

Life Plan

Internal Evaluation Study

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Executive Summary

Context

For 30 years, the situation of institutionalized children has been critical and successive policy measures have been adopted, with a mission to develop a strategy to improve their situation.

The Life Plan project aims at the social integration of youth from the protection system (placement centres or maternal assistance). The evaluation study aimed to identify the main needs of the beneficiaries (at the start of the project but also along the way), the factors that have a role in social integration, evaluation of social services provided within the project, difficulties encountered in the project and evaluation of the success of the intervention. The development of the project during the Covid period caused the initial planning to undergo certain changes, so the study also discussed this issue. The main future risks for the integration of these youngsters were also assessed, as well as the formulation of proposals and recommendations for the improvement of services.

Methodology

The study was conducted by interviewing all young beneficiaries of the project (11), in two waves (September 2020 and March 2021). The interviews were conducted online (Zoom) and were recorded. The interviews were transcribed and the analysis and interpretation were performed using thematic analysis. For this purpose, we used MaxQda and NVivo.

Results

- By participating in the project, the material needs of the youngsters were addressed. There was the possibility of focusing on emotional evolution and identifying other types of needs: professional achievement, education, future plans.
- The use of informal resources – the personal networks of the association, especially for finding a job – have potential positive effects among young people, catalysing their sense of belonging to a community and increasing the trust of the beneficiaries in the specialists involved in the project.
- Solving the problems / punctual interventions of the specialists are based on the specifics of each beneficiary and on the preferred way of communication. Good knowledge of each case is relevant here. The fact that the number of beneficiaries is small makes the project have a high level of efficiency.
- A recurring problem is finding and maintaining a job, sometimes due to the lack of commitment and sometimes due to discrimination.
- The pandemic brought with it a number of problems in the development of the project: the isolation of the beneficiaries and less face-to-face contacts were psychological challenges. While establishing which digital means of communication (such as WhatsApp) were used by the team members and the beneficiaries was a technological challenge. Courses, workshops and other events were also organized online, not face to face.

Introduction

1.1

Context

The “Life Plan” program aims at the social and professional integration of young people who leave the institutionalized social protection system at the age of 18.

The project responds to the difficulty of young people to manage on their own at a very young age, in the absence of resources that other people from typical families have. Leaving the system, often very suddenly, without being prepared and without having independent living skills, is a very difficult life event for them.

In general, the transition to independent living is a complicated stage, but for institutionalized young people, it is accompanied by fear and insecurity, being perceived as a second abandonment. The Life Plan project has two major objectives: to help them adapt to independent living and to create integration models for other young people in similar situations. As of January 2020, the program included 10 young people who received multiple social services to help them improve their independent living skills. They received residential services, being accommodated in sheltered apartments, they were assisted in finding a job, they were supported to complete their formal education. They also received individual psychological and vocational counselling services and participated in personal development and vocational counselling workshops.

1.2

Objectives of the evaluation

1. Identifying the needs of young people (initial and during the project);
2. Identifying the main factors that lead to the social integration of young people;
3. Evaluation of the services of The Social Incubator Association (counselling, residential, support services etc.);
4. Evaluating the success of the intervention;
5. Assessing the future risks for the integration of young people (both from the perspective of staff and young people);
6. Formulation of proposals for improving services (as shown in interviews).

Methodology

2.1

Evaluation Design

We used the method of the interview-based survey. Online interviews were conducted with young people and specialized staff (Zoom, recorded). The first interviews were conducted in September 2020 (the first wave, as it will be called during the report) and the rest were conducted in March 2021 (the second wave).

| Online Interviews | September 2020 | March 2021 |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| With the youngsters | 10 | 10 |
| With The Social Incubator specialists | 7 | 7 |

2.2

Research Instruments

Interview guides were used for interviews (see appendix).

2.3

Sampling

All beneficiaries that were part of the project in September 2020 were included. Only one participant, who had left the project at the start of the evaluation, was not interviewed. Youngsters who participated for shorter periods of time or who were to enter the project after the interview were also interviewed.

2.4

Data Collection

All data was collected between September 2020 and March 2021.

2.5

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data (interviews) was done through thematic analysis and specialized software that was used: MaxQda and Nvivo. I also wrote three case studies, which describe and analyse in great detail the trajectories of the three young people, but also their interaction with the project.

2.6

Limitations

Given that the interviews were conducted by people inside the association, we can assume that there is a potential bias due to the participants not being 100% sincere. This potential risk is present in all assessment studies. Also, the tendency to be accepted can lead to the avoidance of very sensitive topics (consumption and abuse of substances, drugs, alcohol or deviant / antisocial behaviours).

The fact that we have integrated in the analysis the perspective of the specialized staff and that of the young people, allows to a great extent (by triangulation) to have a complete image of the situation of the young people and of the services in the project.

3

Results

Below, we present the main results of the evaluation study. The research objectives are pursued and in each subchapter are presented the perception of the specialized staff and then that of the beneficiaries, as they emerged from the interviews.



Identifying the needs of the youngsters

Their needs when entering the project

Beyond the specific needs, the project seems to respond to the lack of resources that these young people face, given that they want to succeed in life. Besides the financial resources, those of an emotional nature, closely related to the relationship that the beneficiaries have with themselves, self-confidence and, from here, the attitude towards life in general, are aspects on which the intervention of specialists is necessary. If the desire for success exists, more or less crystallized in coherent plans for the future, what is missing is the awareness of what is needed to reach that level of success.



Regarding the needs of the youth at the beginning of the project, they range from primary needs (housing, food) to more complex social needs, related to disorientation and lack of context in which to cultivate sociability.

Specialists see the potential of the beneficiaries, which is important in the way they build their activities. The balance is always changing between potential / risk, the evolution of these young people is not linear. In this context, working with project beneficiaries is broadly a risk management activity.

Lack of independent living skills is recurring in interviews and seems to go beyond the group of project beneficiaries. To address this shortcoming, members of the implementation team participated in a series of daily activities with young people to provide practical examples.

Not being, until the start of the project, put in the situation of doing alone many things, even mundane tasks, young people perceive they become part of a new world, with new

social rules, which they have to appropriate. For example, the payment of maintenance to the owners' association. Some of the young people found it very complicated, and even though they were given clear explanations about the process, they were afraid to go into debt on their own. The intervention of the staff of the association was necessary for them to see concretely how this activity is done and to have confidence that they can do it in the future.



The management of a limited budget was also approached in practice (shopping together), the specialists balancing the specific needs of each young person with maintaining equality between them, in terms of what is offered to them as part of the project.

And during the interviews, the youngsters mentioned primary needs: housing, finding a job but also soft skills: communication, personal development, self-knowledge. But there are also young people who referred primarily to professional needs, especially those who want an artistic career, but also those who have other professions (eg. barber)

The need for independence was also mentioned and the project seemed to bring them a chance to move towards an independent life. They mentioned that they want a stable job so that they can make a living out of it.

3.1.2

Changing needs during the project

During the project, the youngsters have developed, which led to changes in their needs. If, at the beginning of the project, the primary needs (food, shelter) were present, one year after entering the program, they are much less visible, due to beneficiaries spending this period in a stable environment.

They focus more on their careers, studies or personal development. Conflicts have intensified, young people have become accustomed to each other and have come to realize their needs. The improvement of the interactions between them also led to the thinning of the punctual interventions of conflict mediation on the part of The Social Incubator specialists.

By participating in the project, the beneficiaries have experienced a situation in which having a job translates into a higher level of independence. This new conditioning (job-independence) is a very important acquisition for life after the completion of the project, they being able after a year to pay for their own utilities, food and to secure their pocket money



But there are also situations in which they end up not managing their income properly or losing their job, and then the association intervenes to support them for short periods.

Participation in the project meant an opportunity for self-knowledge and personal development, in these cases there are individualized needs, to which specialists try to respond through timely interventions, but also through a communication strategy based on the characteristics of each young person.

Beyond the specificity of the manifested needs, what seems to be universal is the need for support, the need for a safety net that will give youngsters space to develop self-confidence, to better manage their emotions and to develop as many independent living skills as possible.

If, initially, the needs were primary, in most cases, along the way, the beneficiaries came to want to develop professionally, to build their working experience. Interviews also show that they are more interested in finding better-paying jobs, continuing their education, or making long-term plans for the future.



3.2

Factors that play a role in the social integration of young people

3.2.1

Self-determination

Among the factors that lead to social integration are self-determination and a point of convergence of self-confidence and the ability to plan / assume. Young persons with this abilities can be, through the power of example, an promoter of the good integration of others. One of the youngsters who left the project is an example of success, especially by the self-determination he showed, this characteristic not being, however, the result of participating in the project, but being one of his attributes even before the start of the project.

He comes from a placement centre located in a small town 75 km from Bucharest. From the age of 5 months, he is in the child protection system (up to 7 years in maternity care and then in foster care). He remembers with pleasure the time he was in foster care (it was very nice), he even thought that foster carers are his parents. Leaving for a year with his parents was very painful

He earned his first money from the age of 6 (working in agriculture during the day, when he was received by his family at home) and then from the age of 16 when he was allowed to work legally, he changed various jobs: waiter, lifeguard, salesman. He considers he has already been a role model for other children in his situation and wants to continue.

In December 2020, he decided to emigrate and is currently working in a small town abroad. Although he does not know the language of the new country and speaks very little English, he managed to find a night job at a factory and during the day he works as a hairdresser at home and even made a page on social

media to promote this activity. Also in his free time he is a personal trainer, in a gym that works outdoors. Asked how he manages to do so many things, he had an optimistic and positive speech that first of all proved to be a high level of self-confidence. Hairdressing is his passion, he participated in training courses in Bucharest and before leaving he ended up working in a famous Barber Shop. His dream is to start his own business and for that he works hard.

The challenge is for youth to adhere to a plan, despite the difficult times that may arise. Managing these difficult times is where the intervention of specialists is important, as support factors for young people.

Overcoming these moments, without making them major interruptions in their lives, is an important skill and young people have managed to take important steps in this direction.

Self-determination is seen in many young people. There are some who started working at a very young age, in different situations and who have continuity in their jobs. There are also people who have passions that require sustained effort (either a performance sport or an artistic activity since childhood). These passions give them direction and motivation in life.



3.2.2

Accountability

One of the stakes of the project proved to be the empowerment of young people, with visible progress being made here, including when taking into account the evolution of the relationship between young people and team members. The experience in the protection system was one in which the responsibility of young people was ignored, so that the transition from life in the child protection system to independent living, on their own, largely involves accustoming young people to the idea of responsibility and consequences of their own actions.

However, being responsible also means being aware of the help that is offered to you and the resources that you have at your disposal, and being aware of outside help is a dimension of changing / adjusting the way you relate to the environment. One method of empowerment would be to make presentations about independence / being independent, made by young people in the project to other young people, a catalyst for awareness.

Assuming responsibility for a failure, in some interviews with young people, does not appear. Even if a person has changed jobs several times in a few months, she has a speech that does not involve her in any way, but considers that the employers or colleagues are responsible. Her explanations involve other people and especially bring age-related arguments to other colleagues in relation to her.

3.2.3

Life stories

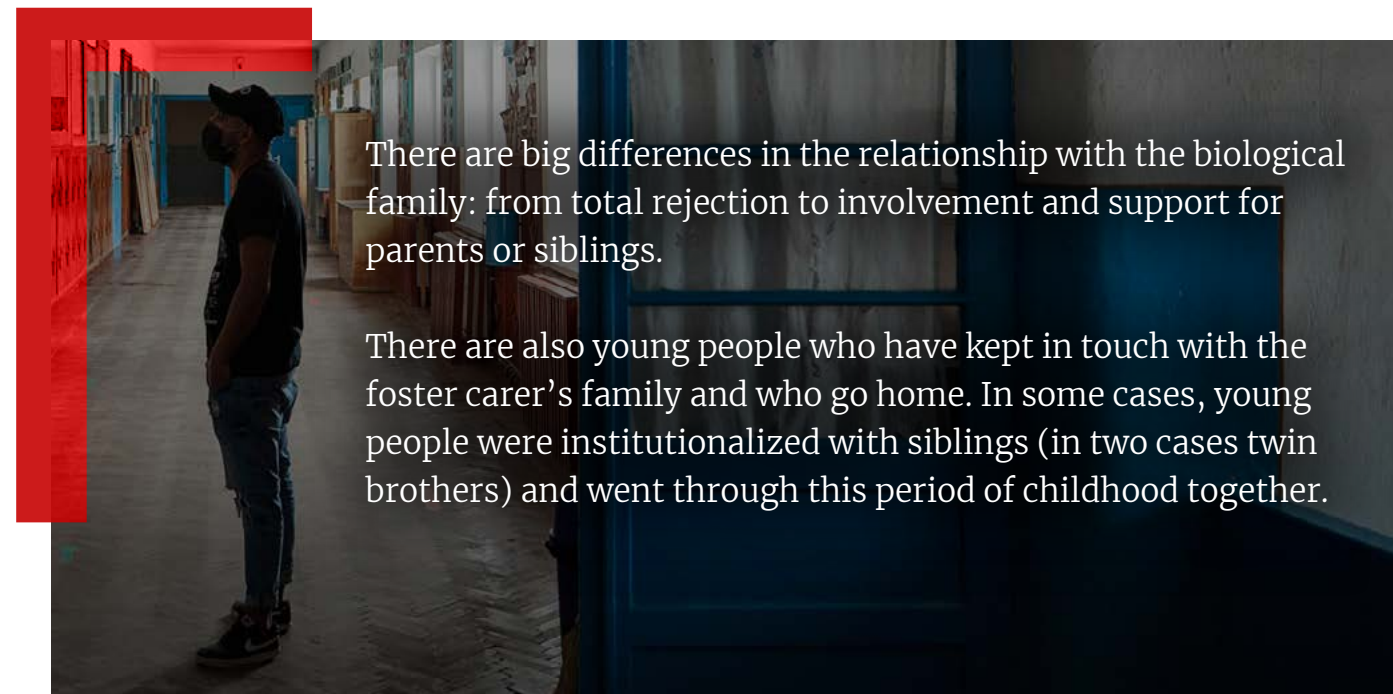
The course of life so far is also a factor of influence in social integration. The experiences that youngsters have had, as well as the accumulated deficiencies, contribute to the way they relate to those around them. According to specialists, the life history of young people is dominated by deficiencies in the psycho-emotional

area, not necessarily the material one, but there is, among the general population, the preconception that, in the system, youths face only material deficiencies.

The way conflict is approached, as well as the difficulties in being / becoming independent, are closely related to their level of psycho-emotional development, the latter being dependent on the experiences they have had throughout their lives and which affect them on a large scale.

Significant, in the project, seems to be exactly the filling of the shortcomings experienced by the youth and the exposure to an environment where self-confidence and positive rewards are present. In this sense, the project is intended to be a substitute for life stories dominated by shortcomings in terms of emotional comfort.

The life stories of young people, although different, have in common the history of abandonment and often multiple abandonment experiences from parents, foster carers, different people they had attached to in shelters or sheltered apartments. They also changed a lot of homes (between three and six, until the entry into the Life Plan project)



There are big differences in the relationship with the biological family: from total rejection to involvement and support for parents or siblings.

There are also young people who have kept in touch with the foster carer's family and who go home. In some cases, young people were institutionalized with siblings (in two cases twin brothers) and went through this period of childhood together.

3.2.4

Health issues

Factors such as mental structure / personality type and life history influence the process of social integration. Moreover, recognizable and diagnosable personality disorders have a massive impact on the daily lives of these youngsters, for those involved, the group to which they belong and the project as a whole.

Beyond the internal difficulties concerning to the relationship between young people and between youngsters and specialists, these cases in which there are psychological health problems are challenges in communication / manifestations beyond the boundaries of the project / housing / association.

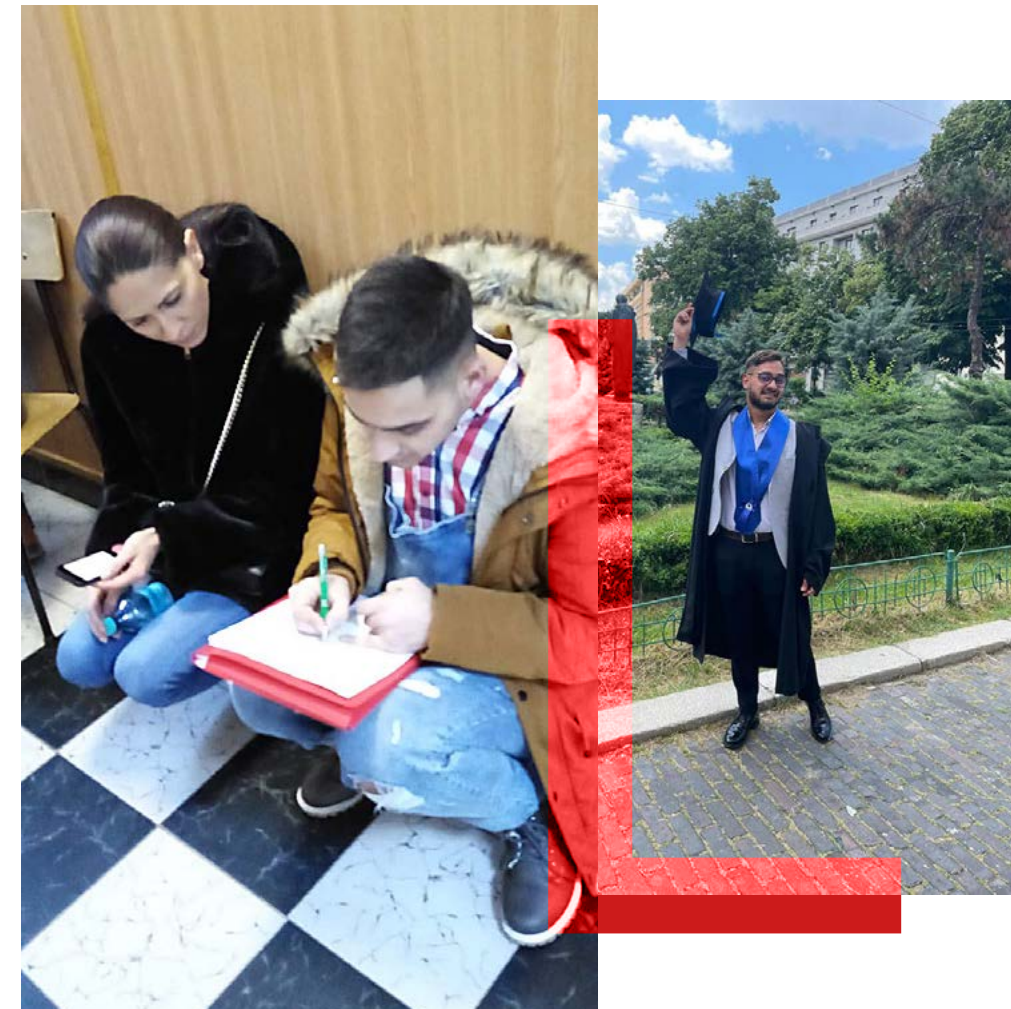
Addressing this type of problem effectively involves psychotherapy, which is sometimes difficult to accomplish, given their tendency to reject even psychological counselling for fear that it may harm them.

3.2.5

Education

In addition to finding and maintaining a job, participation in formal education is another component of social integration. Beyond the directly proportional relationship between the stock of formal education and the salary level / suitability of the job for specific skills, through education, vulnerable youths can have access to social environments in which they face less discrimination and preconceived ideas.

Three of them say they were included in special schools. It is not very clear if they had real developmental problems or if the move was related to their availability at that time (approaching the school) or other behavioural disorders of the children. None of them managed to pass the baccalaureate exam. At the moment, three of them are preparing for the baccalaureate exam and are going to take it in the summer of 2021.



As an observation, most youngsters have a relatively developed language, but sometimes they make mistakes or use regional variants of the words. In only one case, it was found that there were difficulties in understanding the content of the questions (which were not of a high level of abstraction) and had to be reformulated with very simple concepts. At the same time, in this case one of the hypotheses is related to a very fragile emotional state, with obvious difficulties of concentration and very short answers as a result.

3.2.6

Self-confidence / emotional issue

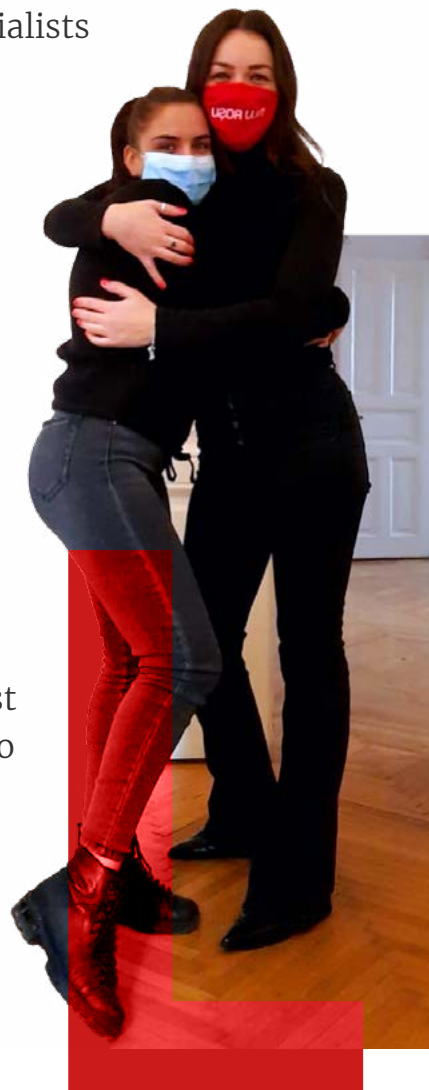
The success of the social integration process depends on addressing the needs of the beneficiaries. There are cases in which the traumatic experiences of the past must be addressed through psychotherapy, which can be difficult to achieve, given the reluctance of young people. Furthermore, the success of psychotherapy depends on its duration but also on the good relationship between each young person and their therapist.

In other words, processing the past, often with traumatic episodes, is a necessary step in the transition to independent living. Cultivating good relationships / interactions between young people and specialists is the backbone of project activities, including counselling and psychotherapy, activities aimed at the main goal of the project, which is to equip youngsters for a life as a responsible adult.

The way they manage to integrate socially or not and the way they react to various situations in their daily lives are influenced by childhood. Therefore, the approach, in a therapeutic context, contributes to the increase of the chances of success.

One of the specialists of the association mentions that the way we live our childhood is very relevant for the way we structure ourselves as personalities and functioning. As a result, he says it is also very obvious to them because in most young people in the protection system there was no consistency of the caregiver, most of the time this leads to a lack of trust in people and an inability to accept the limits, hence possible personality disorders.

Although the survival instinct is developed, adaptability and tolerance to frustration are aspects that need to be cultivated. These two attributes make the difference between failure and success, and they are often lacking in young people when entering the project. The type of



personality of each, already formed at the time of entering the project, also influences the way the integration process unfolds.

3.2.7

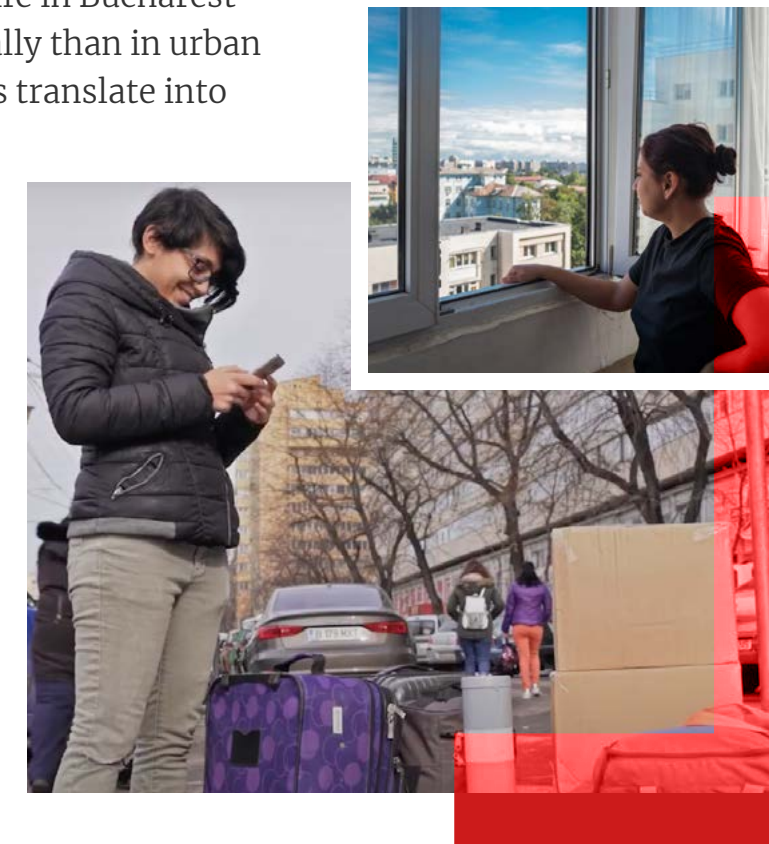
Adaptation in the project / moving to Bucharest

In the case of beneficiaries from outside Bucharest, the adaptation to the requirements of the project coincided with the adaptation to living in Bucharest which is really different from what they know in terms of distances, high population density, various means of transport.

One difference between beneficiaries from Bucharest and those from outside Bucharest is that the latter had fewer opportunities until the moment of entering the project. Basically, life in Bucharest looks different than life in the province, especially than in urban or rural areas. Differences in access to resources translate into different expectations of the project, and these expectations have an impact on the involvement of youngsters in the project / their attitude towards the project.

In order to help them in the adaptation process and to build a good way of relating with them, the option was to involve the specialists in daily activities together with the beneficiaries, to serve as examples. Adapting to the project also meant adapting to a different kind of life together, in which everyone is responsible for their own actions and is forced to internalize the idea of responsibility, in the absence of a constant external authoritarian court.

From the speech of the young people, especially those from the province, it is very obvious that the move was quite difficult, but full of adventures, new experiences.



3.2.8

Psychological and vocational counselling

Among the services offered by the Association, there is also vocational and psychological counselling. The two types of counselling are the core of project interventions, because they address two fundamental dimensions of independent living, a specific one – professional life, finding a job, and a general one – the attitude of the beneficiaries towards themselves.

The vocational counselling was temporary, at the beginning of the project, and included 5–6 sessions, in which each young person learned things about their own preferences and abilities, and was able to make a professional plan.

Psychological counselling is continuous – it is done through regular meetings throughout the project. This type of counselling is sometimes reluctantly viewed by youngsters because it is a demanding process and can bring old traumas to the forefront. This situation is difficult to manage, especially given that emphasizing the binding nature of counselling is likely to increase their reluctance. The relationship between the psychotherapist and the beneficiary is seen as an important aspect, looking in each case for the best option, sometimes meaning the transition of the young person from one therapist to another.

Although the aim of the study was not to assess the emotional state of the beneficiaries, there were questions about their emotional state, emotions and how they manage them, as important needs for their journey. In most cases, they were able to discuss their emotions (probably as a result of workshops that included psycho-educational topics). The most frequently mentioned emotions are anger that appears in verbal or physical manifestations and fear, they talk about their fears: height, water, death, hunger, loneliness, illness.

In most cases, psychological counselling is considered helpful for them to manage their emotional states, and is sometimes even appreciated

as a service in itself. Vocational counselling was an activity that young people are happy to talk about: how the test results match what they want or wanted in childhood, how they did their CV assisted by a specialist etc.

3.2.9

Conflict mediation / accompaniment

Practically, the beneficiaries in the project received assistance from the team members in all the areas where it was needed. As the project involved major changes in their lives, there were many times when the intervention of specialists was necessary, one of them mentioning that young people needed help on all levels and at any time of the day or night.

This constant contact made it necessary to draw boundaries, rather to negotiate them, so that the interventions of specialists should not lead to the involution or stagnation of young people, but to their evolution. The project team seem to have been in a constant position to find the balance between the execution / manifestation of authority and empathy / understanding, so as to transform the situations that young people go through in social learning courts.

3.2.10

Courses / workshops

Within the Association, workshops were organized to address the needs of the beneficiaries in view of independent living. The courses / workshops addressed various aspects, from hiring / how to behave during an interview, to things in everyday life, such as cooking.

Workshops and courses are organized to meet the interests of the youngsters. This approach increases the effectiveness of the intervention and contributes to the development of their sense of independence, with their passions and interests being considered and treated as important.



The beneficiaries seem to be especially interested in activities in which they meet new people, socializing being better perceived than acquiring new knowledge. Due to pandemic, the workshops took place mostly online and some of the youngsters, although aware of the situation, regret that they have not benefited from face-to-face workshops.

3.2.11

Support for formal education (meditations)

During the project, efforts are made towards remaining in school, continuing studies and successfully participating in the baccalaureate exam. Beneficiaries are supported by finding meditators according to their needs, enrolling in school and finding high schools / schools that match their needs / abilities. Complementary to formal education, their interests, that are important for their own future plan, are also addressed. Support for school participation is more important as for some of them participating in the project has meant changing the social environment / community.

3.2.12

Relationships / permanent contacts with the team

Beyond the formal prescriptions of the project, the team members were present in the life of the youth at every important moment or with a certain degree of novelty, so that they gain self-confidence and become closer and closer to doing things themselves. One of the specialists tells us how the beneficiaries were helped in situations they initially did not know how to manage: enrolling in school, buying the first subway ticket, shopping, talking to an employer. The relationship between them and specialists has also touched on aspects of intimate life, areas otherwise not covered by any prior knowledge, such as contraceptive education.

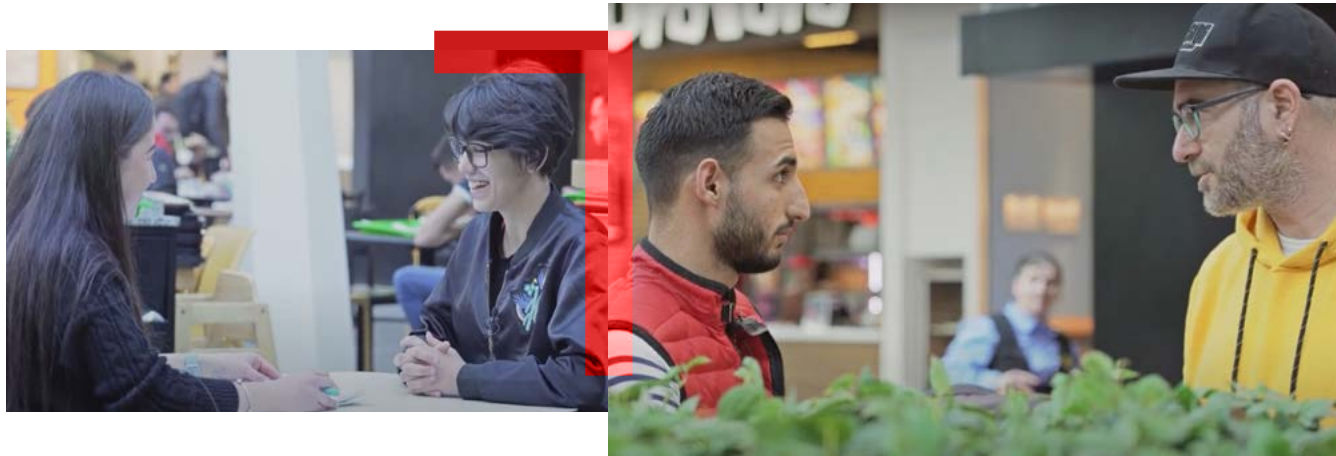
Through constant interactions, including informal ones, the relationship between specialists and beneficiaries has evolved, and with this evolution, they have gained confidence and been exposed to other patterns of interaction than they were used to. The informal character contributed to the generation of a natural feeling of normality, and the repetition of the information until the young people understood it contributed to the development of a feeling of security.



3.2.13

Accompaniment for job hunting

Support for beneficiaries to find a job ranges from identifying possible jobs, including through the social networks to which team members belong, to accompanying them to job interviews. One of the specialists tells us how almost all the youngsters were hired at the beginning of the project, but only a month later most of them were laid off because the pandemic broke out and many companies stopped working. Vocational counselling was another service offered to help them identify areas of interest, followed by effective job search advice.



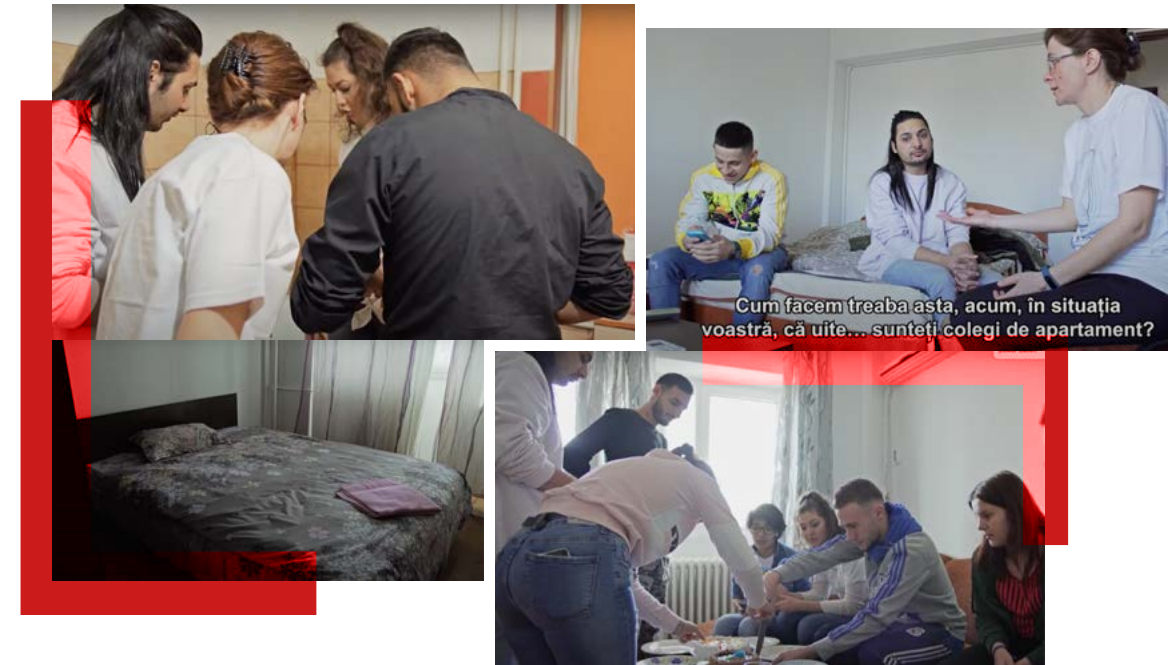
3.2.14

Residential services

Providing a home was of great significance, giving youngsters stability and time, emotional resources available to invest in personal development, finding a job etc. By joining the project, in addition to sharing common areas (bathroom, kitchen etc.) with other colleagues, they benefited from a higher level of intimacy compared to previous experiences. The intimacy of the new housing situation was probably enhanced by the lack of permanent control exercised by a person living with them.

Basically, the residential service provided through the project was a safety net, the intention being to replicate this service on a large scale.

Living conditions were positively assessed by all beneficiaries interviewed. Some have shown great enthusiasm especially for having the opportunity to have their own room. Intimacy, location (in a central area of the city) are very important elements for them.



One of them compares the living conditions with those offered by other sheltered apartments and is very satisfied. He says that at first he thought that two of them would stay in the room as they did in the social apartment where he lived, but he was pleasantly impressed to find out that he would have his own room.

Another beneficiary talks less about living conditions for himself, but tells us about safety and the fact that he no longer feels unsafe at home. For all of them, the fact that they are alone in the room is an important element, being appreciated as a chance for privacy and not to be disturbed by others. They did not have their own room in the shelters or in the sheltered apartments in the child protection system.

3.2.15

Empowering

Cultivating a sense of independence and self-confidence have been important components in working with the beneficiaries. These cannot be summarized in a specific activity, but rather as general a framework in which the relationship with them took place.

The lack of self-confidence was visible at first in their refusal to do the usual day-to-day tasks, that usually seem self-evident and unproblematic for socially integrated adults. Team members were assisting the youngsters accomplish important activities and that was helpful in strengthening the relationship between specialists and beneficiaries, but also to increase young people's self-esteem. They experienced a new level of self-awareness in their positioning towards specialists, based on consideration and, essentially, common respect.

From a psychological point of view, an important aspect of self-knowledge and self-assumption lies in learning an assertive way of drawing boundaries. In other words, actively defined boundaries are the result of the knowledge we have about ourselves.

One of the youngsters says that he was dissatisfied with the fact that we could not find a job immediately when he came to Bucharest. On the other hand, he became aware of how important it was that he was encouraged and left to fend for himself in certain situations.

Ten months after the start of the project, he decided to resign and the fact that he already had a previous experience in looking for a job helped him to better understand the process

3.2.16

Subjective assessments of young people

Below we have included some of the beneficiary's appreciation for the activity of The Social Incubator Association:

- “ People have helped me more in general... that is, think about it, though I didn't want to tell them that I didn't have food in the fridge, I didn't have a job, I didn't have money, I didn't have anything anymore... they still found out and helped me ... and not many people would do what they did
- “ they are very good people, with a big soul, they deserve to be appreciated and they deserve more attention I think and ... I don't know what to say, they are very good with what they do, they give their best
- “ If your life were a book and had several chapters, what would this chapter of your life be called? It will be called ... A Life Plan would be called My life after leaving the system... let's say I think that's what I would call it ... and I would write it in red like that
- “ A (psychotherapist) has some of these, some things that take you from scratch, from something I will never understand and in the end she said everything was connected so all of a sudden you understand 100% so it's a really cool thing



Difficulties in the project

Conflict

Conflicting episodes were challenging, at least at the beginning of the project. The new situation in which the beneficiaries found themselves, the pandemic, which meant the establishment of many restrictions, the need to live with strangers, were factors that favoured the emergence of some conflicts.

The situation of the interactions has improved over time, so that major conflicts did not occur. The improvement happened on the background of a sustained activity by the team, which adapted, for example, the housing situation to the relationship dynamics between the youngsters.

Problematic interactions also took place with people outside the project. These situations have been a sign of difficult adaptation to new life and living conditions, and have been overcome over time, with them better understanding they need to adapt to different situations in life.

The coordinates of the relationship between young people are also related to personal development, responsibility and awareness. Interactions between beneficiaries are dominated by the existence of a potential that is still not reached.

Entering the project and adapting was very difficult for the beneficiaries. Some of them did not know each other, others had previously lived in the same placement centres or apartments in the protection system. Living without the authority of an adult was a new experience for many of them. Also, the state of emergency forced them to stay together indoors for a long time, and as a result, their fragile emotional state sometimes led to very tense situations.

One of the reasons they mentioned, in interviews, is related to non-compliance with the rules of living together and hence some conflicts have arisen, one of them even saying they were close to physical aggression. Other young people refer to situations where privacy was not respected by colleagues who lived in other apartments and who entered uninvited, but over time these issues have also been resolved.

The fact that young people live together in shared apartments sometimes generated conflicting situations about the rules they should obey. Given that the rules are created by themselves, we can assume that the lack of an authority (adult) made it difficult to manage these situations. In many of the conflict situations, the staff of The Social Incubator Association were asked to arbitrate the debate between the beneficiaries.

Interactions between the beneficiaries and the specialists

During the interactions between beneficiaries and specialists there were challenges, some of them based on the difficulty to set boundaries / distinguish between what is useful for the development of the youngsters, as a type of help, and what contributes to a lack of commitment from young people.



The limits are defined through arguments, they are explained to the beneficiaries, avoiding the situations of authoritarian manifestation of control / limitations. Trust, as the foundation of the relationship between team members and beneficiaries, was not present from the beginning, it was rather the result of beneficiaries constantly testing the specialists.

Sometimes, the beneficiaries were not aware that the activities served a purpose, and that made it difficult for them to properly interact with specialists and at the same time made them learn the skills of independent living slower.

The trust the young people have invested in the team members, as well as overcoming conflicts, were supported by the specialists manifesting a calm attitude, without cultivating feelings of guilt, which, for the young people, was a new thing.

3.3.3

Problems adapting to independent living

Independent living was, at least at the beginning of the project, a challenge. From relationships with other members of the community, to one-off interactions with potential employers, all were instances of social learning and support from the project implementation team. Managing a limited budget, living daily with other youngsters, practically unknown, were sources of problematic moments.

This difficulty associated with independent living is also a result of poor socialization of the beneficiaries in the protection system. The specialists found that they lack some basic information that, as a rule, are self-evident to the people considered to be socially adapted. Lack of adequacy to different social situations, coupled with unrealistic expectations and a limited ability to plan for the immediate future, exposes these young people to the risk of remaining in a situation of marginalization.

Sometimes it happens that they behave out of situational patterns. Beyond the fact that rather strange interactions may result, this inability / limited ability to intuit what is considered socially permissible and what is not, can have long-term consequences for them.

Another problem for what independent living means is not taking responsibility, as a voluntary act, or not reporting it as a result of lack of maturity.

3.3.4

Finding / maintaining the job

Successful participation in an interview and accepting a job are two aspects that proved to be difficult. The members of the Association made efforts to find jobs after the quarantine period of 2020, as on the one hand there were few jobs and high demand, and on the other hand, some employers discriminated against these young people, considering that they are frivolous. Indeed, there have been a few cases in which beneficiaries have been offered opportunities to go to the interview and they did not show up, although they initially confirmed to the employer that they would be there.

Therefore, a problematic aspect that goes beyond the individual path of the young people in the project is that the attitude they show has consequences for the whole organization, especially in the context in which team members use / have often used personal connections to find work opportunities.

Job fluctuations were characteristic throughout the project and brought challenges to team members, especially as the pandemic massively diminished opportunities in the labour market. But this conjuncture has led to strengthening of the capacities to deal with job loss situations, as a specific type of adversity.

3.3.5

Education / school

The prioritization of education is not necessarily present, which means that specialists were supposed to create awareness of the role of formal education in the future development of the beneficiaries.

One of the specialists recounts how a young man who was preparing for the baccalaureate considered that the association must make every effort for him to learn, and the fact that they offered him meditators in the necessary subjects was not enough, he gave up shortly after the training began.

3.3.6

Discrimination

Finding a home as well as finding a job proved to be challenging not only because of the inappropriate attitude of the youngsters who lacked the skills of independent living, but also because of preconceived/prejudiced ideas of community members – potential owners or employers. Finding the apartments was a long and arduous task, with some landlords refusing to rent as they thought they would take a risk if they let the program beneficiaries into their apartments.

The combination of these issues, the discrimination faced by the youngsters as well as their lack of accountability, lead to problems that require effort and resources from the association.

The situations of discrimination referred to by them are linked either to their origin in the protection system, to their ethnicity, gender or health problems and to their very young age. Discriminatory situations refer in particular to the workplace, where either the manager or colleagues are considered by the youngsters to be discriminatory. One of them even says that the fact that he comes from the protection system made an employer interpret his health problems as the source of drug use. On the other hand, another young woman says that she is sometimes discriminated against because she is a girl. The same

discriminatory situations are encountered in the case of others who have changed jobs after long periods of time, and the explanation is also related to discriminatory behaviour related to ethnicity, by colleagues.

3.4

Assessing the success of the intervention

The youngsters talk very differently about the project. The two waves of interviews, at 7–8 and then 13–14 months after the start of the project, showed in dynamics the way in which they relate to the services they received, to the way in which they feel they benefited but also how they evolved or how their needs changed. Also, the interviews with the specialists of The Social Incubator Association complete the information regarding the success of the intervention.

3.4.1

Finding a job

Finding and maintaining a job seems to be the main indicator of the success of the intervention, being based on building a responsible attitude and the will to lead an independent life.

Within the project, all beneficiaries had the experience of holding a job, with more or less success, for a shorter or longer period of time. Job change is a phenomenon that occurs quite often, sometimes for objective reasons, sometimes the effect of youth instability and, in turn, generating uncertainty.

Sometimes, the job is more than a resource for subsistence, bringing access to development opportunities and meeting people who can have a beneficial influence on their development.



Most of the beneficiaries have jobs. As one of the objectives of the project was to integrate them professionally, some were hired through the project partner and work in the area of fast food / restaurants. The state of emergency coincided largely with the start of the project. Some youngsters kept their jobs by becoming technically unemployed, others did not. The fact that they were included in the project provided them with support to overcome this difficult period.

3.4.2

Independence

Achieving a certain degree of independence is the best premise for these youngsters after completing the project. In all its very specific manifestations (finding and maintaining a job, plans for the future, housing insurance, interest in formal education and personal development), independence was the overall goal of the project.

Maintaining a job is a sign of responsibility and anchoring in reality, beyond the existence of personal ideals or unrealistic future projects. It is an even greater achievement, as we take into account the process of accommodation that they had to go through, especially those who moved to Bucharest at the beginning of the project.



Independent living skills

One of the needs visible at the beginning of the project was to develop independent living skills. As such, one dimension of the success of the intervention consists precisely in the acquisition of these skills or, more generally, in the adaptation of the behaviour so that the coexistence and the daily life are as less problematic as possible.

Independent living skills are closely related to the confidence that the beneficiaries have in themselves, thus increasing the level of confidence and better adaptation.

Achievements based on own financial resources, combined with the ability to successfully carry out current activities, are also signs of successful intervention. One of the specialists tells how some of the youngsters manage to pay for their utilities on time, after a long period of learning about what they are, how and where they are to be paid.

There has been a change for the better in the relationship between specialists and beneficiaries, but also within the group of beneficiaries, based on the change in their behaviour and their way of relating to those around them.

However, beyond the positive trend, there are cases in which the evolution has been slower and there are situational specificities, requiring a proper attitude, built in response the specialists gave to the needs of each youngster.

Another positive aspect that has an impact on the beneficiaries is gaining a sense of belonging to a group / community, which has helped them adjust to living with new people. The catalyst for this was the way the team works, based on complementarity.

In terms of personal development, the assessments were wide-ranging: from better management of emotions, money), to a good presentation at the job interview, without the emotions that blocked them in the first part of the project. One of them really appreciates the independence in thinking, which he gained as a result of the project, the fact that he is able to make decisions on his own and to adapt to the environment. Others appreciate that they have had the opportunity to meet new people, the freedom they feel – compared to the constraints of the system, the security and the fact that they are still afraid.

Also, one of the young women is very happy that the project has as a general rule the prohibition of drug use. She also mentions an exceptional medical situation that she had just gone through and that she managed to solve only with the help of the staff from The Social Incubator Association (mentions Alina – Project Coordinator – and Medeea – Youth Integration Specialist) who were extremely empathetic and efficient and whose help was crucial for her.

In the second wave of interviews (March 2021), she has a contradictory speech, she seems to be in a very fragile state emotionally, she denies all the good things that happened and all the services she received. She even declares that she wants to leave the project and invokes an alleged injustice that would have been done to her throughout the project.

The fact that she was not allowed to live with another colleague and someone else was preferred in her place seems to be the main source of dissatisfaction. Her argument is that she is preparing for the Baccalaureate exam with her colleague and her current roommate does not agree to visit her.

The youngsters look differently at what could have been offered to them in the project. One of them has a realistic perspective, but one that highlights his unmet needs, especially related to the idea of family and the wounds of abandonment, but which cannot be easily solved.

The young man who managed to become independent and got away from the project fairly quickly keeps in touch with colleagues in the project and believes that the people he met here have an important role in becoming who he is. He positively assesses the importance of the project in his life and feels that it is part of his responsibility to help others, to “give back” but also to be a role model for others in the situation he was in.

Another girl, on the other hand, feels that she has not been able to gain more confidence in herself. She believes that self-confidence comes from the trust that other people place in her. She feels that she has done the right thing but it has not been appreciated by those she has worked with. The fact that she has changed many jobs during this one-year period and that she has not been paid for two of them, she believes, has affected her self-esteem.

3.4.4

Education

The attitude towards formal education is also a measure of the success of the intervention, in that the investment in education is, in fact, an investment in one’s own future. In other words, improving the attitude towards school is tantamount to coagulating, to a greater or lesser extent, ideas about how the beneficiaries would like their future to look like. Interest in formal education is an indicator of accountability.

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3.4.5

Plans for the future

Another dimension of assessing the success of the intervention refers to the existence / capacity to develop plans for the future. These are an indicator of stability / consistency, and employability / investment capacity, beyond immediate gratification. The central element of plans for the future is the workplace, but the place of formal education is also important.

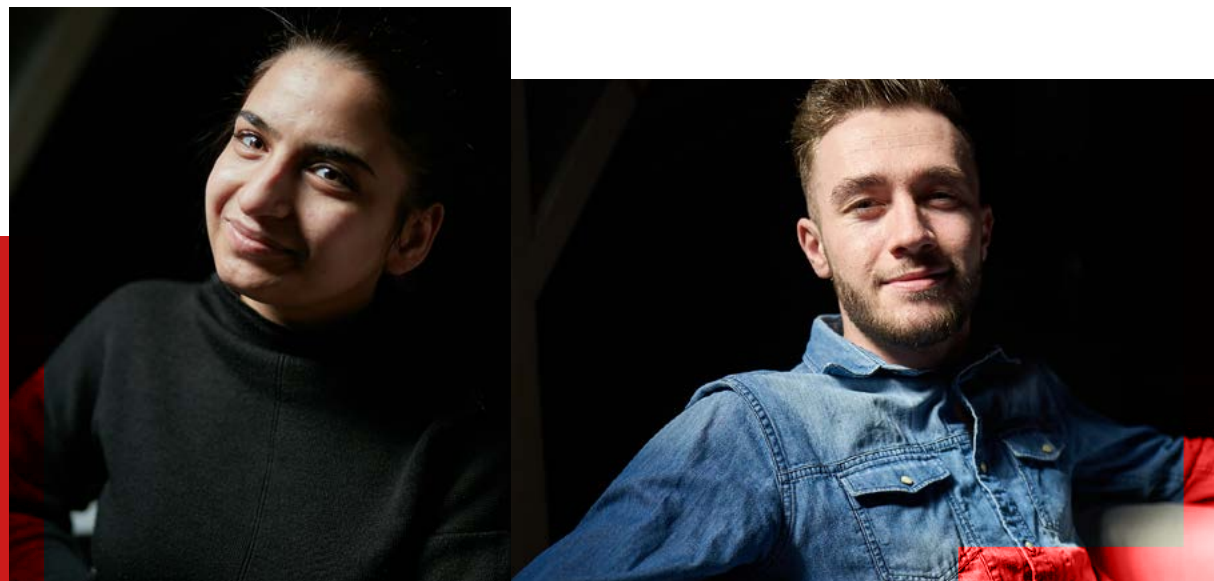
Some youngsters have plans for the future that contain basic elements (housing, employment), others are closer to the idea of public success. However, beyond this variation, it is important to assure them and show a responsible attitude based on self-confidence, the latter being cultivated by specialists / team members by investing them with confidence.

The departure of some of those with whom they entered the project at the beginning has already created different perceptions. There are youngsters who consider it a negative element for the project that they have left, that this would be an indicator of failure for the project. Inclusion for so many years in the child protection system can make them have a distorted perspective, borrowed from the period when leaving meant fleeing / escaping and was punished either by institutionalization measures in juvenile detention centres or psychiatric hospitals.

The aim of the project is to provide a period of accommodation with independent living, to offer the chance to improve or acquire the skills of independent living. So, when asked about plans for the future, some of the them did not know how to state a clear plan, but between a few of the beneficiaries in the project concerned with the same passion, music, it seems that an alliance has been created and they even plan to live together after the project while dividing the rent.

It seems that the time horizon in which they have to deal with finding solutions for independent living is not very clear to them. Even one of them asked in the interview what he will do after finishing the project answered: I want to remain in the project still.

Most youngsters dream of having a family, children, and a home.



3.5

Covid period. Risks, management

3.5.1

Risks

The main problem associated with the pandemic was the difficulty to find jobs, with situations of layoffs or technical unemployment being common. Losing a job due to an external constraint, something independent of their will, was a challenge for the beneficiaries, being, in fact, another element of novelty, in addition to entering the project.

Therefore, it was necessary to explain the situation, the young people needed help to understand what was happening and how to adjust. One of the specialists tells us that the beginning of the pandemic led to a slow start of the project and the attitude of the beneficiaries was initially a negative one, they considered the association was responsible for what happened in their lives.

Project management / managing activities and interactions between specialists and beneficiaries have also been hampered by restrictions on face-to-face interactions.

Beyond the problems caused by the pandemic concerning the labour market, the isolation / need to spend most of the time at home, sharing the space with other barely known youngsters, proved to be a difficult thing.

The pandemic also had some positive effects: it changed the way employers relate to state subsidies, and school participation is easier, thus it helped some young people to continue their studies.

Manage

The change in the dynamics of the labour market, through the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, has resulted, as we mentioned, in delays in the development of the project, especially with regard to finding a job. The lack of jobs meant limited economic resources, and the project team still tried to find new jobs, using their own social networks.

The project has only one funder, but occasional aid has been received, given that the first part of the project coincided with the confusion generated by the beginning of the pandemic, and was visible especially at the jobs market level.

The lack of face-to-face interactions was made up for by increasing technology-mediated telephone / communication at any time considered a crisis by the beneficiaries.

The young people's discourse on the quarantine period (especially during the state of emergency in March-May 2020) is quite detached, somehow it seems that the young people did not understand very well the situation in itself. They shift the responsibility to The Social Incubator staff. One of the young men mentions that he was told by the project coordinator not to leave the house during the quarantine period except with a statement, but after two weeks he decided to break the rule, not being aware that it is imposed for the whole country and not something decided by the association.

The accusations are present in several interviews, being somehow explained by the fact that they were not used to staying so long in the house. Their behaviours during this period are described as avoidant.

For the ten youngsters, with an uncertain life history and full of painful events (abandonment, change, loss), this unusual and very difficult to understand general situation led to maladaptive emotional states. The main fear was not to lose their jobs and not to starve.

Another young man says he felt that he could not carry out his plans, but he adjusted to the situation and found solutions. With all the barbershops closed, he worked during the pandemic as a supplier and appreciated the experience because it gave him the chance to get to know Bucharest.

Each situation was different, depending on their jobs. While some of the young people kept their jobs and became technically unemployed, others were fired during the same period.



There have also been cases where they preferred to go during the state of emergency to foster families where they felt at home or at full risk of breaking the rules, made trips to the former placement centre and found themselves in the situation to be repeatedly fined.

Two of the beneficiaries who joined the project after the end of the state of emergency have even more unpleasant experiences. One of them, who was in the placement centre during that period, said that it was difficult for him because for 6 months he was not allowed to leave the centre unless he went to buy groceries from the store.

Another, who works in the field of HoReCa, between March and December 2020 did not have a job and had great difficulties in making a living, says that he had no food for almost a year, and for a short period of time he was forced to sleep in the Northern Railway Station. He then lived with his friend, who is a church singer and helped him out. He believes 2020 was the most difficult year of his life and he has high hopes for entering a project that will give him a different perspective.

3.6

Assessing future risks for youth integration

Although the benefits of the project in terms of strengthening beneficiaries' ability to fend for themselves are evident, the period after the completion of the project is not defined by specialists as risk-free. The project ensured the start of independent living skills, but the learning and adaptation process is a long one.

Therefore, the monitoring period that will follow after the end of the project is very important. Beyond that, the relationship between the youngsters and the organization is seen by them as a continuous one, the association being a safety factor for them.



Conclusions

Upon entering the project, the needs of the beneficiaries included both material (housing, financial security) and emotional needs (boosting self-confidence, cultivating skills for social adjustment and problem management, etc.).

By participating in the project, their material needs were addressed – providing housing, financial assistance with various expenses until entering the labour market. The fact that they had these needs provided room for focusing on emotional development and identifying other types of needs: career development, education, plans for the future.

Building trust, patience and repeating ideas / information calmly – are described as novelty in terms of relationships for these youngsters. The experience of the system, which marked their period of socialization, is a factor with an important role in social adaptation. Their personalities, their expectations, as they were set up, influence the way they deal with the situation of grown independent people.

The work of the project implementation team is, in fact, a work of keeping under control / managing conflicts and harmonizing the attitude of these young people towards their own existence and towards the social environment.

The services offered by the association include counselling (vocational, psychological), various courses and workshops adapted to their requirements, providing residential support and finding a job.

Use of informal resources – the personal networks of the association's volunteers, especially for finding a job, are common. This practice has potential positive effects among the beneficiaries, catalysing their sense of belonging to a community and increasing their confidence in specialists.



Psychological counselling seems to be problematic, in particular, by the reporting that the beneficiaries have to this type of activity. Probably due to the experiences of the protection system, this reluctance can be a major impediment to the emotional balance and social integration.

The fact that there is constant contact between team members and beneficiaries has allowed team members to have a very good knowledge of their needs, characteristics and difficulties encountered. As the project progressed and the youngsters adapted, this ongoing contact contributed to a good understanding by the specialists of the existing dynamics within the group of beneficiaries and allowed the implementation team to observe changes in the behaviour and expectations of the beneficiaries.

Problem solving and timely interventions of specialists are based on the specifics of each beneficiary and the preferred mode of communication. Good knowledge of each case is relevant here. The availability of team members has led to evolutions in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem, providing emotional comfort to the youngsters. The complementarity of the team has increased the degree of familiarity between beneficiaries and specialists, things not being approached strictly from a formal point of view.

Adapting to the new life situation was a challenge for the youngsters: new space, living together with other people, without the rigor encountered in the strictly controlled environment of a placement centre. For the beneficiaries coming from the province, the adaptation and preparation for an independent life also included the adaptation to living in Bucharest.

Independent living skills – everyday things, the exercise of which they did not acquire during the time spent in the system / placement centres seem to become an important stake of the project. Their absence generated difficulties during the project: conflicts between beneficiaries, (initially) between specialists and beneficiaries, various episodes of inappropriate behaviour towards potential employers, etc.

A recurring problem is finding and keeping a job, both because of the lack of commitment sometimes shown by youngsters and because of episodes of discrimination. The success of the intervention lies in the beneficiaries ability to be independent, after the completion of the project. This is a multifaceted aspect, which includes, but is not limited to, the ability to find and keep a job, the ability to invest (such as education) in one's future, adapting to living together in a community, and cultivating relationships and social interactions, the existence of future plans and the adequacy of expectations to constraints and objective data.

During the project, visible progress was made on all of these dimensions, exemplified in the report. But what seems to be the basis of these specific advances is the change in the general attitude that the youngsters have but also in the way they relate to themselves and the social environment: increasing self-confidence, accountability, learning to set boundaries in interactions with others and at the same time respecting boundaries.

The pandemic brought with it a number of problems in the development of the project: difficulties in finding jobs for the beneficiaries, difficulties in adapting them to life in the project, due to restrictions on interaction and mobility. Problems in finding a job meant the need for additional financial investments, but also their insecurity and distrust towards specialists and the project in general.

Isolation and thinning of face-to-face contacts have been psychologically challenging, overcoming which means of communication (such as Whatsapp) have been used to stay in contact with the youngsters. Courses, workshops and other events were organized online, not face to face.

One way to improve the services offered by the association is to add thoroughness and rigor in the relationship with the beneficiaries, by hiring a specialist (as an educator / pedagogue) to deal closely with the beneficiaries. Within the project, a family environment was replicated, with specific dynamics – for example, the project coordinator is the mother figure, a direction of improvement being, practically, the whole family by adding a father figure.

The Life Plan program contributes to the social and profesional integration of young people exiting foster care at the age of 18, when most of them have to leave the states guardianship and make it on their own.

Life Plan is a program initiated by AFI Europe Romania and implemented by The Social Incubator NGO with support from McCann PR.

