

*Using Tradition to Build Sustainable
Futures for Marginalised Children:
Messages from Georgia*

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Why Sustainability?

- Sustainable well-being relates to the concept of resilience in child development literature.
- ‘Resilience’ has been defined as:
 - ‘*Normal* development under difficult conditions’ – (Fonagy *et.al.*, 1994)
 - ‘The manifestation of positive adaptation despite significant life adversity’ – (Luthar, 2003)
- Resilience suggests that children can reach optimal potential even under stressful circumstances thereby maximising opportunities for emotionally healthy and fulfilling lives into adulthood.

Some Building Blocks of Resilience

- A secure base (emotional 'felt' security and secure attachment style).
- Self-esteem
- A belief in own self-efficacy and ability to deal with change and adaptation
- Social competence
- Autonomy (internal locus) of control
- Sense of purpose and future

Georgia project

- Developed out of work to explore fostering options in Georgia
- Explored the experiences of young people and adults involved in the Dzegvi alternative orphanage/ street shelter via:
 - Interviews with Ghia and Shorena, who ran Dzegvi
 - Interviews with two volunteers who worked in Dzegvi
 - Group interview with five young people who grew up in Dzegvi

Background to Dzegvi

- Georgia was part of the Soviet Union – declared independence in late 1990
- The civil war in 1992-93 (with Abkhazia and South Ossetia) led the collapse of social services and infrastructures.
- 250,000 Georgians were displaced, and as a result, thousands of refugees poured into Tbilisi. This led to serious problems of homelessness.
- For the first time in living memory, Georgian people saw children living on the streets.

- A street shelter was established initially in Tbilisi but then moved to Dzegvi a place outside of the capital by Ghia Razmade, with the support of the Georgian Orthodox church to respond to the needs of the street children.
- Initially no-one had experience of working with abused and neglected children.
- Most children came because of family poverty, breakdown, parental substance abuse/ mental health problems
- The approach taken with the children were based on traditional Georgian traditions of promoting human emotional connection through singing, *supras*, and the appreciation of nature.

Georgian Singing

- Song has an important role in traditional Georgian life – songs for all occasions – including Batonebi or healing songs
- Sung in harmony – Most commonly the initial call in the middle voice, subsequently joined by a single top voice and as many bottom voices as are present.
- Singing was an important part of Dzegvi, and often linked with hiking trips in the countryside.
 - *‘Singing and hiking were what united us’*

- *'I loved the song 'Violet on the Hill' – One time we were hiking and were very tired and hungry. There was no food. Ghia sang this song for the first time, he taught us the song and we all sang it together. This song gave us strength and we found the way out of the wood with new energy. That is why I love this song'*

- One of the children's favourite song in the beginning was the song of the raven which ended with:
'Black Grief! I will not be overwhelmed by you! I will not moan and grieve. I will overcome the pain with courage and recover in three days from the grief of three years. We are going to fight this together'
- The children would shout this last verse.
- However after a while they did not want to sing that song anymore.

The Supra

- The Supra (or Georgian feast) are an integral part of Georgian life. It is a table full of different dishes and Georgian wine and juice.
- The Supra is presided over by a ‘Tamada’ or toast person
- The meal is punctuated by regular toasts, initially by the Tamada and then others around the table. Toasts are to God, ancestors, peace, love, nature, family, each other, absent friends etc....
- Songs then often follow to seal the toast
- No negativity or denigration is allowed at the Supra

Supras at Dzegvi

- These were considered important – the sharing and shared experience of Supras
- *‘There were about 200 people at Dzegvi, so every other day it was someone else’s birthday, maybe there was not any special food at the table but we were blessing each other with just two glasses of wine. We would talk, and the fact that it was somebody’s birthday, that somebody remembers the day and is happy for that day and that their birthday is important for somebody’ - Ghia*

Other aspects of life at Dzegvi

- Shared values demonstrated in practice
 - *‘Everything was shared. I remember terrible periods when there was little food there and I don’t remember anybody eating something hidden. The supra was part of it – everything together.’* Young person
- Learning about Georgian culture, language and traditions
 - Volunteers from Tbilisi, many whom were experts in their field, came and taught the children. Dato, for example is a 9th century monastic paintings.
 - *‘We saw a lot, churches, castles and we walked the whole Georgia, you have to know your country somehow...’* YP

- Inclusiveness – bringing family members – recognising emotional ties to families irrespective of treatment
 - *‘Many children still loved their parents and wanted to be with them and care for them, because they still love them. This was such a thing for me – I could not say anything but to bring their parents with them, and they brought so many problems.’* Ghia
 - *‘Children would quarrel but no child would make fun because of any action or behaviour of the parents.’* Shorena
 - *‘For me it was very important my mother was with me’.* Young person

Final Reflections

- There were about 100 children at Dzegvi. Anecdotal evidence from the adults and young people were that although some of these young people have hard lives, none had serious alcohol or drug problems or involvement in criminality. Problems that characterised the lives of many other children brought up in institutions.
- *‘Before Dzegvi we had spent our life somehow, and then we came to Dzegvi, and we learnt lots of good, and if we didn’t, we wouldn’t be where we are today.’*

The young people spoke of continued stigma associated with having been brought up in an orphanage. However also stated:

- *I don't want anybody to be sorry for me, there is nothing to be sorry about growing up in Dzegvi, and they have to be sorry that they didn't have a chance to be brought up at Dzegvi'*
- *They told me that its impossible for anybody to say that you grew up in an orphanage, then I told them what Dzegvi was, that there was a different life style and that it was wonderful, and that it was one big family'*

What can we learn from Dzegvi?

- Reminds us of the importance of creating for marginalised children, in diverse ways, protective factors that can promote resilience even in adverse circumstances including:
 - Emotional connections with others
 - A sense of belonging
 - Being of value – *‘Mattering and Counting’*
 - A sense of achievement
 - Co-operative and responsive caregiving (promoting ‘felt’ security)
 - Learning to respect themselves and others
 - Learning about their heritage and cultural identity
 - Recognising the importance of family – minimising loss

Some challenges in the UK context

- Reflection on factors inhibiting these ways of working with vulnerable children and young people in the UK including:
 - Societal attitudes towards adolescents (to be protected from rather than protecting) , especially children marginalised through poverty, race, immigration status etc..
 - Inadequate family and child support services and often punitive response by criminal justice systems
 - Overly bureaucratised social work services with limited scope for relationship-based work
 - Residential care remaining a ‘Cinderella service’
 - Huge holes in the safety nets – especially once a child is a teenager