

# PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT OF CHILDREN AND CAREGIVERS IN CHILDCARE SERVICES

Project  
Final Report

31 December 2020

## Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus Infectious Disease 2019 (COVID19) affected lives of children and their caregivers in state care in Georgia. The outbreak resulted deterioration of emotional state of children and caregivers in state care. In some care environments outbreak related restrictions, anxiety and altered routine have resulted in deterioration of challenging behavior. The ongoing project responded to the needs of children in state care and their caregivers significantly affected by the pandemic.

With UNICEF funding Children of Georgia NGO (CoG) initiated mental health/psychosocial support of children and caregivers to enhance resilience and develop coping mechanism for children in state care. In addition, CoG has contributed to strengthening psychologists working in statutory services and small group homes.

## Coordination

Statutory social workers, Agency for State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking (ASCAVHT) and the management of small group homes/residential institutions were referring cases to CoG for mental health/psychosocial support. The project activities were closely coordinated with state and non-state actors. CoG has provided regular updates and consolidated indicator data on the psychosocial support to the project partners.

## Target Group

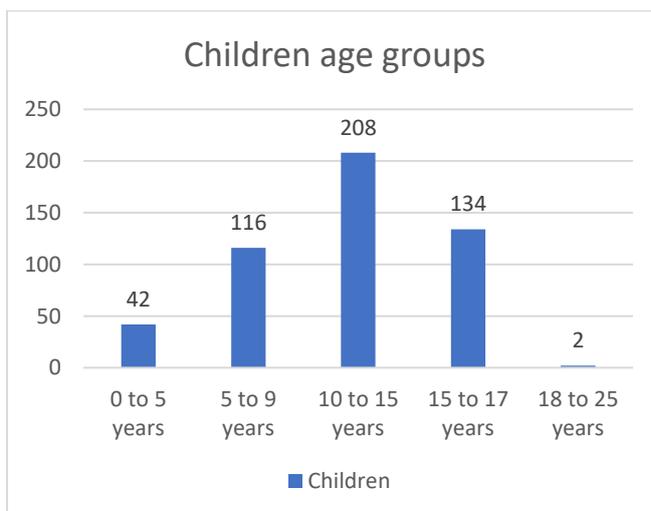
CoG has provided targeted mental health/psychosocial support to children and caregivers in small group homes, foster and biological families and residential care institutions (Table#1).

Table #1 Target group distribution by service type

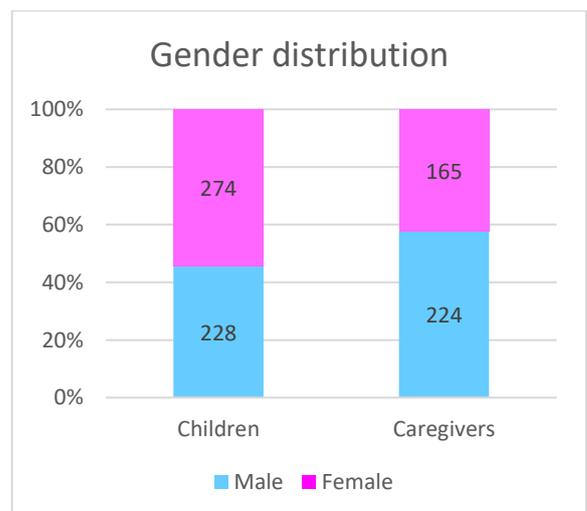
| Child care setting       | # of settings | # of Children | # of caregivers | Operated by  |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
| Small Group Homes        | 12            | 91            | 46              | NGOs:<br>✓ Breath Georgia<br>✓ Divine Child Foundation Georgia<br>✓ “Momavlis Skhivi”<br>✓ SoS Children’s Village<br>✓ Batumi education, development and employment center”<br>✓ “Kidevac Daizrdebian”<br>✓ Society Biliki |
| Foster Care              | 151           | 355           | 295             | Long term foster and kinship care  |
| Families                 | 16            | 33            | 30              | Prevention and reintegration cases   |
| Residential institutions | 1             | 23            | 18              | Kojori institution for children with disabilities operated by ASCAVHT  |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>180</b>    | <b>502</b>    | <b>389</b>      |  |

Charts #1 & #2 below displays distribution of beneficiaries and caregivers according to the age groups and gender.

Chart# 1



Chart#2



CoG multidisciplinary teams have provided mental health/psychosocial support to children with disabilities and their caregivers. Chart #3 and #4 displays number of children with disabilities and distribution to services.

Chart #3

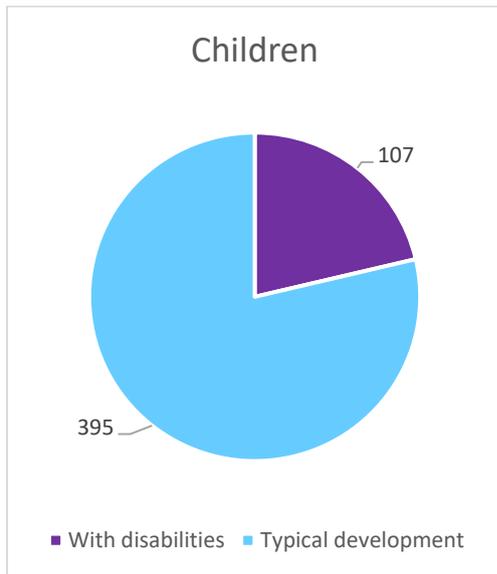
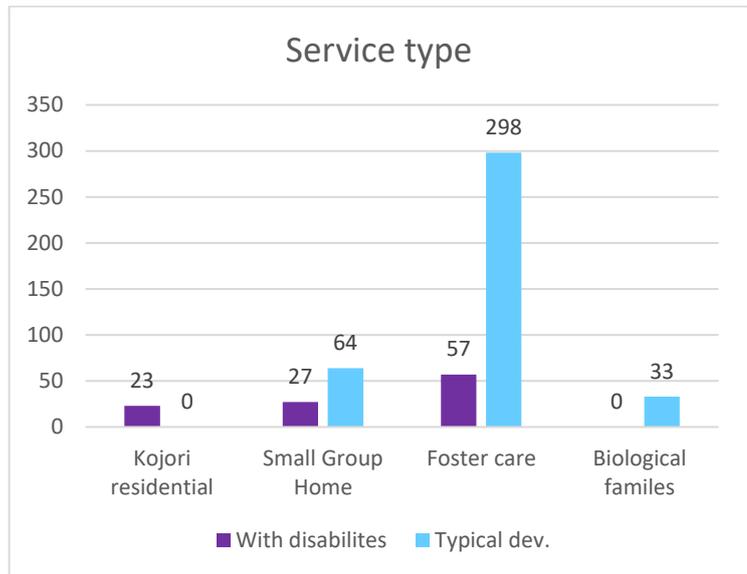
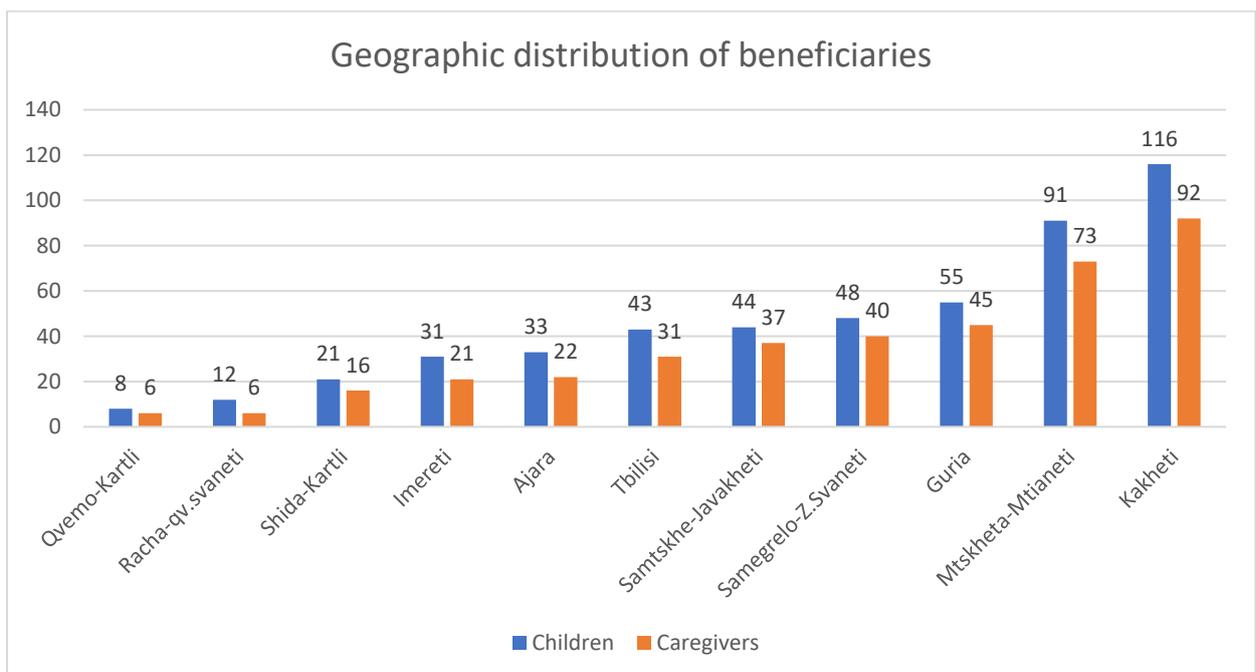


Chart #4



Geographic distribution of beneficiaries is displayed on Chart#5

Chart #5



As part of the strengthening child welfare services CoG has trained and supervises 24 psychologists employed by NGOs and ASCAVHT.

## **Methodology**

The most of the project activities were conducted through distance communication means from CoG office and household locations of the multidisciplinary (psychologists, occupational and speech therapists) team members. The majority of small group homes had online communication means, including internet connection, computers and webcam video call equipment. In those cases where computers at the end of the beneficiaries were not available, COG specialists utilized video/ phone calls with cellular lines. The ability to utilize various communication platforms such as Zoom, Skype, What's app, Viber, video/phone calls. etc. increased flexibility and adjustment to the needs of the beneficiaries.

The mental health/psychosocial support included:

- Gathering information from caregivers, social workers, ASCAVHT and the management of the small group homes about the ongoing situation and needs in care environment.
- Consulting caregivers and foster parents on their own psychosocial needs and stress management, including discussing and addressing possible fear and worry about their health, anxiety and the health of their loved ones.
- Supporting caregivers in re-designing daily routine, in cooperation with the multidisciplinary teams of the service. Including support in those cases where caregivers needed counselling in relation to individual care plans of beneficiaries.
- Supporting effective communication on outbreak related hygiene and behavior messages for children.
- Consulting caregivers and parents on potential increase and specific cases on increased behavior challenges among the beneficiaries.
- Individual and group sessions with children to increase their resilience for overcoming possible anxiety and uncertainty due to the current outbreak.
- Supporting caregivers and foster parents in communication with children with disabilities on the outbreak related issues

- Consulting caregivers for prevention and in cases of violence/bullying/aggression among children or from children to adults.

The support covered distresses caused during and by COVID19 related restrictions/isolation; Sessions with be beneficiaries focused on the emotional state of children; altered daily routine contributing anxiety; conflict management; violence; challenging behavior.

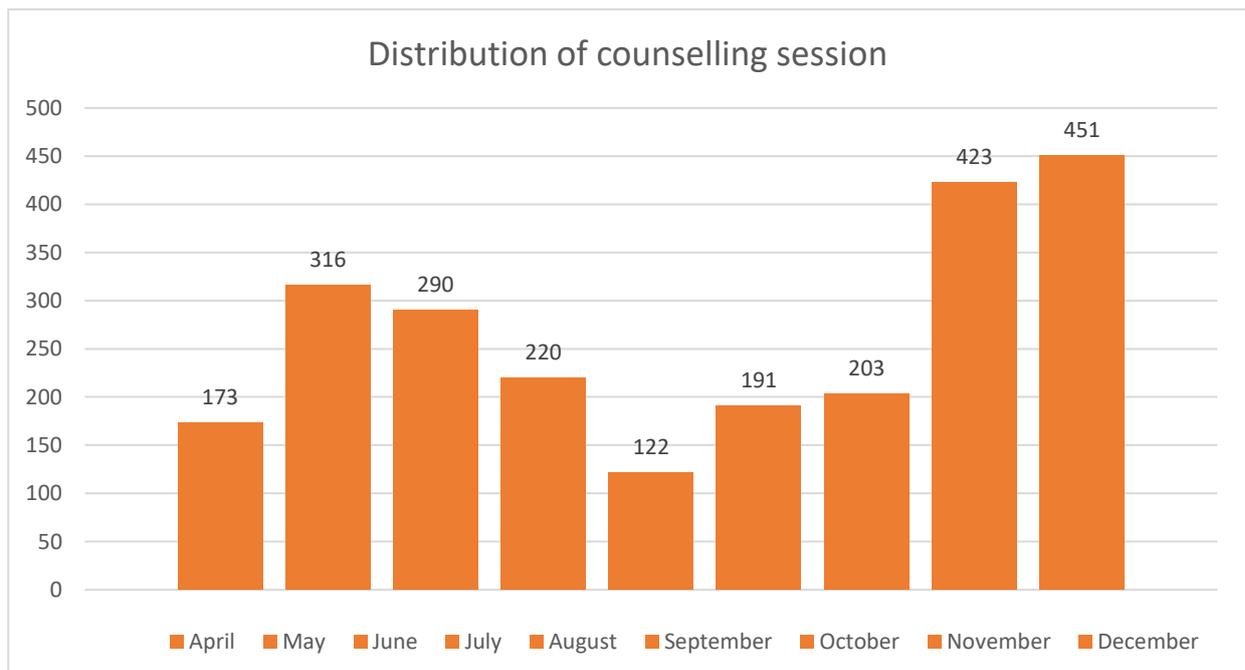
## Project activities

### *The mental health/psychosocial support*

CoG multidisciplinary team has conducted 2389 sessions, including December 2020. The sessions covered 502 children (91 children in 12 Small Group Homes (SGH), 355 Foster Care (FC), 11 reintegration, 22 Prevention, 23 children in child care institution) and their 389 caregivers (46 caregivers in small group homes; 295 foster parents; 30 biological parents; 18 caregivers in Kojori institution) in Tbilisi, Imereti, Adjara, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti; Shida-Kartli, Kakheti, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Guria.

The demand for the mental health/psychosocial support were correlated with the pandemic related situation in country. The chart #6 below describes increase quantity of counselling sessions in correlation to the two recent waves of the pandemic in spring and autumn.

Chart #6 Distribution of counselling session



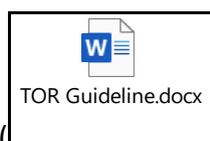
The mental health psychosocial support in Kodjori residential home covered emotional state of caregivers; CoG's multidisciplinary team has visited the institution and gave recommendations to caregivers related to the specific needs. Based on the request from the agency (ASCAVHT) CoG has conducted thematic workshop on disability and mental health-social support for the multidisciplinary team of the institution.

The rapid spread of COVID19 through the population has also affected foster care families, resulting increased number of cases referred by statutory social workers. The provided sessions included support on COVID-19 related issues (anxiety, routine disruption, communication problems with peers) as well as cases of emotional and behavior challenges. The format of the support was focus groups and individual consultations for caregivers/foster parents as well as supporting children with individual and group sessions.

### ***Strengthening child welfare system capacity***

To strengthen ASCAVHT resources CoG multidisciplinary team has initiated revision of the TORs of psychologists employed by the Agency. The TOR included general description of the tasks without detailed scope or procedures. Based on the discussions with the agency it was decided to develop detailed procedural guideline as an annex to the existing job description.

CoG local experts developed of the brief child assessment checklist based on the Achenbach<sup>1</sup> and GABSI<sup>2</sup> assessment tool of children and the management of challenging behavior.



The guideline ( ) includes following chapters:

- Psychologist professional ethics and ethical principles
- Ethical standards
- Child assessment in civil court and custody cases
- Planning psychological intervention
- Cooperation with partners

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<sup>1</sup> The psychological assessment tools previously developed for Georgian environment with UNICEF support will be utilized.

<sup>2</sup> Georgian Behavior Screening Instrument developed by Children of Georgia NGO

- Supervision

The annexes of the Guideline include:

- Informed consent form for child 
- Informed consent form for adults involved in child assessment process 
- Child development checklist 
- Challenging behaviour assessment checklist 
- Child assessment manual in civil court and custody cases 

To strengthen child welfare services CoG trained 15 psychologists employed by SGH and shelter care provider NGOs and 9 psychologists employed by Agency for State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking. CoG has conducted four sets of trainings, including an additional training for statutory psychologists in court psychology and a role of psychologist in child custody and other civil court cases.



Based on the request of the agency trainings were attended by psychologists from child care regional units and small group homes. The training curricula and the topics have been developed and agreed with the agency. The training covered following topics:

- The role of psychologist in child welfare
- Code of conduct and ethical considerations
- Child development and age-related specifics
- Developmental disorders, common diagnosis, peculiarities and needs
- Inclusive educations
- Working with children with low motivation and low self-esteem
- Behaviour management
- Emotional challenges and their management
- Violence, identification and responding to cases
- Crisis intervention
- Sexual education
- Excretion disorders



The training sessions were followed with individual supervision and the joint workshop on the child assessment methodology.



## Challenges considerations and recommendations

During the child welfare reform one of the best-equipped, staffed and supported alternative child care services in Georgia were small group homes. The statutory social services were submitting the most challenging children to those well-supported small group homes and to the Samtredia institution. Currently the ability to manage severe cases of small group homes are negatively affected with staff turnover and diminished internal support from service providers. Also, the Samtredia institution is not child placement option for statutory social services as well. The latter in some cases has resulted in placement of the most challenging children in foster care. The latter is associated with number of potential risks and needs ongoing support of those placements, close monitoring and further follow up.

Another issue was related to the severe cases in small group homes. In number of small group homes CoG has supported in frame of the project, CoG team has encountered at least one case where child with challenging behavior (sometimes combination of emotional problems, anxiety, stress, impulsiveness, self-harming, harming peers) was repeatedly submitted to a residential psychiatric service for two weeks. The latter indicates lack of community-based mental health services readily available for alternative childcare settings. The mentioned requires further follow up and advocacy for the establishment of and accessibility to relevant services.

In general, social services and alternative childcare service providers lack the capacity to handle challenging behavior cases. The latter is often resulting frequent transition of beneficiaries from one type of service to another ei. SGH to foster care and vice versa. Statutory social services supposedly alternate placement for mitigating behavior problems which (frequent change of placement) in fact is more traumatizing factor and in the long run might aggravate challenging behavior/ psycho-emotional state of children.

In one case<sup>3</sup> the child with challenging behavior separated from biological family due to the sexual violence was prematurely reintegrated without proper preparation of the family, nor follow-up support to the reintegration. These cases once more indicate lack of well-equipped and well-supported specialized services.

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<sup>3</sup> The CoG multidisciplinary team and service provider were supporting child and developed a plan for ongoing intervention relevant to the challenging behavior, without recommendation on the reintegration.

Children transferred to alternative care (SGH and Foster care) from Ninotsminda institution mention experience of violence, in particular widespread verbal abuse of children from the staff. The fact that children in various alternative care environments independently describe mentioned situation, adds credibility to the potential problem in Ninotsminda institution.

The proper selection of foster care family to the needs of the potential beneficiaries remain challenge for the child care system. As in some cases foster families were not able to meet the needs of children related to experienced trauma or challenging behavior, the latter often results further transition of these children, which additionally contributes to the problems.

Covid 19 outbreak in general contributed to worsening challenging behavior in the existing cases. In those cases where children were living care environments caregivers were not able to intervene timely and were challenged additionally. Covid 19 has significantly affected mental health psychosocial needs of caregivers as well, increasing their vulnerabilities related to the team work, communication etc.

The experience demonstrates the online mental health psychosocial support of children and their caregivers is efficient. Current situation shows that the ongoing support is needed and welcomed.

The challenges encountered during training and supervision of the psychologists involved in child welfare services demonstrates need for the following:

- The low number of employed statutory psychologists makes constrains for fulfilling their functions imposed by the current terms of reference and new legislation of Child Code. Firstly, it is recommended to increase number of qualified psychologists in statutory services through the Georgia.
- Secondly, due to the wide variety of tasks imposed to these psychologists, it is recommended to introduce psychologist specialisation in the statutory services, with clear division of their roles and functions.
- In response to overwhelming demand for psychological therapy caused by COVID19 and other ongoing factors, it is recommended to outsource therapy with establishment of the relevant flexible and efficient state programs.

- It is recommended introduction of the supervision, as one of the internal mechanisms of the quality control of psychologist's work. The external supervision can be outsourced with ongoing institutionalization of peer supervision together with the specialisation.
- It is recommended to establish regular monitoring mechanisms to follow up psychologist's intervention.