

“Deinstitutionalization reform of the orphanages in Uzbekistan is impossible without preventing the placement of children in state institutions and strengthening social protection measures for vulnerable families, developing family forms of placement of orphans and children left without parental care, professional training of social workers, trainings for foster parents and introducing inclusive education” - noted experts Dilmurad Yusupov and Takhir Mirzhaparov in an article, written specially for CABAR.asia.

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In May 2018, the news of sexual and physical violence against pupils of the House of Mercy No. 1 in Margilan, Ferghana Region, caused a public stir in Uzbekistan.[1] In addition to child molestation, the management of the orphanage was engaged in large thefts of budget money and grants from international organizations. Despite the fact that in December 2017 rumors spread in the region about violence in the orphanage No. 1,[2] criminal cases against the offenders were opened only a few months later. The leaders and employees of the Margilan orphanage received long prison terms,[3] and the local Internet media tagged the Mekhribonlik orphanages (the houses of Mercy) as “unmerciful”.

A good orphanage is a closed orphanage

In addition to children’s exposure to high risk of violence and abuse in orphanages, a number of scientific studies have shown that institutions distort the mental and physical development of children, as well as shape deviant behavior and addictions. The lack of vital social skills and the attendant problems of adaptation of graduates to adult life give rise to a number of dramatic consequences. Thus, according to research, about 40% of graduates of orphanages are criminalized, another 40% become homeless, alcoholics and drug addicts, 10% of graduates commit suicide, 90% of graduates die before they reach the age of 35.[4]

As of 2019, 135 children’s institutions are functioning in Uzbekistan, in which almost 30 thousand socially vulnerable children are being raised.[5] In recent years, the Government of Uzbekistan has adopted a number of legal acts to strengthen the social protection system for orphans and children left without parental care. According to the decree of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, by June 1, 2019, the relevant ministries and departments had to develop a **program of measures for the deinstitutionalization of Mekhribonlik**

houses for 2019-2023.^[6] At the same time, a number of contradictions and inconsistencies with the principles of transforming the institutionalized form of custody of children into alternative family forms of custody are observed in the state’s social policy.

The main ideological message of the reform is that **a child has the right to live and be brought up in the family**. Following this logic, state institutions can serve exclusively as a temporary location for a child, while specialists work with biological families. In cases where living in a birth family and in a family of relatives is not possible, then it is necessary to arrange a foster family for the child. It must be admitted that about 60% of children left without care are the so-called social orphans who have parents.

However, the target of preventive care is still children, and not families, whose problems are the main cause of social orphanage. Prevention of placement of a child in a state institution is the work of subjects of prevention of the social protection system, which must be built up, and which is economically justified and appropriate for the country in the long term. Uzbekistan should move away from the child-centered approach and consider the problems of crisis childhood in the system of a multi-generational family and society as a whole.

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The state needs to direct the main efforts and resources to early detection of family tribulation. Clear mechanisms of the system of early intervention and support for families in socially vulnerable and dangerous situations should be worked out. Thus, it is possible to stop the unjustified placement of children from their birth families into state institutions.

Nothing can replace family

The presidential decree provided for *“a phased transformation of the Mekhribonlik houses into small-sized children’s towns and other alternative forms of social institutions.”*^[7] However, can this profanation be called a deinstitutionalization reform? How many years and budget funds will the state spend on creating such towns? *“Family-type children’s towns”* is a rudimentary, dead-end branch of development preserving an institutional culture, they cannot be called “family” – this is a gross substitution of concepts. Currently, the only “family-type orphanage” is functioning in the Urgench district of the Khorezm region, where eight children are being raised.

Changing the order of addends does not change the sum. No matter how well the orphanage is equipped, it will still remain as a place of segregation. One cannot compile someone else’s experience, even if it’s conditionally successful, and remove from the proposed model those details without which it is completely useless. First of all, it is necessary to understand what a child feels and experiences while growing up without parents. A paradigm shift is needed in relation to orphanages.

The successful experience of deinstitutionalization in the countries of the post-Soviet space shows that in order to launch the reform of orphanages, it is first necessary to develop alternative forms of placement of children in families, while at the same time building an appropriate support system for foster families. All of this can be achieved by gradually redistributing funds and human resources from institutions for children and preventing family break-ups.

Are family-type forms of care ready?

Attracting and selecting candidates who want to take orphans into their families and their professional training is an entry point for the successful implementation of the reform and positive changes. In the presidential decree from February, special attention was paid to *“improving the system of selection and support of potential guardians and caregivers, taking children into the family for upbringing (patronage), adoptive parents and parent-educators of family-type orphanages.”* It is worth noting that patronage care in Uzbekistan accounts for only 1% of all existing forms of family care. As of 2019, only **654 children** were in patronage care. Currently, patronage is the only form of paid custody, while adoption, guardianship and custody are not accompanied by any payments to foster families.

Starting March 1, 2019, the amount of the allowance paid to each child accepted into foster care (patronage) increased by 1.33 times and amounted to 820,000 soums (about 80 US dollars), with a subsequent increase not lower than the rate of inflation.[\[8\]](#) However, the criteria by which it is possible to obtain patronage family status are not clearly spelled out, which may entail corruption risks. According to unofficial data, the housing of one child in a state institution exceeds the amount of the paid child allowance in the foster care by ten times.

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In Uzbekistan, patronage is the only form of family placement for orphans, where citizens undergo compulsory training before taking a child into the family. In such circumstances, it is difficult to talk about the quality of the results of the ongoing reform. Regardless of the form of the child’s future family placement, whether it be adoption, guardianship or foster care, all candidates must be professionally trained for this role, including kinship foster care. Starting from January 1, 2020, certificates of completion of preparatory training courses for the patronage had to be issued. However, no one has yet been trained in Uzbekistan, which may also be related to quarantine measures introduced in relation to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

**Тугинган ота-оналарни тайёрлаш курсидан ўтганлиги тўғрисидаги
СЕРТИФИКАТ**



**SERTIFIKAT
TK № 000000**

(tinglovchining familiyasi, ismi, otasining ismi)

20 ____ yil _____ dan 20 ____ gacha _____ da

(Davlat tarbiya muassasasining nomi)

jami _____ soatli

(kursning nomi)

bo'yicha tayyorlov kursini tugatdi.

Muhr o`rni
Tayyorlov kurs rahbari _____
Sana _____ Qayd raqami _____

Sample certificate of completion of preparatory courses by foster parents. Source: Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PKM-824 of September 30, 2019

An exception is a civil initiative on the basis of the Republican Center for Social Adaptation of Children (RCSAC), where an informal club of foster parents has been created together with the center’s specialists. Currently about 25 foster parents are being trained there, who

intend to register the Association of Foster Families of Uzbekistan in the future in order to consolidate efforts of foster and parent community in Uzbekistan.

In the CIS countries, there are already developments in the form of ready-made programs and materials for training adoptive parents. For example, the [Institute for the Development of the Family Care](#) operates in the Russian Federation, where the [School of Foster Parents \(SFP\)](#) of a famous psychologist and teacher from Tashkent, Lyudmila Petranovskaya, has been successfully organized for several years. In April 2020, the SFP workshops were planned in Uzbekistan at the foster parents’ club at the RCSAC, but, unfortunately, the events did not take place due to the situation with the coronavirus.

Reform is not possible without inclusive education

In Uzbekistan, as in other post-Soviet countries, the practice of placing children with disabilities in state institutions immediately after their birth is still in place.^[9] More than 20 thousand children or more than 70% of children in the subordinate institutions of the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Healthcare of the Republic (children’s homes, Mekhribonlik, Muruvvat, specialized boarding schools) have disabilities and limited health capabilities. In all regions of the country there are 86 specialized schools and boarding schools for “children with physical and mental developmental impairments”, as well as 21 sanatorium-type schools for children susceptible to tuberculosis and bone diseases.

In this regard, the process of deinstitutionalization is impossible without the development of an accessible, barrier-free environment in its broadest sense – distributed custody, accompanied accommodation, without a market of social services, targeted social patronage, provision of equal opportunities and adoption of relevant legal acts. For example, if a child with autistic spectrum condition (ASC) with special educational needs was admitted to a family for foster care (patronage), he would need to study at a mainstream school near his new home. The educational institution should be ready for accepting such a child, if necessary, adapting the school building, preparing an individual curriculum and a qualified tutor accompanying the child with learning disabilities through the entire educational process.^[10]

Unfortunately, inclusive education in Uzbekistan is still at a very early stage of development, and the teaching staff and parents of non-disabled children can even impede the education of a child with special educational needs in their school. The rights of children with disabilities to inclusive education, as well as specific mechanisms for their transfer to

mainstream secondary schools should be spelled out in the Law on Education.[\[11\]](#)

For children with disabilities, an **individual rehabilitation program (IRP)**, which prescribes a route for parents in the form of a plan of procedures and measures (receiving the services of a psychologist, speech pathologist, rehabilitation specialist, etc.) for a child, is of particular importance. Successful international practices for the prevention of social orphanhood imply an interdisciplinary and integrated approach to solving problems with the involvement of specialists from various fields. At the same time, all attention should not be focused on a purely medical approach to children with disabilities.

The main problem is the unpreparedness of society to accept them on an equal footing, creating conditions for the integration of children and adults with disabilities in all spheres of society, and adapting infrastructure to their needs. The stigmatizing and discriminatory public consciousness prevents a person with a disability from increasing their social activity and does not provide an opportunity for self-realization and personal growth.[\[12\]](#)

Sustainable social protection instead of “orphanage tourism”

Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) - this is what orphans receive as a gift from kind people who come to the orphanage to feel sorry for the child, take joint photos and maybe return next year at the voice of their heart... The truth is that children separated from their parents are constantly experiencing extreme stress, even when they smile at you. The orphanage is not like a public thoroughfare and not a contact zoo. It is necessary to help the child return to the birth family, or find a foster home, and help families find the child and support people who provide professional support on an ongoing basis. It is critically important to support families, who are in difficult life situations. At present, Uzbekistan has a strong political will on the part of the country's first person, and we are most prepared to completely change the situation.

The fragmentation of the social protection system for vulnerable groups of the population, the lack of qualified local staff who are able to work with families at the mahalla level (citizens' self-governing bodies) and conduct case management with in-depth study of the needs of each household,[\[13\]](#) aggravates the situation and does not allow the implementation of preventive measures. The coverage and size of benefits allocated to families in socially dangerous situations remain inadequate. In Uzbekistan, most children *“live in families with an income of less than 10,000 soums (\$ 1.2) per day per person”*.[\[14\]](#) As a result, crisis families below the poverty line, large families, or families with children with disabilities cannot provide adequate care for them. 77% of boys and 73%

of girls in Mekhribonlik homes are children of persons deprived of parental rights, “half orphans” and children from low-income families. If the state had supported these families in due course in times of crisis, the placement of children in the orphanage could have been avoided.

How the real reform should look like?

The new stage that begun in 2019 in the deinstitutionalization reform of orphanages in Uzbekistan requires in-depth analysis and independent expertise. A reassembly of the proposed model itself and a review of approaches to the organization, planning and intensity of work and ways to achieve social goals are needed. Deinstitutionalization is a serious structural transformation of the entire guardianship system, at all its levels. Reform directly depends on accurate management decisions, design, schematization and strategic coordination of actions and is impossible without the active participation of the third sector.

It is the parent associations in the form of non-governmental non-profit organizations and independent experts that can provide impartial control and monitoring of the effective implementation of the reform. It is important to create an independent, multidisciplinary and flexible **departmental working group**, empowered to promptly coordinate actions directly with the country’s leadership.

The implementation of the reform of orphan institutions is not easy modernization, or a reboot of the system, but a complete rethinking, smooth reorganization and the gradual abolition of earlier existing structures. Released funds from orphanages should remain in the field of guardianship and trusteeship – they should be redirected to the creation of a training system for foster parents, resource centers and family support services.

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- Reorganize/repurpose institutions for orphans into resource centers for families in difficult situations, and creation of early assistance services and family support services on their basis.
- Organize compulsory vocational training courses for all citizens who wish to adopt a child into the family, regardless of the form of family custody (patronage,

guardianship, trusteeship or adoption).

- Provide training and retraining of personnel for social protection of the population, namely social workers who are able to work effectively with socially vulnerable families at the grassroots levels to prevent social orphanhood.
- Introduce inclusive education in preschool and school educational institutions, creating the necessary conditions and reasonable accommodation for children with disabilities to meet their special educational needs.
- Begin the phased disbandment of all residential institutions, ensuring the transparency of the entire process, as well as minimizing the risks of harm to orphans and children without parental care.
- Develop monitoring systems for post-institutional adaptation of graduates.
- Collect disaggregated data on children in orphanages and make them open to the public, to ensure transparency and monitor the implementation of the reform by third parties.
- Create an updated (mobile) database of orphans and children left without parental care, ensuring the protection of personal data to enhance the transfer of children to family forms of care and coordinate the interaction of government agencies at different levels.[\[15\]](#)
- Conduct a large-scale educational campaign to raise awareness and debunk the common myths that orphans are under the reliable guardianship and protection of the state in children’s institutions.

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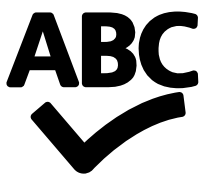
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