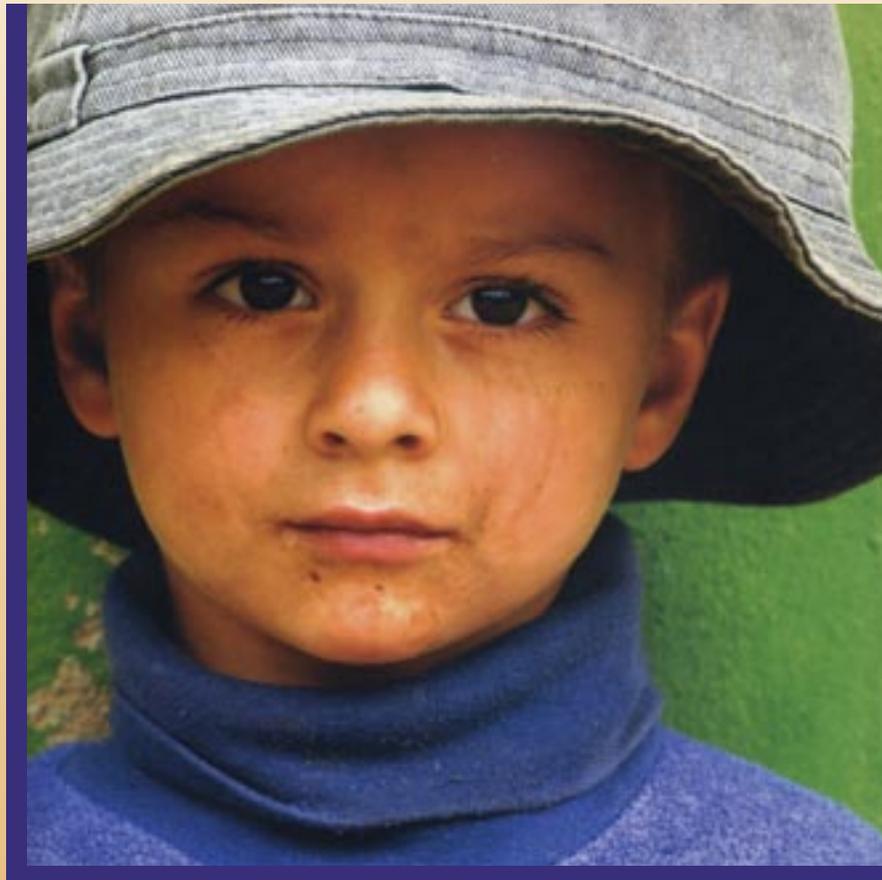


The Forgotten Children of Moldova

Observations on Child Abuse in Europe's Poorest Country

Authored by Jay Sorensen, President
The Kids First Fund, Inc.

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The Kids First Fund

About the Kids First Fund

The Kids First Fund helps abused and abandoned children. We protect children from abuse. We empower young adults with a positive future. We strengthen families. We build awareness of child abuse. We operate in countries where resources are very limited. Current projects provide support for children in the democratic republic of Latvia located on the Baltic Sea. The Kids First Fund supports programs to educate child welfare professionals such as police officers, judges, social workers and prosecutors on child abuse issues. Direct assistance is also provided to centers providing care for abused children. The Kids First Fund is an extremely efficient nonprofit organization that does not incur any expenses since all staffing and services are donated. The organization has been granted special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Learn more at KidsFirstFund.org.

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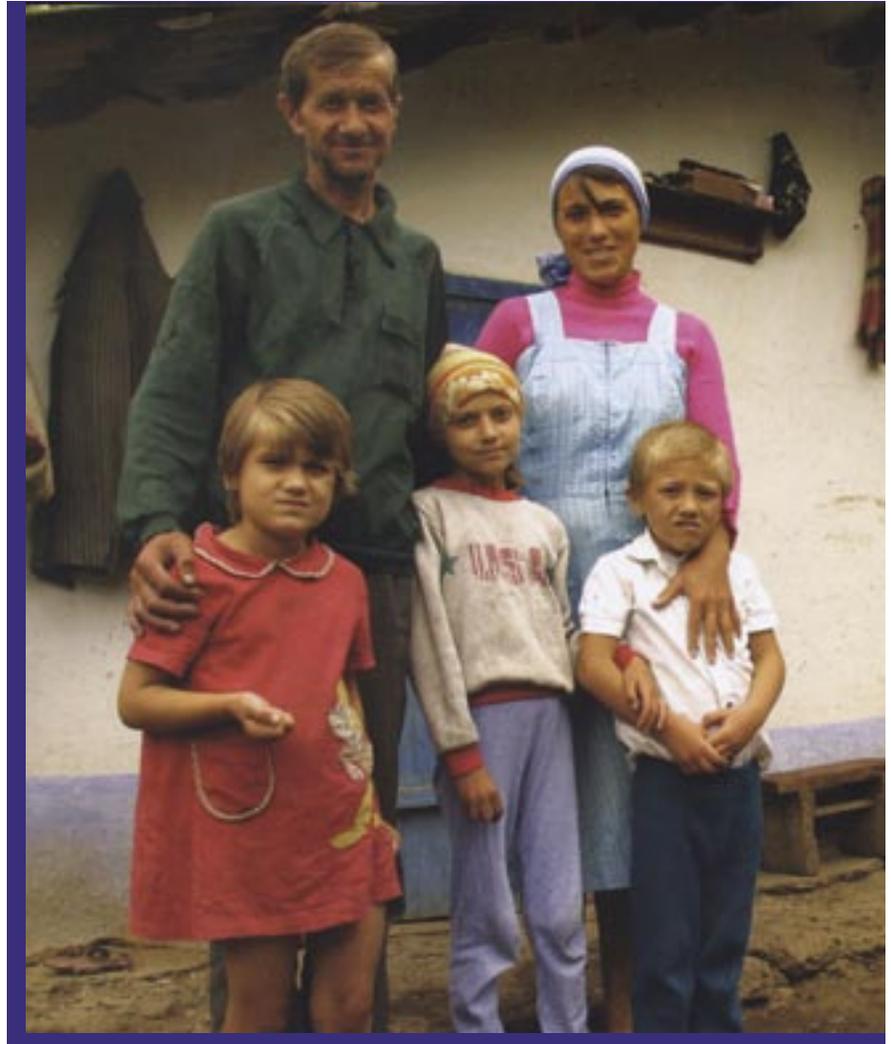
Introduction

The Kids First Fund anticipates the need to add a second location after completion of the family shelter project in Balvi, Latvia. This report summarizes the observations of Jay Sorensen (president of the Kids First Fund) from a trip he took during March 2008 to learn more about child abuse in the Republic of Moldova.

The Kids First Fund is committed to ongoing support of its mission in Latvia, which will likely involve continuing cooperation with the Latvia Children's Fund. Economic conditions in Latvia have improved dramatically since the Kids First Fund began its operations in 1999. Since then, the country has joined NATO and the European Union (EU) and has received millions of euros for infrastructure, social, and cultural projects.

Admission into the EU has required Latvia to adopt many reforms to include extensive welfare services and judicial protection for women and children. Standards within Latvia are rising to meet those of Europe's leading nations. Economic growth in Latvia has raced ahead and the country is now a leader among the group of newly admitted EU member states. However, these changes have created a sizeable government deficit, growing inflation, and an outflow of population.

These mixed results have largely benefited children in Latvia as the standard of care for abused children has improved, and the issue of child abuse has become a social and legislative priority. Much work remains to be done to help children, with an acute need in rural areas where unemployment is high and local government expenditures are low. But Latvia is certainly on a course in which the country is far better equipped to help itself. These improving conditions have prompted the Kids First Fund to consider the addition of a second location for the development of projects to help abused and abandoned children.



Why Moldova?

Ad-hoc meetings conducted by Jay Sorensen occurred among board members Rogers Grigulis, Irma Kalnina, and Valdis Rande in Latvia during 2007. An overall expansion strategy began to evolve from these conversations. Administrative efficiency, economic need, and cultural similarity were identified as key factors in selecting a second project. To be specific:

- **Administrative efficiency:** A location near Latvia would allow board members to conduct business in both locations without the need for travel to another region of the world.
- **Economic need:** The second project location should not currently be an EU member, or scheduled for EU admission.
- **Cultural similarity:** The board can apply key experiences from Latvia to another location.

Based on these observations, search parameters include a small country, one that was a former Soviet republic, and has a predominant Christian culture. These parameters exclude larger countries, such as Russia, where the scope of child abuse problems would overwhelm a small organization such as the Kids First Fund. This also excludes largely Muslim countries where the issues of child abuse and the rights of women would require the board to undertake an extensive re-learning process.

Moldova very quickly rose to the top of the list after consideration of these factors. Moldova's reputation as Europe's poorest country, and low level of awareness within the United States, aligns with the original factors that led to the selection of Latvia in 1999.



How Information Was Gathered

Jay Sorensen traveled to Moldova during March 2008 to meet with representatives of Moldovan social service agencies and to learn more about the country. The agencies are actively involved in providing care and counseling to abused children and mothers, investigating cases of child abuse, advocating on behalf of children, and educating professionals on child abuse issues such as detection and treatment. The following persons assisted the fact-gathering process by arranging the meetings:

- **Paul DeGregorio** (former Commissioner, U.S. Election Assistance Commission and past adviser on election issues to the Government of Moldova)
- **Gabriel Mumjiev** (an employee of the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative in Moldova)
- **Natalia Gore** (Executive Director of the Institute for Democratic Initiatives in Moldova)

Gabriel and Natalia accompanied Jay to act as interpreters and to provide an enhanced understanding of Moldovan culture and to provide background on political and social issues. Meetings were held with representatives of ten local NGOs in the capitol city of Chisinau and at a smaller rural location. NGO refers to non-government organization, or often known in the United States as non-profit agencies. Jay spent a total of four days in Moldova.

While in Chisinau, Jay also met with staff members at the U.S. Embassy representing the Bilateral, Political and Public Affairs offices. The U.S. Ambassador expressed his support for activities contemplated by the Kids First Fund in Moldova. In addition, a meeting was held with the local office of the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF). This meeting resulted in the receipt of excellent materials produced by UNICEF on the topic of child abuse in Moldova including:

- **UNICEF in Moldova**, 46-page report issued in 2006
- **The Situation of Children Left Behind by Migrating Parents**, 94-page report issued in 2006
- **Violence against children in the Republic of Moldova**, 72-page report issued in 2007 jointly by the government of Moldova
- **State responsiveness to violence against children**, 80-page report issued in 2007 jointly by the government of Moldova

Specific statistics referenced in this report are footnoted when derived from one of the above published sources. However, information gathered during conversations with NGO representatives has not been attributed to any specific source. It is a widely-held opinion that Moldova is not an open society governed completely by the rule of law. NGO representatives provided information that could be viewed as damaging to the reputation of the government of Moldova. The names of these individuals and the identity of the NGOs have been kept from this report to prevent the possibility of retribution by the government.

The identities of children (to include gender and location of residence) described in the stories included in this report have been changed to protect their identity. The images of children and parents appearing in this report were copied from printed materials with the permission of the Moldova office of UNICEF. The use of these images does not suggest they have been the victims of abuse, nor are the adults perpetrators of abuse.

About the Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova is an independent country bordered by Romania and the Ukraine. Its size is comparable to the State of Maryland. Formerly part of Romania, Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union at the close of World War II. Although independent from the USSR since 1991, Russian forces have remained on Moldovan territory east of the Dniester River. In this area, they support the Slavic majority population (mostly Ukrainians and Russians) who have proclaimed an autonomous "Transnistria" republic.¹

Generally regarded as the poorest nation in Europe, Moldova became the first former Soviet state to elect a Communist as its president in 2001. The country has a population of 4.3 million and is in population decline due to a low birth rate and the migration of citizens to other countries for employment. Official unemployment in the country is low, but 25% of working-age Moldovans are currently employed abroad. The ethnic composition of the population is largely Romanian-speaking Moldovans (78%), Ukrainian (8%), Russian 6%, and Gagauz 4%). In terms of religious beliefs, Moldova's population is overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox (in excess of 90%) with religious authority split between the Orthodox churches of Romania and Moscow.²

Moldova enjoys a favorable climate and good farmland but has no major mineral deposits. The economy depends heavily on agriculture and features fruits, vegetables, and tobacco. Wine is a very important export. The country must import almost all of its energy supplies. Moldova's dependence on Russian energy was underscored at the end of 2005, when a Russian-owned electrical station in Moldova's separatist Transnistria region cut off power to Moldova. At the same time, Russia's Gazprom energy conglomerate cut off natural gas supplies in a dispute over pricing. Russia also refused to import wine and food products from Moldova. The result of these actions greatly harmed the country's economy and underscored the reliance on Russia. Relative stability returned during 2007 because of Russia's partial removal of the bans, some capital investment by foreigners, and improved domestic demand driven by money brought back to the country by those working abroad.

Economic and political reforms have been slow because of corruption and strong political forces backing centralized control. Nevertheless, the government's goal of eventual EU integration has resulted in some progress. Russia has signaled its concern over Moldova joining the EU and has expressed anger over the possibility of Moldova becoming part of NATO. Prevailing wisdom suggests Moldova's government may seek a compromise by enjoying the economic benefits of EU membership but not upsetting the balance of power by joining NATO. The economy remains vulnerable to higher fuel prices, poor agricultural weather, and the skepticism of foreign investors. EU integration is many years away. The presence of an illegal separatist regime in Moldova's Transnistria region continues to be a drag on the Moldovan economy.



Children Have a Very Difficult Life in Moldova

In many ways the child abuse situation in Moldova mirrors that of other former Soviet republics. Conditions in Moldova, however, seem to be more desperate as the country appears to be stuck in the culture of its Communist past and unable to make the economic leap to become an efficient food producer for Europe. Extreme poverty, corrupt government and a fractured family structure have conspired to create an almost hopeless future for at-risk children. Unless otherwise specified, the following factors were identified by UNICEF, and validated during meetings in Moldova, as key challenges:

■ **Almost half of Moldova's people live below the poverty line.**

More than 46% of the population is below the government-defined subsistence minimum of US\$90 per adult per month.³ The percent of population below the International Poverty Line of US\$4.13 per person per day exceeds 34% as of 2006.⁴ According to UNICEF, one-third of young people ages 18-29 report they do not earn the minimum required for their own survival. Approximately 37%

of children are classified as working more than four hours per day. Children in poor rural families are twice as likely to work as other children. Working children are far more likely to drop out of school and fall into the cycle of poverty. They are also more prone to human trafficking.

- **25% of working adults have left the country to work abroad.** National opinion polls conducted during 2000 found 40% of young people would leave Moldova forever if they had the chance. Only 9% of young people wish to remain in the country. By the end of 2006, approximately 334,000 Moldovans had left Moldova to work or search for a job. This represents more than 21% of the total population age 15 and older.⁵ The primary migration destinations are Russia, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Israel.

The money sent back by these workers serves as an important instrument of survival for their families. In 2006 the total volume of remittances amounted to US\$1.18 billion and accounted for an amazing 35% of Moldova's gross domestic product.⁶ According to UNICEF, this emigration has left 35,000 school age children without the care of both parents, and an additional 75,000 children with one parent abroad. These official statistics have been called into question, with some experts suggesting real numbers may be two or three times higher.

- **Many children receive little nurturing in the home.** There is a lack of stimulation for children in many families, especially those affected by extreme poverty. The overall lack of resources, with many families lacking toys or books, undermines the development of children. For example, 25% of three and four-year-old children are unable to name any color, and 50% of all children are unprepared for full-time schooling. There is a cultural lack of communication between many parents and their young children.

- **Health and education resources are deteriorating. Infant mortality rates are among the highest in Europe.**

The number of HIV-positive children and children with disabilities is increasing due to minimal health promotion, unsafe sexual contact, and inadequate medical services. The quality of primary education and health care has declined due to a departure of qualified professionals from the country and government funding problems. Low morale and sub-standard salaries are resulting in an exodus of teachers and doctors.



STORIES from MOLDOVA: *Justice without recovery*

When Moldova's justice system delivers justice, its social service system might fail to provide recovery for the victim. A man, guilty of previous rape convictions, raped a 14-year girl. The court delivered a guilty verdict and a prison sentence of 20 years. The girl suffered extreme physical and mental trauma. Together with her mother, she is receiving therapy to heal her mental wounds.

Her physical recovery, however, is stalled. She required surgery to repair the damage created by the rape. The government will provide surgery in the capitol city at no charge to the girl's family. However, the family does not have the cash to pay for transportation to the capitol or for post-surgical medicines. As of the writing of this report, her family had accumulated enough money for the initial surgery, but can't afford the fees associated with the second surgery.

■ **Moldova is one of the main countries of origin for the trafficking of women and children.**⁷

The primary purpose of this human trade is for begging and sexual exploitation in Western Europe, the Balkans, Russia and the Middle East. Many victims are children, with 30% reporting they were below the age of 18 when they left the country. Certain groups are especially vulnerable, such as school dropouts and children from poor families.

■ **A Soviet-era tradition of institutionalizing children continues.**

The Soviet philosophy of welfare was to remove dangerous persons from society and to place them in the care of the state. This legacy largely continues in Moldova. Victims of child abuse fall under this category and are often placed in orphanages and boarding schools. Community-based social work was not provided in the Soviet Union, and only recently was introduced by Moldova's government. Removal of abused children, rather than treating the whole family, remains an all-too-common solution.

According to a recent U.S. State Department report: "Conditions for children in orphanages and other institutions remained generally very poor. Underfunding caused major problems such as inadequate food, warehousing of children, lack of heat in winter, and disease. In its 2006 report, the Moldovan Human Rights Center stated that 85% of the 10,350 institutionalized children were not orphans; one or both parents were living, and had entrusted their children to institutions because of poverty or departure to work abroad."⁸



STORIES from MOLDOVA: Nicolae and his father's tavern

The lack of concern and ineptness by government-employed child guardians is often shocking. A social service agency related the story of a brother and sister who were routinely abandoned by their parents. The boy is 18 months old and his older sister is three.

Neighbors knew the children were often abandoned during the day. The children would wander outside and play unsupervised in the yard. After months of this, a neighbor called local government authorities to complain about the complete lack of parental care provided by the parents during workdays. The neighbor only referenced the 18-month old boy when making the complaint.

The local child guardian entered the house and observed the children at home and without supervision. What happened next is beyond belief. The official only removed the 18-month old boy; the three-year-old was left behind because the formal complaint did not mention the girl.

The social service agency learned about the "sister left behind" after receiving the toddler. A call was made to the municipality's child guardian who admitted being aware of the three-year-old but refused to return to the home to retrieve the child. Only after the social service agency threatened to alert a major television station did the child guardian agree to bring the little girl to the children's shelter.

In addition to the factors noted by UNICEF, there are two more issues that were frequently raised by NGO representatives during the meetings held in Moldova:

■ **Government services are poorly delivered and uncoordinated.** Authority for the welfare of children appears to fall under two separate government ministries. The Central Authority for Child Protection is under the Ministry of Education. It is viewed as the traditional enforcement agency of the original legislative act (Article 113) pertaining to children. The Ministry of Social Protection was more recently established by executive order in 2006 as the agency for guardianship of abused children. Attempts have been made to align Article 113 with the more recent executive order; the government has not moved this proposal to parliament for vote. Each agency appears to dispute the other's area of authority, and savvy perpetrators have learned how to "work the system."

The confusion continues to the local municipality level where there are extreme variations in the enforcement of laws to protect children and the delivery of social services. A recent survey of professionals indicates more than 48% of government employees (police, welfare workers and teachers) providing services to protect children do not have access to internal rules and training related to child abuse.⁹ Of the child abuse situations observed by government employees, more than 73% were not referred for action to the appropriate agency.¹⁰ Some local municipal bureaucracies are so disorganized that birth records and identity cards are not issued for children.

■ **Child neglect and abuse seems to be an accepted part of family life.** While child abuse is defined, the notion of "child neglect" is absent in Moldova's legislation. This is merely a legislative

example of the ignorance that is often present in family life. In an extensive survey of parents conducted by UNICEF, 19% believe the way parents treat their children should not be regulated by law.¹¹ In addition, 9% of parents believe the law should allow parents to beat their children in a manner that would cause bruises and wounds. The survey also revealed four out of ten parents say physical violence "occurs frequently" in families in Moldova.

The acceptance of child abuse may simply be a symptom of the difficulties described in the preceding section of this report. It may also be a holdover from the Soviet era in which official intervention in private homes rarely had a positive outcome. For many, the family next door suffered less from the beatings of a father than from the knock on the door by the State security apparatus. Only 5% of parents surveyed would make a report to the police if they saw another parent beating a child. Thankfully, sexual abuse is treated differently, with 70% of parents saying this must be reported to police.



The Child Abuse Situation is Very Serious

The conditions described in this report have created the ideal setting for extensive child abuse in Moldova. The facts and figures spill from the pages of various reports and paint a picture of hopelessness for children caught in the web of poverty, ignorance, and abuse. The following represent a sampling of items from the "Violence against children in the Republic of Moldova" report sponsored by UNICEF:

- 25% of children state their own parents beat them if they do not listen to them (page 14)
- 60% of children report their families do not have money for food, and further say they do not have time for playing, friends, or homework because of the work they must do for their family (page 15)
- One in ten children state adults involve them in watching pornographic films (page 15)
- 60% of parents say Moldovan parents show insufficient care for their children's hygiene and nutrition; they leave their children without supervision at home (page 17)
- 40% of parents think beating a child is justifiable and an effective measure for correction (page 19)
- Among parents, 20% feel family doctors, social workers, and police officers actively avoid helping abused children (page 19)
- Over 40% of parents are not aware of the role played by family doctors, school staff, and social workers regarding cases of child abuse (page 19)



STORIES from MOLDOVA: *Nicolae and his father's tavern*

Nicolae is a 12-year old boy and is a victim of abuse and neglect. His father owns a bar in a village and requires Nicolae to work in the bar and serve alcohol to customers. The father is a single parent while the mother is working overseas to earn foreign currency.

A relative reached out to a social service NGO in the capitol to complain about the lack of concern shown by local child-protection authorities. The agency confirmed the local government was aware of the situation and the lack of attention given to Nicolae's situation. Two representatives from the social service NGO traveled to the village to investigate and initiate documentation of a case.

The investigation revealed the terrible conditions experienced by Nicolae. The small room in which he stayed was overfilled with vodka bottles emptied by the father. The quantity of bottles left little space for Nicolae to sleep. They interviewed Nicolae, but he was reluctant to talk because his father was there. The father allowed the representatives to talk to his son privately. The boy complained about physical abuse and indicated there were long periods of time when he was alone without supervision. The NGO representatives felt there was probable cause of neglect and abuse.

The NGO representatives again asked the local social services official to intervene. The official agreed to be present during a second interview and expressed happiness that someone else was doing the work. The NGO representatives pursued the issue by filing a complaint with local prosecutors. This permitted a second interview of the child and father. Unfortunately, the prosecutor's office did little to ensure a proper interview. Nicolae was questioned in front of his father without the benefit of a children's advocate or psychologist being present.

Not surprisingly, Nicolae changed his story and did not complain of abuse. The father displayed disturbing behavior by blaming his wife for his problems and threatening to hang himself. This testimony occurred in the presence of his son. The local child protection authorities did not pursue the complaint. They admitted fear of the father as a primary reason because of his reputation for aggressive and violent behavior.

The NGO representatives filed the complaint based upon violations of the family code. A judge has not yet heard the case and Nicolae remains in his father's home and is still working in the tavern.

- Children revealed 18% of teachers slap students and 10% beat their students (page 33)
- 37% of students questioned believe at least half of children in Moldova suffer from hunger due to a lack of sufficient food at home, have very little clothing, and few school accessories (page 35)
- 21% of parents believe children are “frequently exposed to serious violence by their parents” (page 40)

The child survey results are based upon a sample size of 1,629 school-age children between ten and 18 years, who answered a written questionnaire. The adult survey was conducted via face-to-face interviews with 630 parents.

Concluding Comments

Admittedly, this has been a depressing report to research and write, and is a depressing report to read. Some readers might label Moldova as a dysfunctional and impoverished place on the fringe of Europe that has little hope for a bright future. The situation faced by many children, as portrayed in the facts presented, is certainly scary and shocking. But these things happen in places all over world, including the United States and the European Union. But the degree to which they occur in Moldova, and the challenging economic environment, begs the outside world to become engaged in funding solutions and creating change.

This report has largely been silent on the efforts made to improve the lives of abused children in Moldova. Every NGO representative engaged during the meetings in Moldova is passionately committed to the cause of helping children. They are eager to learn new methods and are committed to remaining in Moldova. By design, the meeting agenda omitted government agencies. The type of structural change required for Moldova rarely comes from within the system. It must originate from outside the system. This is why Moldova’s fragile and young NGO community is so vital to the development of a truly civil society.

This small group of leaders represents Moldova’s best opportunity to create a country that is focused on nurturing its future generation. There is a

tremendous amount of work to do in Moldova and everywhere in the world. But the success of these efforts will have a profound effect upon all of us. Words from the preface written by Giovanna Barberis (UNICEF Representative in Moldova) for the report on Moldova says it best:

“There is no better way to make Moldova a highly prosperous country than by investing in children, supporting children, giving children a voice . . . ensuring that children’s rights are respected and fulfilled.”¹²



STORIES from MOLDOVA:

Her father kicked a hole in her neck

Once in a while the story of child abuse is sensational enough for inclusion in Moldova’s television news broadcasts. The newscast showed a 13-year-old sitting on a hospital bed. Her father, in a drunken rage the day before, kicked his daughter at home until she fell to the floor. He then continued the beating by stomping his foot on her neck. The television cameras showed the girl’s bloodied face while the attending physician provided a detailed medical description.

One side of the girl’s bruised neck had become so swollen that the profile of her neck no longer existed. In addition, the toe of her father’s boot had punched a hole in her esophagus. The girl bravely described what her father did to her. Her frankness suggests the beatings were not uncommon. And yet, it seemed this little girl had gained a level of courage rarely seen in adults.

The news commentator ended the story with this information: “The father had been assessed a 50 Lei fine (approximately US\$5). The ministry responsible for the protection of children refused to seek further punishment and had no comment on the case.”

A Few Words of Thanks

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Image Credits

The images of children and parents appearing in this report were copied from printed materials with the permission of the Moldova office of UNICEF. Their images should not suggest they have been the victims of abuse, nor are the adults perpetrators of abuse.



Endnotes

¹World Fact Book by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the U.S. Government reviewed online March 2008.

²World Fact Book by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the U.S. Government reviewed online March 2008.

³Poverty and Policy Impact Report 2006, page 95, issued by Government of Moldova, Ministry of Economy and Trade.

⁴Poverty and Policy Impact Report 2006, page 95, issued by Government of Moldova, Ministry of Economy and Trade.

⁵Poverty and Policy Impact Report 2006, page 88, issued by Government of Moldova, Ministry of Economy and Trade.

⁶Poverty and Policy Impact Report 2006, page 88, issued by Government of Moldova, Ministry of Economy and Trade.

⁷UNICEF in Moldova, page 11, issued during 2006.

⁸Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2007, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State.

⁹State Responsiveness to Violence Against Children, report issued during 2007 by UNICEF, pages 30 and 31.

¹⁰State Responsiveness to Violence Against Children, report issued during 2007 by UNICEF, pages 46 and 47.

¹¹Violence Against Children in the Republic of Moldova, report issued during 2007 by UNICEF, page 57.

¹²UNICEF in Moldova, page 2, issued during 2006.