authority that has the power to place restrictions on parental rights) can remove the child from their families. The preferred method is to place the child with other relatives or turn to family solutions like foster care. Only as a last resort are residential homes used.

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In Cyprus, there are four residential structures for boys and girls aged 5 to 13, in the cities of Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca and Paphos. Those younger than 5 may be placed in these homes in exceptional circumstances. In parallel, there are also homes for adolescents, called 'Youth Hostels', which, in some cases, also house unaccompanied foreign children. At the moment, there are around 90 children housed in care homes and around 100 unaccompanied children placed in the community.

Children who have committed crimes are sometimes removed from their families. At the moment, around 15 children are imprisoned, all of whom are older than 16. For the others, there are household measures which set out voluntary work and other socially useful work. The Social Welfare Service has the role of supervising their progress and updating the Family Court on at least a biannual basis. It also has the role of monitoring the progress of the young people placed in correctional facilities from when they are released.

For the entire phase where children are removed from their biological families, parents are supported by professionals from the Social Service to help them overcome any problems that had been observed and to accompany the child as they re-join the family and bring them back together again.

When a child becomes of age, a tailored support plan is put in place, with responsibility lying with the Directorate of the Social Welfare Service. The tailored State Plan is designed and monitored based on the needs and characteristics of each young person, with measures that might differ greatly from one case to another. For every care leaver that has just come of age, a total sum of €20,000 is allocated to be used over the course of ten years (or rather, by the time they are 28) to cover university fees and other costs linked to education (books, materials…), costs linked to work (equipment or other things) or for costs linked to housing (furniture, utensils etc.). For care leavers who have not yet found a job, a basic income of €480 and an extra subsidy of at least €220 to cover the cost of rent is provided. This form of subsidy is guaranteed to care leavers as soon as the Directorate of the Social Welfare Service considers them financially independent.

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4. Our Ten Commandments: eight working guidelines and two universal principles

The tailored research-action activities established by the project *Stand by Me* have enabled us to gather the experiences and suggestions of more than 200 people, including young people, representatives of relevant institutions and those who work in the sector. During the International Forum in Brașov, we compared what emerged at a local level and arrived at a shared set of recommendations and universal working hypotheses to submit to policy makers in our respective countries. In the following months, we developed and integrated these intuitions, promoting moments of comparison and dialogue with more than 100 key people involved in policies aimed at care leavers in our four cities, to compile these Ten Commandments, which contains eight priority working guidelines and two universal principles that must shape the way we look at policies and implemented projects.

1) A clear, coherent and harmonious regulatory framework.

When we think about the condition of young care leavers, the risk of a clean break between the field of rights of the child and provisions for adults arises. For those who are about to become of age, the presence of systems in place that guarantee a gradual and non-traumatic passage from one reference system to another is fundamental. We must give meaning to this change to the extent where coming of age implies a new structuring of the relationship between the individual, society and the legal system. In this regard, it is important to develop the framework of existing regulations and measures: integrate it to ensure it is fully complete; implement good practice and experimental interventions; rationalise and simplify them if necessary; bestow harmony and fluidity upon systems that are too often fragmented.

2) An integrated approach.

Following on from the previous point, it seems necessary to re-draw up the various competencies, responsibilities and ownership in play. First, it is necessary to work on the inter-institutional dimension: engage with all relevant people; clarify how roles and responsibilities are set up; promote dialogue and collaboration; guarantee a climate of openness and trust. But it is also important to promote integration at an intra-institutional level, overcoming the barriers at the outer limit of each different sector, department or office's competencies. Promoting an integrated approach means, most of all, overcoming spontaneity and the informal, personalistic management of the relationships between networks, formalising structural synergies that can act in a stable, transparent and effective manner at the same time.

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3) **Welfare and accessibility.** In many European countries, the family has a key role to play when accompanying young people through life and towards independence, even after they have come of age. Very often, young boys and girls are heavily dependent on their families, even when they are much older than 18. Those leaving a residential home or a foster family cannot count on this support, which is why the need to identify priority channels of access to welfare strongly emerges. Demands vary depending on the country and individual situations, but, for some issues, the challenges are the same: the question of accommodation and the right to a home; continuing studies and the chance to access high quality schooling; their entrance into the world of work; directing them to health services to guarantee independent access; and financial education to facilitate access to credit and banking institutions.

4) **Reference points.** Care leavers find themselves having to face an important evolutionary step in their journey, often much earlier than their peers. To do it alone, they need to be able to rely on solid reference points which can help them overcome their sense of solitude and find safety and support at the most complex times or in moments of difficulty. It is important to work together to build emotional reference points for boys and girls, both among the workers who have followed them on their journey, and in the region's formal and informal networks. At the same time, it is vital to provide professional reference points (tutors or case managers) who can guide and monitor their development once they become of age, mending the holes that may appear along the path between services for children and the service for adults.

5) **Expert support.** The professionals who support the boys and girls in the community and during their journeys towards independence have a fundamental role in guaranteeing the quality and efficacy of their plans. It is therefore necessary to invest in these professional figures (in terms of education, welfare, psychological, etc.) both in terms of training and providing refreshers for them, and in terms of motivating them, increasing their status and working conditions. The people who work in social policy are those who are most affected by burn-out syndrome, both on account of the lonely conditions they often find themselves working in, and because of the workload compared to the magnitude of the problems to be dealt with. To guarantee the boys and girls have a high-quality journey, we must promote the workers' wellbeing, guaranteeing decompression and supervision spaces, investing in high-quality training programmes, and favouring a connection with all those working in the field in a collaborative, co-responsible manner.

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6) **Tailored journeys.** We must set out a tailor-made plan for each boy and girl, which considers their talents, needs, desires and aspirations. Boys and girls must be personally involved in planning their own future. The pathways must not be imposed upon them but instead built together, starting first with the talents that each care leaver can implement, avoiding standardisation and plans that fail to fully value their true abilities. Talent and vulnerability are not diametrically opposed attributes; they can coexist. There is no reason to give up building study, work and life pathways that are fully cohesive with each child's greatest ambitions as they leave the system. In this sense, talent should be understood as a constellation made up of competencies, abilities and aptitudes, from which we launch off to enable them to fulfil their potential and achieve their dreams.

7) **Robustness and trust.** We must accompany boys and girls as they develop their own story and their own path, forming an awareness of themselves and giving new meaning to the experiences they have faced. The planning aimed at care leavers must allow them to nurture self-esteem and build meaningful relationships aimed at improving wellbeing and the future. Psychological support, being listened to by workers and civic participation are just some of the systems that enable young people to invest in themselves and in positive relationships that are capable of increasing the chances of achieving self-fulfilment, avoiding the repetition of dysfunctional relationships. Thus, it is important that we also value networks amongst peers and the role of civil society as a resource that can promote opportunity and act as a bridge towards new goals.

8) **Territory and relationships.** To look to the future with trust, it is fundamental to support care leavers as they build and enrich the strong bonds with all the people they meet in their area and in their everyday life beyond their lives in alternative care. This includes schoolmates; workmates; neighbours; those who live in the area; sports clubs; cultural associations, and the world of art and culture; religious groups; political groups, and all other types of organisations. These are bonds that generate wellbeing and a feeling of inclusion, and prevent and hinder stigmatisation. They are bonds that enhance each person's social and relationship capital, multiplying the opportunities available to them and solidifying the network of protection that can be activated when facing difficult situations. Cultivating these bonds is not just good for care leavers, but it enriches everyone. It is a chance to learn from diversity and encounters with extraordinary stories and rare challenges.

9) **The universal principal of participation.** Promoting participation

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means guaranteeing the right of every boy and girl to be listened to and involved in all choices that directly regard them. It is a fundamental principle of the protection of every child, which must be held in full consideration, even as they get closer to leaving the care system and approach an independent life. Promoting participation does not just mean listening to a person in the setting of an educational relationship, it also means promoting the gathering of more voices and the construction of a collective, public voice through civic and associative experiences. Care leavers' associations are an important, expert example of how individuals' circumstances can be transformed into real and proper political proposals. Moreover, it is also important to support other sorts of associative experiences, focused on common, universal themes which can unite care leavers with other young men and women.

10) The universal principal of non-discrimination.

The boys and girls of Agevolando, the Italian care leavers' network, have sent a strong, clear message to institutions: "We do not expect more from a care leaver than we expect or would expect from a child of the same age". In other words, let us remind ourselves that care leavers are girls and boys. They are obviously different from each other and different from their peers, but, at the same time, they are all equal. Just like other boys and girls, they have joys and fears, dreams and disappointments, abilities and weaknesses. They are faced with the world of school and the universe of work, with economic, housing, emotional and relationship questions. Let us avoid, therefore, asking of them more than we ask of anyone else. And let us also remind ourselves to not to expect anything less, not to flatten their pathways, and not to reduce the field of possibilities that they find themselves faced with. We have the opportunity to start from the experiences of care leavers and to look with fresh eyes at all the boys and girls who live in our cities and are faced with incredibly complicated questions related to their and our future.

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5. The Virtuous Practices That Inspire Our Work

"Care Leavers Network" (Italy)	
Description	Agevolando is the main organisation for care leavers in Italy. It was born in 2010 from the initiative of a group of boys and girls who had spent a part of their own lives away from their biological families, and who had decided to make themselves available for any peers who had similar experiences in a way that makes them the protagonist, as well as encouraging solidarity and peer support. Today, they develop projects, campaigns and initiatives to promote the wellbeing and active participation of young people leaving the care and protection system. One of these initiatives is the Care Leavers' Network, an informal network supported by Agevolando since 2017, and which is today active in more than 10 Italian regions with proposals for exchange, training and advocacy.
Useful links	www.agevolando.org

"Project Care Leavers" (Progetto Care Leavers) (Italy)	
Description	An experiment supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy as part of the Fund for Combatting Poverty and Social Exclusion and operating in collaboration with Istituto degli Innocenti. The project's general objective is to accompany those who have just come of age in their journey towards independence through the creation of the necessary support systems that will enable them to gradually build themselves a future, and to become an adult from the moment they exit the care and protection system. The project focuses on the Tutor for Independence as the figure who supports the aims and objectives of national experimentation and tailored projects. Based on each child's economic situation, support for independence can also be achieved with the awarding of an individual grant not exceeding 780 euros a month to cover both ordinary expenditure and costs specific to the challenges faced by care leavers.
Useful links	https://www.minori.gov.it/it/attivita/progetto-care leavers

"First Room – Innovative tools for the socio-professional integration of young people leaving the special protection system" (Romania)

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Description	A "call for projects" launched at the end of 2019 by the Ministry for European Funds (Management Authority of the Human Capital Operational Programme) for and aimed at public authorities and social services. The call allocated 23 million euros for operations directed specifically at supporting care leavers and young people leaving the system in the previous four years with different types of interventions, from social integration to employment, from housing to financial support.
Useful links	http://mfe.gov.ro/pocu-23-mil-euro-pentru-sprijinirea-tinerilor-care-parasesc-sistemul-institutionalizat-de-protectie-sociala/

"Aftercare Start Program" (Brașov, Romania)

Description	In 2004, the Association SCUT in Brașov launched a programme of community support called "Aftercare Start", with the aim of helping young people living public institutions to tackle the transition towards an independent life. Today, the programme is developed with the support of the Brașov district local authorities, various local economic figures, the Embassy of the Republic of Ireland and a close volunteer network. It is aimed at care leavers between 18 and 35 years old, vulnerable young people and at-risk families (single parent families, children at risk of dropping out of school early, material poverty…), with personalised pathways offered to around 30 people each year for periods of between 12 and 48 months. The services offered ranges from psycho-social counselling to psychotherapy, from training to work, from promoting health to support providing food, as well as participation and active citizenship courses.
Useful links	www.scutbv.ro

"Integration" Programme (Nicosia, Cyprus)

Description	"Integration" is a programme launched in 2018 in Cyprus to help place young people between the ages of 13 and 19, who have been recovering from drug addiction, into work. The programme involves the National Authority for Addiction, the Penitentiary Authority, the University of Nicosia and several of the city's therapeutic communities. In its pilot phase, it oversaw the organising of tailored training courses for around 50 girls and boys, which took place in three phases: around 30 hours dedicated to basic competencies (social skills, IT, English and entrepreneurship); around 70 hours spent on specialist modules (secretarial,

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	masonry and paving, personal and beauty care, and IT support among other things); and an apprenticeship placement in a company. Each course included systems for assessments and certification for each of the competencies acquired.
Useful links	https://www.unic.ac.cy/tdunit/programma-entaxi-gia-deyteri-synechomeni-chronia/

"Passus" (Gothenburg, Sweden)	
Description	Passus is a programme aimed at girls and boys leaving criminal networks and pathways. Its main goal is to support the creation of new networks of relationships and new systems of opportunity. It provides for tailored educational interventions aimed at young people, supporting their families, and training, accompanying the various stakeholders involved. The project's operations are connected to the "Valdspreventiva Resurs Centrum", an initiative of cooperation and training designed to support young people going through situations of different types of violence, either as perpetrators or as victims. Passus is a project executed since 2018 from Fryshuset, in collaboration with other local bodies and juvenile justice institutions.
Useful links	https://www.fryshuset.se/verksamhet/passus

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6. Our Extended Working Group

In Italy (alphabetical order)

Name	Entity	Role	Country
Baseggio Michela	Tutti per Uno	Educator	Italy
Bergami Patrizia	Area of Rozzano	Director at the Municipality of Rozzano	Italy
Bertolè Lamberto	Municipality of Milan	President of Milan City Council	Italy
Buscemi Elena	Municipality of Milan	Managing Director of Labour and Social Policies, Metropolitan City of Milan	Italy
Cascone Ciro	Prosecutor of the Republic at the Juvenile Court of Milan	Prosecutor of the Republic at the Juvenile Court of Milan	Italy
Casiraghi Laura	Social Enterprise Sercop	Social Worker	Italy
Cesaro Grazia	Juvenile Chamber of Milan	President of the Juvenile Chamber of Milan	Italy
Ciceri Guido	Social Enterprise Sercop	Director of Social Enterprise Sercop	Italy
D'Alberto Clarissa	Agevolando Association	Policy Maker and Spokesperson for Agevolando Association	Italy
Fazio Simona	Spazio Aperto Servizi	Director of the Family and Minor Department at the Social Cooperative Spazio Aperto Servizi	Italy
Ferrario Carlo	Agevolando	Peer-researcher for the project *Stand by Me*	Italy
Gafforini Liliana	Lombardy Region	Contact Officer for Care leavers Measure, Lombardy Region, Directorate-General for Social, Housing and Disability Policies	Italy
Gallina Maria Luisa	Ussm Milan (Office of Social Services for Minors)	Social Worker	Italy
Gallione Cristina	A.S.S.E.M.I. (Azienda Sociale Sud Est Milano)	Director of A.S.S.E.M.I. (Azienda Sociale Sud Est Milano)	Italy
Gatto Maria Carla	Juvenile Court of Milan	President of the Juvenile Court of Milan	Italy
Giacometti Manuel	Spazio Aperto Servizi	Peer-researcher for the project *Stand by Me*	Italy

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Loverso Livio	Metropolitan City of Milan	Head of Labour Market Observatory, Metropolitan City of Milan	Italy
Lupo Susanna	CTIF, Spazio Aperto Servizi	Psychotherapist	Italy
Madoni Patrizia	Metropolitan City of Milan – Health Protection Agency	Social Worker	Italy
Magatti Gianluigi	Progetto Sociale Cooperative	Coordinator of apartments for independence	Italy
Mosca Aurelio	Metropolitan City of Milan – Health Protection Agency	Director of the Planning Department for the Integration of Social Health Benefits with Social Benefits	Italy
Musicco Francesca	Social Enterprise Sercop	Psychologist	Italy
Orilla Veronica	Lombardy Region	Lombardy Region, Directorate-General for Social, Housing and Disability Policies	Italy
Pagani Massimo	Guarantor for childhood and adolesence – Lombardy Region	Guarantor for childhood and adolesence – Lombardy Region	Italy
Parravicini Dario	Metropolitan City of Milan	Director of Economic Development Metropolitan City of Milan	Italy
Polti Elisabetta	Spazio Aperto Servizi	Peer-researcher for the project *Stand by Me*	Italy
Porro Pinuccia	Coordinamento Nazionale Comunità per Minori (C.N.C.M.) ("Community National Coordination for Minors")	Northern area spokesperson for CNCM	Italy
Ravelli Susanna	AFOL Metropolitana	Spokesperson for AFOL Metropolitana	Italy
Sacerdote Silvia	Ussm Milan (Office of Social Services for Minors)	Ussm Milan (Office of Social Services for Minors)	Italy
Samwell Mina	La Cordata	Peer-researcher for the project *Stand by Me*	Italy
Spinoni Monica	Martinitt e Stelline	Director of Social Housing at Martinitt e Stelline	Italy
Turco Maria	A.S.S.E.M.I. (Azienda Sociale Sud Est Milano)	Policy Maker, Head of the Children and Family Division of A.S.S.E.M.I.	Italy

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Turetti Egidio	AIMMF ("Italian Association of Magistrates for Juveniles and Families")	Clerk at the AIMMF ("Italian Association of Magistrates for Juveniles and Families")	Italy
Valentino Ofelia	Juvenile Chamber of Milan	Lawyer	Italy

In Romania (alphabetical order)

Name	Entity	Role	Country
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Boza Roxana	Santo Stefano Centre for Minors, Ghimbav	Inspector	Romania
Catana Marimar	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Romania
Ciocoiu Emilia	Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Manager at Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Romania
Cristureanu Carmen	PECA Foundation	Manager	Romania
Danu Mihaela	Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Manager at Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Romania
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Gafitescu Aurora	Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Manager at Directorate-General for Social Assistance and Child Protection – Brașov	Romania
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In Cyprus (alphabetical order)

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Kallonas Petros	Cyprus Prison Department	Agent	Cyprus
Kouskouli Natasa	Social and Welfare Services (Public Administration)	Official	Cyprus
Lamari Nantia	Mental Health Services – Promitheas	Social Worker	Cyprus
Molua John	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Cyprus
Monero Chris	N.A.	Care leaver	Cyprus
Panteli Sotiroula	Hope for Children – NGO	Social Worker	Cyprus
Papadopoulos Stelios	N.A.	Care leaver	Cyprus
Savvopoulou Natasa	National Addictions Authority Cyprus	Head of the Policy Department at the National Addictions Authority Cyprus	Cyprus
Stylianou Iakovos	Cyprus Prison Department	Educator	Cyprus
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Touray Alasan	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Cyprus
Trifilli Panayiota	Social and Welfare Services (Public Administration)	Official	Cyprus

In Sweden (alphabetical order)

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Bahsoun Shadi	Livsanda	Manager of Housing Services at Livsanda	Sweden
Engelbretksson Ulrika	Uddevalla	Head of the Department of Prevention – city of Uddevalla	Sweden
Fard Ashkan	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Sweden
Franck Håkan	Policy Department	Head of the Policy Department	Sweden
Gustafsson Daniel	Gothenburg Municipality	Head of Department for Gothenburg Municipality, Lawyer	Sweden
Hassan Abdiweil	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Sweden
Hermansson Annica	Policy Department	Head of the Policy Department	Sweden
Larsson Emma	Livsanda	Coordinator	Sweden
Mushtaq Khorsand	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Sweden
Nygren Lovisa	Swedish Prison and Probation Services	Head of Swedish Prison and Probation Services	Sweden
Oskarsson Moa	N.A.	Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Sweden
Reza Mahdi	N.A.	Student, Peer-researcher for the project Stand by Me	Sweden

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Project Partners

Metropolitan City of Milan
Italy (leader)
The Metropolitan city of Milan, made up of 134 municipalities and a total of 3,176,180 inhabitants, is the holder in the area of economic and social development of a fundamental role in the promotion of equal opportunities, opposing every form of discrimination and therefore promotes positive acts of inclusion, putting the rights of people, particularly the young generations, at the centre. The wealth of experience in the field of continuing training and research, the networks consolidated with international organisations, the Appeal Court of Milan, the Juvenile Courts, professional associations, the most representative Bar Associations, NGOs and, last but not least, local and regional entities, are the basis of constant planning activity both for EU and national funds, as strategic actions (including in the Metropolitan City's Strategic Plan) to promote a child-friendly culture in the Metropolitan area.

Codici | Ricerca e Intervento
Italy (partner)
An independent entity that promotes pathways for research and transformation in the social field, alongside organisations, institutions and networks, in understanding and accompanying the social changes taking place.

Spazio Aperto Servizi ONLUS
Italy (partner)
Active in Milan since 1993, it offers educational services, social assistance and specialist services for people with disabilities, and children and families in difficulty. The cooperative plans and offers answers to the social needs identified in the area, promotion social and community wellbeing through shared, endorsed pathways aimed at creating a supportive, active and responsible community.

Asociatia AHEAD
Romania (partner)
Founded in 2013 to respond to the need to provide educational alternatives designed to provide integration and social participation for children and young people belonging to disadvantaged groups. Ahead develops the talents and abilities needed to help children and young people integrate into society.

G.G. Eurosuccess Consulting
Cyprus (partner)
Through its participation in various European development and education projects, it works to exchange good practice and know-how with regard to different target groups and sectors, with the aim of supporting and providing opportunities for education, creation and the development of various groups and organisations in society.

Stiftelsen Fryshuset
Sweden (partner)

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A dynamic, independent entity and movement, multifaceted to support the development, empowerment and social inclusion of young people, with particular attention paid to at-risk subjects and marginalised young people. Fryshuset offers young people the opportunity to develop their innate abilities and discover their passion to help them to fulfil their potential and integrate themselves into society from a work, culture, social, school and professional perspective.

Project carried out by:
Metropolitan City of Milan (IT)
Codici | Ricerca e intervento (IT)
Spazio Aperto Servizi (IT), Ahead (RO)
Eurosuccess (CY) and Fryshuset (SE)

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SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES
FOR CARE-LEAVERS INCLUSION
THROUGH PARTICIPATORY POLICY MAKING

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