

”EVERY CHILD IS PARTICULAR!”

About the changes achieved through cross-border collaboration in the
mindset and practices of child welfare work in Russia

Summary of the report evaluation of the activities by Save the Children Finland in the Republic of
Karelia and Leningrad Region of the Russian Federation in 2005-2013¹

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Save the Children Finland, its neighboring area collaboration and about Russia as an operational environment.....	4
3. Local partners and their empowerment?.....	6
Mir Detei: social support and learning about child rights in Sortavala	6
Beregite Detei: peer support and promoting the rights of children with disabilities in Vyborg.....	8
Karelian Union of Child Protection: advocacy for children and networking of children homes in Karelia ...	9
4. Effectiveness and impact.....	10
GO1: Changes in children accessing quality services	10
GO2: Changes in legislation, practices and attitudes	12
GO3: Changes in the capacity to act of the involved NGOs and their local communities	13
GO4: Changes in involvement of children	13
Conclusions.....	14
5. Relevance, efficiency and sustainability of the collaboration	14
6. Some thoughts on the future	15
References.....	17

1. Introduction

This summary is to present the main findings of the evaluation report in which the performance of Save the Children Finland (later SCF) in its activities in the Russian context was measured. For the evaluation, seven projects carried out in 2005-2013 by SCF with its local partners in the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad Region were selected (by SCF) under more profound analysis. In the evaluation, the selected projects are treated as examples of SCF's activities in the region in order to consider the impact of the work of SCF in Russia.² Thus, the aim has not been to measure individual projects but to understand the main goals of SCF in Russia at more general level. In other words, through these projects I have tried to build a comprehensive picture what kinds of activities have been supported by cross-border collaboration and what are the main results of this support. The global outcomes (i.e. sought goals) of SCF were applied to measure the effectiveness and impact of the work of SCF in the Russian context. These outcomes included: "More children access quality services" (GO1); "More children benefit from pro-child policies, legislation and mechanisms" (GO2); "Strong civil society and local communities support the realization of children"; and "Children are able to express their views and influence decision-making" (GO4).³

In addition to the effectiveness and impact, questions concerning relevance, efficiency and sustainability of the projects by SCF were investigated in the evaluation. Since the projects of SCF as a rule have involved a local NGO as a partner, evaluation concerned also the capability of these partnering organizations to act in questions of child welfare in Russia. One of the purposes of the evaluation was to make recommendations for the future.

The evaluation was carried in spring 2013. Many kinds of project documents have served as the material for the evaluation. In addition to these already existing and written materials, interviews of people who have been involved in the projects played a major role for evaluation of the performance of SCF. Besides Helsinki, these interviews were conducted in Sortavala and Petrozavodsk as well as Vyborg during two field trips. In the Russian side, in addition to the representatives of the partnering NGOs, also local and regional authorities and beneficiaries of the projects were met. During the trips, visits to several institutions were made. Thus, together with talking to people, participatory observation served as one of the main methods to collect information.⁴ In order to understand better the on-going reform in foster care and child welfare more generally in the Russian context, I have also acquainted myself with the relevant – and recent – policy documents that were referred often during the field trips.⁵

Undoubtedly, one can conclude that with collaboration projects between SCF and its local partners much has been achieved. The major achievement concern the changes in the mindset and practices that have taken places among those professionals who work with children: this change has meant a shift towards pro-child working practices. Moreover, the partners have been successful in improving the quality of the existing public services for children and in providing essential complementary services of their own. SCF has also succeeded in the hoped-for outcome of strengthening the capacity of its local partners. These positive outcomes, though, have been possible also due to the changes in the operational environment: many positive developments have happened in the state policies concerning child welfare in Russia. Yet, the

² Four of altogether seven projects were implemented in Karelia, while three of them took place in the Leningrad Region. See more detailed information about the projects in the original evaluation report (in Finnish, Kulmala 2013a).

³ See more about the listed outcomes in the Global Program Plan of SCF for 2011-2013 from September 2011; see more about the application of the outcomes for this evaluation process in in Kulmala 2013a (in Finnish).

⁴ I spoke with altogether forty nine people. See detailed information about those people as well as about other materials in Kulmala 2013a (in Finnish).

⁵ My PhD dissertation (see Kulmala 2013b) investigated state-society relations in the Karelian context, in particular in the Sortavala district, which is why the state, regional and municipal level policies towards civil society are very familiar to me. One of the partners of SCF, MD from Sortavala, has served as one of the empirical cases in my dissertation. Thus, my previous work has provided me valuable background information and expertise on the topic in order to be in better position to conduct this evaluation work.

policy changes cannot be accredited to the SCF projects. One needs to admit that currently the activities of the local partners are very practically oriented and somehow resemble social work among children and their families, while advocacy has not been any top priority in the activity of the majority of the partnering organizations. Development of participatory mechanisms to involve children in decision-making processes has not gained as much focus as perhaps hoped for. Currently it seems that the support from SCF – in financial and professional terms – is still needed. The foster care system is now under huge reformation in Russia, so SCF and its partners would be in good position to have impact on what kind of system is emerging and more importantly that the interests of children would be heard and seen in the outcomes of the reforms. Many principles written in the policy documents behind the reform, such the aim to create a system that mostly bases on foster families and smaller children's home units, are well in line with those ideologies that SCF has emphasized in its work. This is why I consider important that SCF would not withdraw from its activity in the Russian context right now. Rather, I would prefer to see even tightening of collaboration in terms of educational and professional support – perhaps, in the format of a larger EU-funded project. In the future, however, it seems that there should be better available also Russian domestic funding since the outsourcing mechanism of the state-based services are constantly increasing and the new policy documents in the field of child welfare recognize the role of NGOs in the related questions.

2. Save the Children Finland, its neighboring area collaboration and about Russia as an operational environment

SCF started its activities in the Russian context already in 1995 as a material support to children who lived in one children's home in Saint Petersburg. Quite soon, especially after the economic crisis in 1998, these activities were largely transferred to Russian Karelia.⁶ Ideologically it is perhaps quite controversial that SCF in the first place begun supporting foster care in state institutions, not in foster families, but it becomes rather understandable in the Russian context where most children lived (and still live) in those institutions in which living conditions might be quite miserable. The purpose of SCF's work in Russia thus has been in improving these conditions by material support and developing pro-child working practices. Material, a sort of humanitarian aid has remained in central place in SCF's work in Russia but the main focus has shifted to professional support in order to develop those pro-child methods.

SCF has carried out numerous projects in Karelia, which have focused on the improvement of the quality of care in the state foster care institutions. In addition to the Karelia children's homes, SCF has concentrated on the prevention of custody cases by developing student welfare services in schools and a system of support families. In Vyborg activities to support parenting and families with disabled child has been central. SCF has not had any specific Russia program in its work. Despite this fact, there are several common goals among the projects of SCF in Russia, and these goals correspond well with activities of the organization even more globally. The so-called thread of SCF's work in Russia can be said to be in making improvements in living environment and condition of children who live in state institutions, prevention of custody cases through supporting families in many ways, promoting rights of the disabled children and capacity building for local civil society organizations. All

⁶ See the closing report of the initial project: Keskiöja, Paula (2006): Kummilapsitoimintaa 10 vuotta lastenkotilasten hyväksi Pietarissa v. 1995-2005. Loppuraportti 16.1.2006. Pelastakaa Lapset, Helsinki. Ideologically it is perhaps quite controversial that SCF in the first place begun supporting foster care in state institutions, not in foster families, but it becomes rather understandable in the Russian context where most children lived (and still live) in those institutions in which living conditions might be quite miserable. The purpose of SCF's work in Russia thus has been in improving these conditions by material support and developing pro-child working practices.

the project have emphasized the important to collaborate with the authorities and especially social, health care and education departments of the local administrations have been usually drawn into the project activities. In addition to more concrete work around the issues in focus, the projects as a rule have aim at awareness-raising on those issues themselves. Many of the projects have addressed the issues that have carried somewhat sensitive nature in the Russian context, which has meant the lack of publicity and public debate around those issues in question. In 2013, however, from the viewpoint of SCF, its work in Russia seem to be much in concrete material help and support of already exiting activities. SFC would prefer to see more focus on advocacy work instead of such social work oriented activities.

From the viewpoint of major concern of SCF, Russia as an operational environment has indeed changed much. Especially in the field of foster care, the Russian state has introduced new policies that aim at massive changes of the foster care system – thus, exactly in the field that has been in focus of SCF’s work in Russia.⁷ Ideologically central to these new policies is the statement that each child has right to live and grow in family. In addition to addressing the questions how to support Russian families in order to prevent the situations that child would be placed away from home, the goal of the reform is to deinstitutionalize the massive system of large state foster care units through the creation of a new system based on foster families. More attention is also to be paid on social integration of children living in the state institutions and development of more home-like environment in the state units. All in all, it now seems that the state will invest on the development foster family system, while the existing large units remain with less and less resources. In Karelia, the reform is taking its first steps but it seems that the new born foster care authorities have no idea what their work will be in practice. Especially these authorities seem to be with question where to find all the needed foster families in order to dismantle the state institutions. Traditionally Russian have not been too willing take foster a child or to adopt a child. What is urgently needed in the Russian society is to promote social change in this field, i.e. to strive for change in people’s attitudes for foster care.

In sum, one can conclude that a new foster care system is emerging is Russia and one can say very little about the outcomes of these reforms and related processes. The goal to decrease the direct involvement of the state in foster care might mean an increasing role for social and religious organizations as well as for business sector to step in in the child welfare service provision, since it seems unrealistic that the current state-based system can be taken down to the families. The above-mentioned new policies in fact emphasize the establishment of the so-called social partnership in which the state, businesses and civil society would actively collaborate in the field of child welfare. Thus, this reform indeed opens up wider possibilities to the local partners of SCF to be active in child welfare more generally and in foster care in particular. At more general level, the Russian state has in recent years introduced several funding mechanisms to (socially oriented) Russian NGOs to get more involved in social service provision: for instance, the Russian state institutions can now outsource a service to an NGO in certain fields, such as support for parents and children, prevention of “social orphanage” (as the phenomenon of placing a child away from her/his family due social reasons is called in Russian), home care of the disabled.⁸ In this respect, the collaborative efforts of SCF and its local partners correspond well with the national policies in the field, which in turn open up more possibilities to local NGOs in carry out their activities. It is necessary to note

⁷ The main bodies of these policies are the following national level documents: National Action Strategy for Promotion of Child Interests for 2012-2017 and National Program of Russia without Orphans for 2013-2020. Read more about the policies in Finnish in Kulmala 2013a and online in Russian: <http://state.kremlin.ru/face/17518>; <http://большоеправительство.пф/upload/iblock/9ee/9eedc1c0acc7ab0e8cd1f6e05975c6da.pdf>.

⁸ The Russian state’s attitude toward civil society is dualistic: the state has officially acknowledged a need for certain types of civil society organizations, such as social service providers, that serve state interests, while the activities of others, such as human rights organizations, are being disrupted. Thus, there is a trend of simultaneous support and disruption, cooperation and control; new mechanisms for cooperation are constantly being introduced, but at the same time control is increased. (More in e.g. Kulmala 2013b.)

also that the much spoken new law, the foreign agent law, will not restrain collaboration in field of child welfare between SCF and its local partners since their activities does not become labeled as political.⁹

The federal state has also promised to address funds to the Russian regions for the described outsourcing purposes. In practice, however, poor regions, such as Karelia and Leningrad region, cannot benefit much from these federal funds, since the programs require a certain amount of self-financing that these regions cannot have afford to in a larger scale. (More in Kulmala 2013b.) From the viewpoint of SCF and its local partners, in particular, this is somewhat disappointing since the effort carried through in this partnership have been highly appreciated by the local and regional authorities which would be willing give more responsibility to those local NGOs in the field of child welfare and consequently fund the implementation of some of those responsibilities if there just were money available for these purposes. In Karelia particularly the climate towards civil society tends to be favorable and participatory.¹⁰

Thus, Russia as an environment to operate for SCF has changed during the recent years and many of the changes can be seen as positive from the viewpoint of SCF's work in the region. Currently, SCF and its local partners operate in questions that are finally prioritized also by the Russian state. This more likely will mean that the state will not interfere in this collaboration and involved organizations even if also many restrictions for Russian NGOs and their foreign partnerships have appeared in state policies. On the contrary, especially in Finland's neighboring areas, Russian authorities trust on SCF and welcome its expertise in the middle of massive foster care reform. I see that at the moment, one could genuinely have an effect on the emerging system which is why I highly recommend continue the collaboration in the region still for a few years (until the Russian system in foster care and financing of NGOs will be more developed and stabilized).

3. Local partners and their empowerment?

SCF has a rule operated with a local NGO partner in the Russian (as in any other) context and involved the local authorities in this collaboration. Next, the local partners will be introduced as well as their development and capabilities to act in child welfare discussed.¹¹

Mir Detei: social support and learning about child rights in Sortavala¹²

SCF's local partner in Sortavala, a child protection organization Mir Detei (later MD), was established in 2001 in Finnish-Russian collaboration. Since then SCF has been the main funder of this local organization. Bringing out children's voice, developing preventive mechanisms to work with families, building the capacity of MD, providing meaningful leisure activities for children and youngsters, developing effective fundraising methods and promoting voluntarism have been set as the goals for MD's work and trans-national collaboration with SCF. One of the permanent activities within this collaboration has been to provide material support (e.g. clothes, food, day care and school fees) for families with low income. Such activity fits well to SCF's ideology to help the most vulnerable children. Though, SCF would be willing to shift the focus from such social support to advocacy activities. MD, in turn, sees the continuation of such

⁹ In fact, the new law might indirectly have more negative impact due to the largely prevailing assumptions by foreign funders that could not anymore finance Russia (read more in Kulmala 2013a, in Finnish).

¹⁰ In comparison with some other regions of Russia, it seems that there have been fewer conflicts between the authorities and civil society organizations in Karelia, and for instance, according to several representatives of the Karelian organizations, the changes in the NGO legislation of 2006 were be implemented softly. Also the foreign agent law seemed to have quite marginal impact in the region. (Kulmala 2013b.)

¹¹ A more detailed analysis has been presented in the original evaluation report in Finnish (see Kulmala 2013a).

¹² For MD see also Kulmala 2013b.

aid essential to those families who have been under the program. Also the municipal administration relies on the efforts of MD in this field and often advises families in need to turn to MD.¹³ Within the trans-national collaboration, in order to prevent children to be placed away from their families, were established also several kinds of weekly-running hobby clubs for children as well as created a small-scale system of support families. The latter activity though did not root very successfully in the local context.

Even if social work kinds of activities have been central to MD's work, the organization has steadily moved towards awareness-raising on child rights at more general level (see more in Kulmala 2013b). MD has, for instance, carried on surveys on child rights, according to which people know much more about their responsibilities than rights. Also seminars have been held on the topic among the officials and professional and articles published in the local media. Children themselves have been given possibility to learn about their rights in many ways at schools – and in very concrete terms by illustrating the annually published calendars in which each month presents one of the UN child rights and in the children's journal Raduga, published by MD. With such awareness-raising efforts, one has achieved a change in the attitudes of people: as one of the active people said to me, "We have learnt that a child is not only a child, but a child with rights". One needs to admit that such work is still in its beginnings and MD would still need constantly to remind local community about these rights.

There was carried out also a collaboration project on developing student welfare services at local schools. Within this project, multi-professional groups were created and trained. According to local people, one of the main achievements of this project has been that professionals from different institutions (schools, social and health care services, NGOs) learnt to work together. Such collaboration has become firmly established in the local working practices even if the project has ended. Thanks to the project, involved people also understood that is a child – not an adult (a teacher) – who is in the core of the educational work.

As most recent trend, MD has started preventive work among young families. The organization has established clubs for pregnant mums and mums of small children. It was hoped by the chair of MD that such preventive work would serve as the main focus in the activities of MD in future – though, as noted, she considered the material support for families essential. The chair of MD has quite recently started to work as the director of a municipal socio-cultural youth center and she was hoping this center in future to serve as a family center which would provide a complex set activities for children, youngster and their families and therefore the center would function as a preventive mechanism of many family related problems. Yet, due to severe financial problems, such dream was still far ahead. All in all, it seems that the activities of MD will be in many ways intertwined with the activities of the youth centers, which might benefit both organizations in terms of resources, for instance. However, it is utmost important for MD not to forget the fundamental task of NGOs to promote social change.¹⁴

MD has been successful in gaining a strong position in the local community. The organization is well-known and appreciated by the ordinary people as well as officials. MD has been able to raise funds also from other

¹³ In the Russian system of social support, this kind of material help to people with low income is one of those rare social obligations that lie in the responsibilities of the municipal governments. In practice, however, in the situation when the municipality has scarce resources, it has typically sent its client families with children to MD – like some other clients to other local NGOs (more in Kulmala 2013b). For instance, in 2013, the social department of the Sortavala municipal administration did not distributed any funds for these purposes but instead completely relied on the help of NGOs in this field. In this respect, local NGOs including MD have undertaken some of the functions of the municipality – with the help of Finnish funding.

¹⁴ Such a situation of combined public (state) and voluntary (civil society) efforts seems to be rather typical at large in the Russian context. Especially now in the current situation when the foreign funds for Russian NGOs are in constant decline, such combination might serve as a potential survival strategy for NGOs. (More in Kulmala 2013b.) In MD's case, I would not worry too much about the NGO becoming completely buried within the state institutions, since the active people in MD are very committed to their mission. näyttääkin siltä, että tämänkaltaisen julkisen sektorin ja järjestötoiminnan yhteistoiminta on molemmille osapuolille selviytymiskeino tilanteessa, jossa molempien resurssit ovat vähäiset (Kulmala 2013a).

sources than SCF from local business and other sponsors and domestic state funding instruments as well as well through other trans-national partnerships. Such success can be indeed largely credited to SCF which has been successful in its aims to build the capacity of its local partner. Yet, the activities of MD are still mostly built on the annual support from SCF. If this support ended, I believe that it would not mean the end of MD since people who are involved are highly committed to their mission. Contacts among the local community have been established and involved people are creative in their ideas. Yet, basic activities are carried through thanks to the funds from SCF and their fate would hang in the balance if SCF would exit at the moment.

Beregite Detei: peer support and promoting the rights of children with disabilities in Vyborg

A local partner in Vyborg, child protection organization Beregite Detei (later BD), was established by SCF to coordinate its activities in the region. BD has mostly been active in supporting vulnerable families – before anything single parent families and families with disabled children. This support has been largely carried through a family center Margarita which has served as a meeting place for vulnerable families in the premises of BD. In the center, numerous mother-child groups and hobby clubs for children have gathered in order to prevent a need for foster care. Participating mums have really appreciated such activity and it became evident that children enjoyed the meetings at the centers. Families have also received some material support through the center.¹⁵ According to the official project documentation, the center would engage in awareness-raising on child rights and having impact on social, health care and education policies, but in practice it seemed that such advocacy work has remained rather low.

Besides the above-described preventive work with families, BD has strongly engaged in working with families which have children with disabilities. In the framework of the collaboration project of SCF and BD on the topic, a register of such families was created through which local families with disabled children indeed found each other. Even though the project has ended, the safety and peer support net has been created and the involved families communicate on a regular basis, which seems to serve as an utmost important resource for their daily lives. This community serves from mundane chatting to information change concerning changes in relevant policies and laws. In the framework of the project, hobby clubs for disabled children were arranged on a weekly basis. These clubs provided a unique opportunity to these kids to participate in such activities and disappointment about the close down of these clubs after the project period was tangible among the families with whom I met. Parents of those families for sure communicate without any project, but it would be important to find funds to continue the work of the hobby clubs. Many concrete improvements in the services for disabled people had taken place as well during the project. Local people felt that concerning the disabilities, at the level of people's attitudes and mindset was much achieved: "We were able to a little bit turn something in people's heads", as one of them put it. Yet, much remains to be done since disabilities have been traditionally hidden and stigmatized in the Russian society.

Single parents and parents with children with disabilities (i.e. mothers) without exception had found the family camps, provided through BD, very important because they provided a unique opportunity for parents and children together to go to camps. Also the social committee of the region considered such parent-child camps as a new social innovation and currently funds such these activities. BD would be more than willing in future to take such role of being responsible for certain services if funds were found from the governmental structures.

One of the collaborative projects was to promote inclusive education in the region. During the project much was done – schools renovated, people educated and even the municipality at the programmatic level

¹⁵ Materials for such support have been received through donations by the local and international contacts of BD.

committed to the issue: as a result most of the schools and kindergartens are in principle inclusive. Yet, in practice, most of the disabled children still do not take part in the education at ordinary schools. Also the municipality withdrew from the funding it had provided after the projects. Thus, it seems that the work remained unfinished and happened what unfortunately sometimes happens: the started activities are carried out only when there are ear-marked funds available.

BD has not been too successful in generating funds outside the support by SCF. Yet, as noted, the organization would be willing to take a role of service provider and officials are also ready to think about outsourcing something to BD. Many kinds of ideas were in the air concerning the already existing activities at the center and also new openings in the field of foster care reform, for instance. Yet, currently BD is extremely dependent on the support by SCF and without this support there is a real danger that the family center will be closed down. What seem to be extremely important for BD's work as a resource are its tight contacts to a local university and an adult education center. Through the university in particular many students have volunteered in the activities of BD. Through such arrangement many activities could be carried on if only funds to maintain the premises were found somewhere. Involving younger generation appears to me important also due to the fact that in such a way these young people get experience of voluntary work and working with people in vulnerable position, which is more likely something that these people carry through their life. In addition to the evident question of financial resources, MD would still need some capacity building in advocacy work.

Karelian Union of Child Protection: advocacy for children and networking of children homes in Karelia

Unlike the above-presented partners in Sortavala and Vyborg, the Karelian Union of Child Protection (later KUCP) existed well before its collaboration with SCF. A group of then-deputies in Karelian regional parliament decided to register a regional NGO in order to impact policies concerning children – directly in terms of laws and through developing pro-child working methods at the level of the institutions working with children.¹⁶ The leader of the KUCP participates in many official bodies that seems to be relevant when aiming at changes in laws and practices: for instance, she is a member of the regional council for the implementation of the national action strategy for which the on-going foster care reform build on.

The advocacy orientation has been explicitly written in the mission of the KUCP – yet, the organization in engages in many kinds of practical work for children. KUCP represents and defends the rights of children in very concrete terms, for instance through “Child Attorney” service, which provides free-of-charge juridical help for children. This defense work has proved to be successful and the leader of KUCP who on a voluntary basis runs this service has won around eighty per cent of the cases. This activity is not funded by SCF but the funds channeled through SCF at the moment enable the service since through them KUCP is able to keep and run its office. KUCP is extremely experienced in raising funds from domestic and international sources but at the moment, for the first time in the organization's history, SCF is the only source of funding – except a small-scale project funded by the regional authorities from the above-described instruments that the Russian state has introduced to fund NGOs.

The collaboration with SCF started in 2006 when SCF sought for a local NGO partner for its activities targeted to Karelian children homes. The goal of this project has been to guarantee the right of children to full growth, development and education. These processes have been supported by improving the living conditions of these children by providing material aid for the participating children homes and arranging

¹⁶ Especially in the current situation in Putin's Russia when the opportunity structure for NGOs and other (oppositional) groups seems to be rather closed, this advocacy work rather takes place at the lower levels – instead of the national policies, at the level regional and local practices.

hobby clubs in those state-based institutions. Material support and hobby clubs are considered very important and the clubs, for instance, have been equipped fully thanks to SCF support only. Clubs activities are seen important since they give meaning activities and kids keep busy around them which prevents many kinds of problems among them. In monetary terms, this kind of material support does not require big amount of money but it is still seen to be essential extra resource for the children homes.

In addition to such material and direct help, the project has focused on promoting pro-child working methods through training. As the biggest result of the project, one indeed can consider the change from authoritarian care culture towards child central and friendlier practices in these institutions. In recent years much attention has been paid to social integration of the children living in children's homes and aftercare of those leaving their institutions. At the first stages, the focus of the latter work was on practical skills needed for these kinds to live on their own, but lately the focus has shifted on remedial education and preparing kids for entrance exams of intermediate and higher educational institutions. Admission to such education would guarantee a place to stay in dormitories which might be an easier way to get used to live outside the children home. KUCP received the above-mentioned state grant for such activity. The problem is that the grant is only for four months which obviously does not allow persevering work, not to speak about maintaining the basic activities including office running costs.

An indisputable achievement of the collaborative project is the establishment of the board of directors to which the directors of each Karelian children home are members. This body is coordinated by KUCP, it gathers on a regular basis and it has provided an important channel to exchange of experiences and working practices. The fear of closing down of such body due to the lack finances indeed caused tears. In addition to children homes, KUCP in collaboration with SCF has promoted pro-child working practices also in other kinds of institutions. KUCP, for instance, participate in the project that was discussed through MD in Sortavala in which new practices in student welfare services were developed. Without a doubt, as in Sortavala, this work continues also in other parts of Karelia.

As an NGO, KUCP is a strong combination of advocacy and concrete work. I found it interesting that even if the organization is very loud in its critics against the state policies, it tightly and constructively collaborates with different-level governmental officials. Among the local partners, KUCP is least dependent on SCF in many ways, which means that there is no need for capacity building of this organization, but as noted for the first time, the organization has become very dependent on SCF in financial terms. KUCP could be a very strong agent in the middle of the huge foster care reform since as a regional organization it brings together all the children homes in Karelia and consequently all the relevant officials both at the regional and federal level. In such work, however, KUCP would benefit from professionalism in SCF in the field.

4. Effectiveness and impact

In the next section, the effectiveness and impact of collaboration between SCF and its local partners will be discussed in the light of SCF's global outcome goals. I ask what has been achieved through cross-border collaboration and what perhaps went wrong.

G01: Changes in children accessing quality services

SCF with its local partners has indeed in many ways contributed to and modified the local service scene for children in Karelia as in the Vyborg district of the Leningrad region. First of all, within the collaboration projects, the partnering organizations have succeeded in improving the quality of existing – mostly public – services. Secondly, they have been able to provide the so-called complementary, extra services. In the context of Russia, where the state has traditionally taken the lead in welfare service provision, these

involved NGOs have thus to say filled the gaps in those places where the state has not worked well enough or it has not operated at all.

The project focusing on the Karelian children's homes has in fact concerned the entirely state-based existing system. The project has aimed that the provided foster care in these state institutions would be of better quality. It is an undisputable fact that numerous clubs (and their equipment) have improved the quality of life of children who live in those institutions. The support through the project has been something extra, something that those institutions could have not had afford to without financial support from SCF. This kind of support has been very direct, concrete and visible also from the viewpoint of children. In addition to such material support, education and training have large contributed to more pro-child working practices in the institutions, which have to have positive impact on children's life quality. Further training and education of pro-child approaches and methods would be obviously needed – not only in the Russian context but I guess anywhere in the world professionals cannot be trained too much in this field. Like in Karelian children's homes, in Vyborg, through the project resources one has made progress in the disabled children to access services and the quality of those services, for instance in health care, has been improved in very concrete terms. Any kind of renovation of the facilities for those children has made the premises more comfortable to be and visit. In Sortavala, the material, social support of families that MD has been able to provide with the support from SCF has indeed been an improvement in the situation that the municipality has not been able or willing to carry out its social responsibility to support those families. Here, the NGO has in very concrete terms stepped up where the state has failed in its obligations.

Also the integration of the disabled children into the schools in the Vyborg district can be considered as an improvement in children accessing the services. Physically schools became better equipped to take the disabled children and transportation to schools for such children was introduced. It is a big accomplishment that all the schools are now in principle inclusive. Yet, the work was left unfinished and in practice schools are not ready to take children with disabilities – in particular due to the insufficiencies what it comes to their staff: no professionals or assistants can be hired. Similar situation appeared in Karelian children's homes where the system of personal educators for each child did not take root due to the reality: when there are hundreds of children in these homes and much less personnel, the goal to create such system was far from realistic.

In schools of Karelia, it seems that new collaborative practices in student welfare services have been successfully created which has supposedly made from the viewpoint of students better those processes in which school tries to interfere into the life of a student in problem situations. Although, individual approach to students in daily school practices seems to be still off target. What it comes to the children's homes, with the projects of SCF one has been able to improve the quality of services in the institutions as described, but these projects have hardly had any impact to the other forms of foster care – largely because those other forms have been underemphasized in the Russian society. Now in the middle of the huge foster care reform one could really make efforts to participate in these process and thus to have impact how the system would look in future.

In addition to improvements in quality of the existing services for children, through collaboration projects the partners have established many services that can be considered complementary to the existing, public ones. In the Karelian children's homes the projects have paid attention on the questions of after care, for instance – and issue that has been until now missing from the official practices. Family centers, clubs in those centers and family camps with a preventive function have served children and their families in parallel to other kinds of services. If having been successful, the initiated system of support families in Sortavala could have served as a primary example of an NGO-led complementary service to local families. In future, I would see that some of the initiated services will stay in the NGO sector but at the moment it seems that the Russian state is somehow stepping in in the fields that so far have been taken care by the third sector. Yet, the recent policy documents put great emphasis on the role of NGOs in service provision

so one could assume that the role of NGOs in the field will increase as will the state funds for those NGOs to provide services that have been earlier (at least in principle) taken care by the state, public structures. So far, however, many of the complementary services provided by the local partners of SCF are in danger to fall down if SCF stepped back from providing funds for its Russian partners.

Generally speaking one can conclude that all kind of training and education carried out in the framework of the collaboration has been influential in improving the quality of services for children – regardless whether those services took place either in the state or NGO sector. As one of the most important tasks for the local partners of SCF I see monitoring that those already achieved improvement will stay and stepping in in wholly new areas that are relevant from the viewpoint of their beneficiaries and where the state would not work (properly).

G02: Changes in legislation, practices and attitudes

The threads of SCF's work in Russia have concerned children's homes and schools in Karelia as in the Leningrad region. Through projects the partnering organizations have made effort to implement new working practices that – when successful – would increase the quality of services in question, as discussed above.

It seems that the impact of the projects on the Russian legislation has remained modest and even non-existent. Yet, this is not to say that there was no impact from this perspective. Rather, the impact has taken place at the lower levels of action. A remarkable change has taken place at the level institutional practices and mindsets of people working for those institutions. One of the most important outcomes of the collaboration between SCF and its local partners manifests itself in development and hopefully more permanent application of pro-child working practices and methods in those institutions that have participated in the projects. Yet, not all of the wished-for practices have been successfully become rooted in the local context, as discussed above. One seems to be meaningful is that among those people who work with children and who have been involved in the project a significant change in their mindset can be heard: whether working in schools or children's home, people now tend to that instead of previous, more authoritarian understanding of the educational processes, they now tend to think that is a child who is central in those processes. The uniqueness of each child has become understood: "each child is particular", as quoted in the title of this evaluation report, was often repeated to me. Without a doubt, the change is there, even if could be still done.

In addition, the projects have been successful in raising-awareness in the public on the issues that the partners have been working with. Many kinds of vulnerabilities are now more visible. Perhaps, most in this respect has happened in Vyborg concerning the disabilities, which traditionally in the Russian context, as noted, have been tried to hidden. Making visible the issue of disability itself has required courage from those people who have participated in this work. In addition to publishing the issue, also advocacy work for the rights of those people has been carried out – even if one needs to admit that articulation of the related claims has not taken usually forms that would base on strong rights-defense rhetoric. Also here much remains to be done in order to gain the fully acceptance of the disabled as they are in the Russian society at large. This is something that one would hope SFC's local partners to make efforts in future. What is comes to child rights in general, much has been learned in the projects, but this work should be continued and more focused in future. It seems that concerning children who live in foster care, especially in the institutional forms of such care, such advocacy for making this group of people more visible and accepted has not been practiced much. This would be something that the local NGOs should engage themselves in future, since it is exactly the sphere of civil society where new identities are to be created and advocated for.

One can easily conclude that attitudes and practices have changed in positive terms. But it also seems that some of the issues become buried when the projects end. I also heard often than when one gives something from her/his own hands to someone else – for instance a new form of activity initiated by an NGO to a municipal institution – it disappears or radically changes. Such situation tells us much about the fact that those practices still rely on individuals and their efforts instead of taking any institutionalized form. It is exactly the local NGOs who should take the responsibility to monitor that initiated and further applied practices stay in force.

G03: Changes in the capacity to act of the involved NGOs and their local communities

What it comes to the goal of SCF concerning the capacity building of their local partners, the change is huge especially in Sortavala and Vyborg. Thanks to SCF, there is now an NGO that works for child welfare in those localities. SCF has hoped that their local partner would become an independent agent. One has to say that the local partners of SCF have different capacity and readiness to act: each of them has their strengths and weaknesses. Each of the local partners have been allowed and able to rather independently use the funds channeled through SCF, which indeed signals from their organizational skills being at certain level as well as from their pro-activeness in ideas. One of the biggest outcomes of international collaboration – not only by SCF but more generally in the Russian context (cf. Kulmala 20013b) – is the capacity building of Russian NGOs in project managements: more generally speaking, those organizations which have been involved in international projects seem to do better also in gaining available domestic resources. The local partners of SCF have also gained a certain, strong social status in the local communities – among the officials and ordinary dwellers. Thus, they have also gained constituencies, which is not any minor fact in the Russian context (more in e.g. Kulmala 2013b). Despite these benefits, each of the local partners is still – or better to say particularly now – very dependent on SCF and its funds.

In addition to strengthening those local NGOs, SCF has managed to build capacities of local communities at large. As noted, through the projects, people from different local institutions have learned to act together for certain purposes. It seems that once these contacts, connections and collaborative practices have been established, they will not disappear but communication and cooperation will continue even if there was no project.¹⁷ Moreover, the projects have promoted peer support – among both the professionals and beneficiaries. Such peer support has increased the ability of certain work communities to act. An utmost important role peer support has played for those vulnerable families who no more feel that they are alone. This obviously have positive impact for the capacity of families to pull through their daily routines. Such evitable capacity building in turn brings NGOs constituencies which is a major factor in the context when civil society is still emerging.

G04: Changes in involvement of children

Children have benefitted from many of the activities carried through the collaboration between SCF and its local partners. In addition to material help, most directly children have benefitted from leisure time activities provided to them. It seems that for instance in the Karelian children's homes, children have been drawn into planning of those activities for themselves. In Sortavala, the discussed children's journal is one of the best examples how to involve children themselves in the work for promoting their welfare: children make the journal for themselves from their interest and simultaneously learn professionally and

¹⁷ See about very similar findings in the other evaluation report by me (in Finnish): Kulmala, Meri (2012), Koko kylä hiittämässä: värttiläisten aktivoituminen kohti terveellisempää elämää. Loppuarvio vuosina 2007-2011 toteutetuista lähialueyhteistyöhankkeista Värtsilässä. Kansainvälinen Solidaarisuussäätiö, Helsinki.

substantially. In Vyborg, where the projects have concerned very small children as well as children with disabilities I could witness the involvement of children themselves in a less extent than in the other mentioned localities.

Conclusions

SCF has promoted and supported the capacity building of civil society (i.e. citizens) in those fields it has been active in Russia. NGOs have been established and their organizational, professional and substantial capacities have increased during the cross-border collaboration. Through projects SCF has initiated new issues, ideas and practices which has led to remarkable changes in working practices and attitudes of the involved people. Financial support has played a major role: it has played a major role for the partners of SCF as well as for the beneficiaries. To sum the major role of the local partners for their beneficiaries is the fact that those people have gained material help through those organizations and a place to meet their fellows, which has been significant for many of them. The local partners have been engaged also in advocacy work but without doubt such work has been practiced to a lesser extent in comparison to concrete case-by-case help. Yet, one need to remember that publishing an issue or making a group of people is also advocacy as such. The local partners with the support from SCF have been able also to modify the service structures that are considered relevant for children. In the context of Russia, where the political system is quite closed for concrete legislative changes through NGOs, all the improvements in the local service provision and working practices in the institutions that work for/with children can be considered as achievements. Yet, in order to guarantee permanent changes it would be important to push the state also for the better policies from the viewpoint of children.

Through collaboration participants of the local communities have found each other and learned to work together which obviously strengthens the capacity of those local communities to act for common goals – for the best of children in this case. The local partners have understanding and professionalism enough to apply learned practices in the context of Russia, but in addition to providing necessary resources, communication with SCF would be useful in substantial terms.

5. Relevance, efficiency and sustainability of the collaboration

Thematically the projects of SCF have indeed fit well to the organization's global agenda. What has not been very functional from the viewpoint of SCF is the practical and social orientation of the activities that have been carried on by the local partners but mainly funded by SCF. To a certain extent, one can conclude that currently SCF support somewhat established activities. Yet, this is not to stay these activities would be static – instead, some new ideas and trends have been created constantly. From the perspective of SCF, its projects in Russia have not been very cost effective: the project have been quite small in monetary terms and from this small money a large amount has gone to administrative work.¹⁸ On the other hand, in my opinion, with such small money, much has been done. Nonetheless, it might be more rational that such small-scale cross-border collaboration would be in future carried further not by the central office of SCF but the local association that are located in municipalities close to the Finnish-Russian border. At this level, the work carried out by Finnish local associations has resemblances with the work of their Russian equivalents, MD and BD in particular.

¹⁸ Such a problem has been typical at more general level to projects of Finnish NGOs in Russia. See, for instance, the evaluation that I have conducted for another Finnish NGO: Kulmala, Meri (2012), *Koko kylä hiihtämässä: värtziläläisten aktivoituminen kohti terveellisempää elämää. Loppuarvio vuosina 2007-2011 toteutetuista lähialueyhteistyöhankkeista Värtzilässä. Kansainvälinen Solidaarisuussäätiö, Helsinki.*

For the Russian partners, practical and social orientation of their work has suited well since many problems in the localities are very practical in their nature: concrete (and material) help is what has been needed most. More generally in the Russian context, most NGOs are socially and practically oriented and engaged in helping and providing services to their beneficiaries. In addition to monetary support, professionalism in questions concerning child welfare and in project and otherwise organizational management gained through collaboration with SCF has been invaluable. It has been also urgently needed: even if local people have had awareness on certain problems and will to act, they have lacked many skills to tackle with those issues. These people have also been innovative in applying what they have learned in their own context. Material aid, though, is fundamental in the lack of own resources.

For the sustainability of the achieved results, an important factor obviously is the change in the mindset of people. One need to admit though that such change does not concern masses of people, which means that such work need to continue. From this perspective more focus on awareness-raising and advocacy would be useful. Those people who have been actively involved in collaboration with SCF however are fully committed to work (together) for children, which is why I believe that everything would disappear even if SCF would completely withdraw from funding any activities in Russia. All the local partners have gained a strong position in their communities which is why they will benefit from the growing amount of domestic support for NGOs. Nonetheless, as said, we are not yet there that those domestic funds would able any comprehensive approach and related activity by the local partners.

6. Some thoughts on the future

As a starting point for this evaluation of SCF activities in Russia, the organization aimed at learning more what has been done and what has been achieved in the Russian context. Learning such bigger picture would enable the organization to plan better its future activities in the region. One goal for the future undoubtedly is to decrease the dependency of the local partners from SCF. In the long run, SCF would hope to withdraw from its funding in the region – especially what it comes to fund already established and largely socially oriented activities.

As noted, in the Russian context SCF has supported largely children who live in the state-based foster care institutions, which is ideologically anything but obvious from the viewpoint of the organization. Now however there are big changes in the national policies in Russia in this field and these new policies seem to be better in line with the ideological ground of SCF. Right now, the whole Russian system of foster care is undergoing huge reform which means that there would be more possibilities to have an impact to the emerging system than earlier in the history of SCF's activities in this region. These new policies also put a great emphasis to increase the role of NGOs in the field which more likely will open up new possibilities for the local partners of SCF to get involved in the related processes. For such larger involvement I consider communication with SCF still necessary. These are the main reasons why I cannot recommend SCF to withdraw from its activities in the region at this critical moment. Another question in the long run is what has been the purpose of supporting children's homes for two decades and leave them alone now when one can expect that the Russian state is investing even less than earlier to those institutions. The demolition of the prevalent institutional foster care system will not be realistic in Russian; at minimum one can say for sure that it will not happen soon in future. Also the social integration and aftercare of the children living in the institutional foster care, which are issues that have been long in the agenda of SCF, are now for the first time ever mentioned in the national policies, which would more likely open up possibilities for further collaboration and thus impact also with these questions. Current state policies seem to be favorable also from the viewpoint of promoting inclusive education.

In this critical situation I would recommend to the Russian partners of SCF to carefully familiarize themselves with the new policies: what is really happening now and what are the avenues opened up for

Russian NGOs to implement the new policies – especially in the field of creating the system of family-based foster care and smaller institutional units; training of foster families; and social integration and aftercare of children living in the large state foster care institutions. As said, the mentioned policies encourage for collaboration between the state and civil society institutions. The local organizations could appeal to these principles when approaching the authorities and thus actively engage in creating those places where NGOs could contribute to the merging system and practices. For such purposes a working seminar bringing together the representatives of SCF (including its local associations close to the Russian border) and all three Russian NGOs could be useful. In addition to trying to take advantage of regional funding instruments for Russian NGOs (which obviously are insufficient), it could be a good idea to combine their efforts in order to apply together for federal funds, for instance around the questions concerning the foster care reform. Perhaps SCF could also contribute to such application by giving its hand in preparing the application and guaranteeing some co-financing by for instance providing at least partly the required self-financing of the Russian organizations. In such joint seminar, the participants could also consider different ways to put pressure on the regional (and federal) Russian governments to provide sufficient funds for the NGO activities in the field.

Since the on-going reform, i.e. deinstitutionalization of Russian foster care system, would fit well in the agenda of SCF, I would also recommend a bigger collaborative trans-national project around the reform in the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad region. Funding for such international project could be applied from some European (perhaps also from some Nordic) sources. Such project could be based on three pillars: bordering municipalities from both countries (for instance Joensuu and Lappeenranta from Finland and Sortavala, Petrozavodsk and Vyborg from Russia), educational institutions specialized in social work located in those municipalities and obviously the already partnering NGOs. From the side of SCF these NGOs would involve mainly the local associations, but the central office could contribute to the preparation of the application and later to provide training professionals in the project.

What is comes to inclusive education the good start of the work in Vyborg requires continuation in order to achieve inclusiveness also in practice. One should also pressure the regional and local authorities to return those investments that were done during the project. In Karelia, inclusive education is even far from true. Thus, the NGOs in Karelia should learn from the processes in the Leningrad Region. One topic that all the Russian NGOs should continue is their preventive work, which is high on the national agendas as well, which provided avenues for Russian NGOs to work in this field. The format of different family clubs seems to be a good way to be active in this field. It is obvious that there is a need to continue with such activities. This is also what their beneficiaries want. Could it be possible to channel some of the SCF's funds to its local associations which could continue work with the local Russian NGOs? In addition to the social administrations, it could be possible to draw local businesses as sponsors into such activities. In its efforts for the families with disabled families, I would advise BD to turn to other Russian NGOs working with the disabled people. Perhaps such networking would bring along possibilities for national, federal-level funds as well. Networking could also strengthen the ability of BD for advocacy. Since the so-called material help for families and children's homes does not seem to be most relevant functional from the perspective of SCF, it would be good to map out the possibilities to continue these activities through sponsorships from the local businesses for instance.

Each of the local partners needs to pay more attention how to practice and further strengthen the advocacy side in their activities. I would also encourage them to think about systematic ways to monitor and control that the already achieved outcomes would not disappear. They also have to demand the state sector to execute those social obligations that belong to its responsibilities. It is obvious that from the viewpoint of SCF it is not meaningful to fund activities that should, according to the Russian legislation, be carried out by the Russian state. In the long term advocacy work, connections to the legislative governmental bodies are important. Yet, in the current situation when political activities are somewhat

prohibited from Russian NGOs, it becomes crystal clear that Russian organizations need to be careful and strategic in articulating their goals and related claims.

Especially the local partners in Sortavala and Vyborg, MD and BD, might benefit from collaboration with the local associations of SCF in the bordering municipalities – if some of SCF funds now administered to the central office could be transferred to the local level. These more equivalent partners in their activities could then negotiate what would be most needed areas to continue to collaborative work with and what ways of collaboration would be most effective and meaningful for the both parties. So far, the Karelia-wide activities now coordinated by KUCP – the work of the board of the directors of the Karelian children homes in the first place – could be left to the central office of SCF. As a regional and advocacy/policy-oriented organization, KUCP would have all the potential to serve as an excellent local coordinator for possible collaboration (hopefully in a form of a larger joint project) around the deinstitutionalization of Russian foster care. If collaboration will continue as a new project, one of the goals for such project should be to create an action plan that would include a realistic exit strategy for SCF to withdraw from its funding in the region, a process which seems to be evident at some point.

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