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Artículos científicos

High time to develop policy and practice for care leavers: Early beginnings in Portugal

Ya es hora de desarrollar políticas y prácticas para las personas extuteladas: Primeros comienzos en Portugal

É tempo de desenvolver políticas e práticas para ex-cuidadores: os primeiros primórdios em Portugal

Ana Francisca Cordeiro Pimentel

Research in Education and Community Intervention, Portugal

afranciscapimentel@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3997-1966>

Joana Matias Antão

Research in Education and Community Intervention, Portugal

joana.anta@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2758-6860>

João Pedro Marceneiro Gaspar

University of Coimbra, Centro de Estudos Interdisciplinares, Portugal

Centro de investigação em Educação de Adultos e Intervenção Comunitária, Portugal

gasparjp@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2259-6146>

Abstract

Several gaps concerning the preparation of care leavers in foster care and residential care are identified at the European level. Most of these gaps are related to care leavers not being prepared to live independently and to the lack of developing common support methodologies and procedures. In Portugal, the situation is particularly worrisome as, among European countries, it has one of the highest percentages of children in residential care. Furthermore, there has been minimal investment in support for care leavers at various levels: national research in the area is

limited, support for preparing young people for leaving care is minimal, and specific post-care legislation for care leavers is absent. The “OUTogether Project – Promoting Children’s Autonomy on Alternative Leaving Care” was developed to address some of these issues. The project had three specific areas and target populations: 1) advocating for policy and legislation where professionals and youth who have left care worked together; 2) developing a training programme for residential care staff and 3) developing support services for youth. In this chapter, the authors focus on the first area of action. The advocacy work involved participants working together to analyze, discuss and develop recommendations for the context of care and aftercare. Although there is still a long way to go, this advocacy work has resulted in progresses on legislative and practices changes. The chapter starts with a summary of the OUTogether project and then focuses on the methodology used for the advocacy work. This is discussed as an example of how to improve policy and practice in a country with little support for youth leaving care.

Keywords: advocacy, autonomy, care leavers, residential care, transition.

Resumen

Se identifican a nivel europeo varias lagunas relativas a la preparación de las personas que abandonan el acogimiento familiar o residencial. La mayoría de estas brechas están relacionadas con la falta de preparación de las personas extuteladas para vivir de manera independiente y con la falta de desarrollo de metodologías y procedimientos de apoyo comunes. En Portugal, la situación es especialmente preocupante ya que, entre los países europeos, tiene uno de los porcentajes más altos de niños en acogimiento residencial. Además, ha habido una inversión mínima en el apoyo a las personas extuteladas en varios niveles: la investigación nacional en el área es limitada, el apoyo para preparar a los jóvenes para abandonar el acogimiento es mínimo y no existe una legislación específica posterior al acogimiento para este colectivo. El “Proyecto OUTogether – Promoviendo la Autonomía de los Niños en Cuidados Alternativos de Salida” fue desarrollado para abordar algunos de estos problemas. El proyecto tenía tres áreas específicas y poblaciones objetivo: 1) abogar por políticas y legislación donde profesionales y jóvenes extutelados trabajaron juntos; 2) desarrollar un programa de capacitación para el personal del acogimiento residencial y 3) desarrollar servicios de apoyo para jóvenes. En este capítulo, los autores se centran en la primera área de acción. El trabajo de promoción implicó que los participantes trabajaran juntos para analizar, discutir y desarrollar recomendaciones para el contexto de lo acogimiento y el cuidado posterior. Aunque todavía queda mucho camino por recorrer, esta labor de defensa ha dado lugar

a avances en los cambios legislativos y de prácticas. El capítulo comienza con un resumen del proyecto OUTogether y luego se enfoca en la metodología utilizada para el trabajo de incidencia. Esto se analiza como un ejemplo de cómo mejorar la política y la práctica en un país con poco apoyo para los jóvenes que abandonan el acogimiento.

Palabras clave: políticas públicas, autonomía, extutelados, acogimiento residencial, transición.

Resumo

São identificadas a nível europeu várias lacunas relacionadas com a preparação das pessoas que abandonam o acolhimento familiar ou residencial. A maioria dessas lacunas está relacionada com a falta de preparação dos ex-tutores para viverem de forma independente e com a falta de desenvolvimento de metodologias e procedimentos comuns de apoio. Em Portugal, a situação é especialmente preocupante visto que, entre os países europeus, tem uma das maiores percentagens de crianças em acolhimento residencial. Além disso, tem havido um investimento mínimo no apoio aos ex-cuidadores em vários níveis: a pesquisa nacional na área é limitada, o apoio para preparar os jovens para deixar o cuidado é mínimo e não há legislação pós-cuidado específica para esse coletivo. O “Projeto OUTogether – Promovendo a Autonomia de Crianças em Atendimento Alternativo” foi desenvolvido para abordar algumas dessas questões. O projeto tinha três áreas específicas e populações-alvo: 1) defesa de políticas e legislação onde profissionais e ex-enfermarias trabalhavam juntos; 2) desenvolver um programa de treinamento para o pessoal de cuidados residenciais e 3) desenvolver serviços de apoio para jovens. Neste capítulo, os autores se concentram na primeira área de atuação. O trabalho de advocacia envolveu participantes que trabalharam juntos para analisar, discutir e desenvolver recomendações para o contexto de colocação e cuidados posteriores. Embora ainda haja um longo caminho a percorrer, esse trabalho de advocacy tem levado a avanços nas mudanças legislativas e práticas. O capítulo começa com uma visão geral do projeto OUTogether e depois se concentra na metodologia usada para o trabalho de advocacy. Isso é discutido como um exemplo de como melhorar a política e a prática em um país com pouco apoio para jovens que abandonam os cuidados.

Palavras-chave: políticas públicas, autonomia, ex-tutores, acolhimento residencial, transição.

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Introduction

In Portugal about 97 percent of the children in care are placed in residential care (large institutions with an average of 20 children/house) and only around 3% in foster families. This is the opposite of what happens in most European countries and contradicts recommendations in international guidelines (ISS, 2020). This fact is particularly worrisome at the time of leaving care. In Portugal, it is possible to stay in care until the age of 21, or even until the age of 25, if the youths are studying or in a training process (Law No. 23/2017 of 23 may). This possibility of extended care was introduced in 2017. This change in legislation was due to intensive policy work. In this chapter we will describe how the OUTogether project worked to improve policy and practice for care leavers in Portugal. The aim of the chapter is to give an example of how to improve policy and practice in a country with little support for youth leaving care. Thus, helping other countries to improve their support for care leavers, and developing the support not being left on the edge.

Being in extended care is dependent on the young person's consent. Most of these young adults, due to lack of cognitive and emotional skills or even life experience outside the institution, decide to leave. When they say no to this possibility of prolonged support, they cannot return to the child protection system/residential care, even when they are faced with many difficulties and realize that they do not have the capacity to live independently (ISS, 2020).

A recent comparison of policy and legislation on leaving care in 36 countries from all continents concluded that only 47% of the countries had legislation around support for care leavers (Strahl et al., 2020). In this study, they also found that legislation was considered well developed in only 22% of the cases. Portugal is one of the countries where the legislation is scarce, with a total lack of recognition of the figure of care leaver. The limited legislation regarding support for care leavers in Portugal leads to an absence of assistance for those who were exposed to neglect, abuse or other types of domestic violence and then age out of care. In Portugal there is very little support for those who leave care for an independent life. As soon as they leave the Child protection system, care leavers are left to themselves.

In 2019, there were a total of 7046 children and young people in alternative care in Portugal (ISS, 2020). In that same year about 2500 children and young people left care, and 43 percent of these were 18 or older. Most of them, around 60 percent of those aging out of care returned to their family of origin and/or extended family. About 9 percent went to a rented room and/or house, about the same number didn't give information about their destination, about 3 percent were considered

as being in a long-standing break or escape (2.8%) and under 2 percent went to an educational center and/or residential home (ISS, 2020).

The transition from care to adulthood is characterized by “a range of challenges” for care leavers –considering the lack of support in several countries (Adley & Kina, 2014, p.1). When compared to most young adults, care leavers face limited access to housing and employment opportunities, experience loneliness and feelings of abandonment, insufficient and inadequate financial resources, and lack of family and social support. (Courtney & Okpych, 2017; Prince et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2011). The number of studies about the pathways of young people aging out of care in Portugal is limited (Adeboye et al., 2019; Martins, 2016; Artamonova et al., 2020). The ones that exist focus on specific contexts or have small samples, providing only a limited picture of the national situation. This lack of research and statistics emphasizes the importance of work in this area. We argue that in Portugal, these gaps are bigger due to a lack of specific social and educational practices and policies, which contribute to a withdrawal of local communities and policymakers regarding the need to create effective conditions for this group. In Portugal there are gaps in three main areas: research, policy and after care rights and support for care leavers both while they are in care and after leaving care.

To fill some of these gaps the “OUTogether project - promoting children's autonomy on alternative care” was developed. This project is an example of how to improve policy and practice in a country with little support for youth leaving care. The OUTogether project was a collaboration between different organizations and countries and funded by the European Commission (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020).

We will begin with a brief summary of the framework of the OUTogether project and its main results. Subsequently, we will focus on the methodology used for the “Advocacy” work in Portugal.

Objectives

The project was a partnership between four organizations: 1) A Portuguese NGO, APDES, working to promote sustainable development among vulnerable communities. 2) SAPI, a Bulgarian NGO that provides services to develop social work and enhance social inclusion of vulnerable groups in Bulgaria. 3) PAJE, a Portuguese non-profit organization that supports youths who lived in foster care. 4) Centre Sirius, a Croatian center for psychological counseling, educational training and research. APDES coordinated the project.

The general objective of the project was to improve the situation for care leavers in three European countries; Bulgaria, Croatia and Portugal. In order to achieve the main goal of the project, three action areas were developed: (1) Advocacy with the goal of developing legislation and policy (2) Training and Capacity-Building of Professionals and (3) Support services for young people.

The first area had as its main objective to increase institutional cooperation on the rights of the child in alternative care. With that end in mind, National and European working groups were created to develop national and transnational recommendations. The main goal of the second area was to increase professionals' competence, practice and methods to support care leavers. Work in this area included the piloting of training courses for professionals, who in then became trainers with the role of training their teams and a network for professionals (ToT). The last area, aftercare support, had the main objective to improve actual support service. In this third part of the project specific support measures were developed like organization of an info-desk, workshops about living an independent life, and mentorships programmes. All these activities were developed in the three countries.

Methodology - about advocacy

The project was defined by principles of institutional cooperation, capacity-building, participation, empowerment and sustainability that promoted the recognition, involvement and co-responsibility of different social actors in the development processes. A child-rights based approach was followed throughout all project activities, placing emphasis on enhancing children's resilience and capacity to claim their rights.

In the following we will focus on the first area, advocacy with the goal of developing legislation and policy.

The participation of all concerned parties, especially from youths and professionals, allows the design of interventions that are more realistic and integrated into real context dynamics, facilitating their involvement throughout the process and enhancing their empowerment and problem-solving capacity. The use of these methodologies implies an appreciation of the young people's lived experiences and promotes the process of individual and organizational development and participatory decision-making (Vosz et al., 2020). According to the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007), that provides a way to conceptualize a child's right to participation (Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Assembly, 2014), children must be given

the opportunity to express their view (Space), they must be facilitated to express their views (Voice), their view must be listened to (Audience) and the view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Influence). The model assumes that these elements are interrelated, with a significant degree of overlap among them - (a) space and voice, and (b) audience and influence. It also shows that these four elements have an explicit chronological order. In this sense, the acquisition of competencies is based on the establishment of a strengthened relationship between professionals and young people leaving care, in terms of capacity-building, trust and empathy, thus promoting a moment for participation (Space, Voice and Audience) and improvement of autonomy (Influence).

The adopted methodology followed the conceptual framework proposed by the Center for Democracy and Governance, which defines three essential components for an integrated and sustainable advocacy strategy: (i) the empowerment of citizens (Transformational Component), (ii) the reinforcement of Civil Society (Developmental Component) and (iii) the exercise of political influence (Instrumental Component) (Fox & Helweg, 1997). These three components function interdependently, i.e., the impact of one is reinforced by the actions of others, which are not a set of sequential steps, but a dynamic model that seeks to ensure political change and sustainability of the advocated political reforms.

The Transformational Component comprehends is really close to a democratic political culture or ethic democracy with a tradition of participatory decision making (Fox & Helweg, 1997). This process should begin with the development of collective problem-solving skills. It is a first step in building individual self-confidence and moving beyond a state of isolation and impotence. Empowered individuals are in a better position to defend their own and others' rights and to develop mechanisms that promote true autonomy (Fox & Helweg, 1997).

In this project, specifically in the working groups, research about the characterization of the national context, on the needs assessment, and the debates, were important allowing all the intervenients to become better informed and to participate in the development of policy on alternative care, the rights of care leavers, as well as the mechanisms and instruments available to meet the challenges care leavers encounter.

The Developmental Component aims to increase the ability of individuals to organize collectively, seeking to change existing power relations. The principal result of this component is a civil society capable of acting on behalf of citizens to represent and advance their interests. (Fox & Helweg, 1997). In this particular project, the capacity-building of civil society organizations, through the creation of a group work of stakeholders, who worked together with the same goal,

made them stronger to fight for their values, in what concerned the rights of children in care and aftercare.

The Instrumental component is related to the exercise of political influence and is a process of applying a set of skills and techniques with the objective of influencing the decision-making process. The principal result of this component is a civil society capable of acting on behalf of citizens to represent and advance their interests vis-a-vis political power-holders (Fox & Helweg, 1997).

In this project we can find that the increase of institutional cooperation by assembling the national and European working groups was a tool that ensured the effective implementation of new ways of addressing current difficulties and needs in alternative care and engaged stakeholders in a combined effort to achieve this purpose.

Results

It was our primary intent to work and develop democratic and participative competencies for youths, allowing for true autonomy and appropriation of rights. Public and private stakeholders from each of the 3 countries were involved, namely Alternative Care Institutions and State institutions (e.g., Social Welfare department, Child protection services), Professionals, Researchers, NGOs and, most importantly a group of care leavers' representatives (Youth expert group) to work together. This working group had 10 meetings in each country to discuss ideas in order to develop a national assessment on child policy and service provision on leaving care and to develop national common methodologies for supporting youth leaving care.

Firstly, all these participants worked together with the same level of involvement to analyze, discuss and develop recommendations about support for care leavers. It was recognized that to reach an appropriate support for care leavers and suitable practices it was necessary to use a strategy of information-sharing and networking both at national and transnational level.

Secondly, all stakeholders were involved in the design and implementation of both leaving care and aftercare support. On one hand, only State entities could provide an adequate framework for child welfare workers and organizations involved in support services (namely its capacity to make mandatory procedures and requirements for selection, training and supervision of carers). On the other hand, only the knowledge derived from research and experience (namely, of those involved as care providers or as children and youngsters) could ensure adequate responses to real needs. Lastly and across all activities, children leaving care took part in all the decisions that

impacted upon their lives as a group, in order to ensure that care leavers were involved in their life projects.

Development of political recommendations

The development of national assessments on child policy and service provision on leaving care involved an extensive assessment of existing child national laws and policies, procedures and/or protocols on leaving care; as well as an extensive assessment of the implementation of supportive services for aftercare. This research and assessment were done by the project team in cooperation with the working group. After this assessment, the working groups, described previously, started to establish a common base to describe functional requirements for institutions and professionals' practices. This should ensure that the support given was appropriate and the youth acquired relevant skills needed for independent living. This final proposal of recommendations for leaving care support was then debated in a National Forum. The National Forum consisted of a meeting with other stakeholders, invited to discuss the draft version of the proposal. Some youngsters that lived in care were also invited. Feedback from the debate was also taken into consideration in the final recommendations. The final version was disseminated to national and international State entities.

National Recommendations for care and aftercare

One of the main results of the project was therefore the creation of the document called "National Recommendations: Leaving care process for current and former young people in alternative care".

Recommendations were divided into 2 sections: recommendations within the context of care, and within the context of aftercare. Since it is crucial that the work towards autonomy starts as soon as the child/young person is admitted into care, both contexts must always be considered together for a best possible independent life project.

Within the context of care, the following were proposed: measures concerning the need to promote and develop family care in order to decrease the number of children in residential care; the implementation of improvements in the functioning and structure of foster homes, ensuring compliance with quality requirements; recommendations concerning the children and youngsters in care and care professionals. Within the context of aftercare, legal and structural measures

concerning the support and follow-up of care leavers, essential to ensure a good transition to adult life for young people, were proposed.

Recommendations in the Context of care

We will first focus on the context of care, underlying some of the most important recommendations and achievements.

Due to the specific needs of Portugal in what concerns the child protection system, with a very low percentage of foster care compared to residential care, several recommendations were provided. These recommendations placed an emphasis on easier access to political decision making through document sharing and problem awareness, which proved productive. As a result, there was a greater investment in foster family care, with better foster care funding.

Some efforts to improve the quality of residential care in Portugal were also made. Recommendations mention the need for important changes in this field. The need to ensure the specialization of residential care according to the characteristics and problems of the children in order to provide therapeutic intervention for the rehabilitation of physical and psycho-emotional traumas, reducing generalist residential care responses, is underlined. There are also some recommendations regarding the structure and functioning of residential care units such as: guaranteeing that residential care units are smaller and mixed as to the sex and age of the children; possibility of hosting siblings together; definition of criteria that ensures the size and operating mode of the residential care units are similar to family model; drafting a code of ethics for these units (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020). Recommendations also underline the major importance of external, specialized and experienced supervision in all contexts and residential care homes. Therefore, “the supervision of foster homes, by an external and qualified professional, should be mandatory, in order to ensure higher quality of care services” (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020).

In what concerns children in care, it's underlined the urgency of increasing and validating their participation (e.g., Involve the child and his/her family in house rules from the start; obligation of involving children/young people in the assessment of their homes; assurance that the children/young people in care have access to spaces for dialogue in foster homes; promotion of active participation by young people and; Participation in social life) (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020). It's also mentioned that every young person in care should be prepared to leave the institution from the moment he/she arrives, participating in a programme of promotion of skills that contribute to a successful transition (FICE, IFCO & SOS Kinderdorf, 2007; Gomes, 2010).

Regarding the caregivers this document recommends that they must be specialized for each unit and with an adequate profile for the exercise of these functions. Professionals must have specific training and knowledge in residential care, namely through protocols with higher education entities or with specialization in this field, advocating for an obligation of professional accreditation of education teams (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020).

Some of these recommendations are currently in discussion in Portugal. Some policy makers are exerting pressure to operationalize the Law No. 164/2019 of 25 October that defines a plan with guidelines for residential care. Therefore, some efforts are being done in order to include in this legislative document most of the recommendations mentioned before.

Recommendations in the context of aftercare

In the context of aftercare, some fundamental improvements were made. One important suggestion was that young adults were able to return to the institution when unable to live on their own. This recommendation is waiting for approval from the National Assembly and will allow the re-entry of young people into foster care when they leave by choice. This change in legislation also recommends implementing an empowerment program to promote favorable transitions to the aftercare (Pimentel, F. et al., 2020).

Recommendations underlined the importance of assuring that every young person will benefit from follow-up and support by a figure of reference from their original institution in the after-care period. This follow up is urgent and would ensure that, for a minimum period of two years (adjustable), the foster home maintains contact with the careleaver. This way the young person will not regard the leaving care process as another disruption in their life, as they will continue to receive support (FICE, IFCO & SOS Kinderdorf, 2007).

Another recommendation was to give care leavers a legal right to support regarding education or employment. Attending to this, the society should do all the efforts to reduce damage, facilitating access to mental health, facilitating access to labor market - access to internships, tax benefits for employers, for example, or even access to available housing would be some of the aspects already addressed by the current minister, responsible for this field, showing receptivity to move forward.

Discussion

Gathering professionals and young people was one of the most significant and innovative parts of this project. The fact that young people in care and after care integrated the expert group was crucial for the project. As mentioned by Briheim-Cookall, et al (2020, p.2) “Government statistics provide only a partial picture of care leavers’ lives. (...) This information does not tell us how young people feel”. Therefore, it's fundamental to listen to what youngsters have to say about their life and experience. Furthermore, as mentioned by Purtell et al. (2019, p. 9) “When working together in forums and similar events with youth services practitioners and management, young people behave in a professional manner and expect the same of others.” Vosz et al. (2020) also underlines the importance of listening to youngsters in a way that empowers them and gives their opinion the due weight by “taking their views seriously, in all aspects of decisions that affect their lives” (p. 10).

These meetings require a lot of preparatory work (on the project team’s part), systematizing and structuring all the information that is necessary to gather. However, it is important that the meetings keep an informal environment, where everyone feels understood, safe and respected. Being able to provide the occurrence of coffee-breaks is also crucial for the creation of a cozy environment. This is also defended by Purtell et al. (2019, p.9) that mentions the risk of being condescending when applying “directive, highly structured activities that stifle open discussion and information sharing between young people”.

In such heterogeneous groups the existence of different profiles and communication styles is natural. Allowing space for all of them was another identified challenge. Some participants tend to talk a lot and share great bunches of personal information, while others often remain quiet and are more introverted. The creation of dynamics with smaller groups (e.g., 3 youngsters and 3 professionals) was a very useful tool to assure that everyone had time to share their own opinions. Besides, it is also important to create some moments where people can write instead of talking. The project team also encouraged the sharing between meetings (by email, mobile phone or in person) for those who felt it necessary. This was important because it gave participants additional time to reflect about the discussed subjects and then share their opinions in a more structured and time-friendly way.

Being aware of these challenges and having the knowledge about these tools and methodologies is particularly useful when the shared information is sensitive and personal. In this project two red flags were identified, both related to the posture of the professionals when talking

to youngsters: a devaluation posture where the professional assumes that he holds the knowledge and that young people's sharing is not as valid as theirs; and a paternalistic posture in which the professional tries to help the youngsters, limiting their autonomy and freedom. As mentioned by Cascardi et al. (2015) this idea of paternalism is especially common when dealing with children viewed as vulnerable. In both cases, the intervention of the project team is mandatory to soften these postures, encouraging an empathic style, where everyone tries to understand and share the emotions of others.

The fact that this participation is voluntary must be underlined, giving that participation "is a right, not an obligation (Lansdown, 2018, p.6)". The participation of all individuals was incentivized and valorized but, youngsters' participation was particularly important for us. As mentioned by Vosz et al. (2020, p.4) "Because young people in residential care have experienced an extreme intervention in their freedoms and rights, participation should necessarily involve more than having a say in individual matters and include expressing views and being taken seriously in matters relating to policies and systemic decisions that affect their lives".

Political process – changing policy

As mentioned above, and following the recommendations of the working groups, there was a need to move forward with concrete legislative changes, in order to obtain faster results. With the help of specialists in the legal field and knowledge of the legal framework for childhood issues, a proposal for a specific legislative change was prepared. This document was widely discussed in Portugal and was positively evaluated by internal and external stakeholders. This was the main trigger to develop some actions to mitigate such gaps, supporting the creation and strengthening of a political agenda on the transition from alternative care to an independent life.

The advances in the legislative changes were achieved through formal channels - requests for hearings - where, in addition to scientific evidence, we shared the point of view of people of the field, presenting concrete cases, and appealing to the most human aspect of policy makers. At the same time, there are informal contacts at seminars, congresses and academic events that usually invite political personalities. This allows streamlining processes that are usually time-consuming and give visibility to the fieldwork - so often presented in these academic events. This gives us recognition and credibility, making the policy makers more available to hear our opinion on issues that truly impact the lives of young people in transition and our proposal about legislative changes.

Another important achievement is related to the creation of an informal group of young people - The Young Experts. Due to their advocacy experience, the young experts understood the importance of being able to work together to protect the rights of children in care. These young people created a communication plan and carried out awareness campaigns on social networks, thus addressing various target groups. They have also participated in many scientific meetings and seminars, allowing the voice of children and young people to be heard in different contexts. Some of these young people also became members of a consulting group of an Association that promotes and defends children's rights. As mentioned by Purtell et al. (2019, p.10) "Young people have much to contribute in identifying ways for care systems to improve" and, fortunately, the number of opportunities for their participation is increasing.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, the work groups that joined professionals and young people was one of the most significant and innovative parts of this project.

Important recommendations were produced for the context of care and aftercare. To have youngsters prepared to have a successful independent life is fundamental to create all the conditions for their development and for their preparation. «Alternative care services should develop and implement programs that ensure the smooth and gradual exit of young people from the system. This exit should not be related to age or educational level, but rather to readiness and level of social competence.» This implies a series of changes and improvements in the conditions and quality foster care. For this reason, there was a great focus on recommendations to improve the foster period. Besides this, due to the lack of support in the aftercare process, legal and structural measures concerning the support and follow-up of care leavers, essential to ensure a good transition to adult life for young people, were suggested. «The continues support and smooth transition should be guaranteed by provision of responsible professional or significant adult to support a child before and after leaving care until the young person is able to live independently (at least 2 years).» As a result, there was a large investment in advocacy work with policy makers to put some of these recommendations into practice.

Having the possibility of sharing information, ideas and points of view between those who work in this field and the ones that live in it, was essential and enriched the knowledge on this area. But this kind of participatory methodology is also very challenging.

The first challenge has to do with the selection of the participants. It is important to invite professionals from several areas of expertise and with different backgrounds (namely professionals that work directly with children and youths in care and aftercare, researchers, etc.). It is also important to invite a significant number of young people (some still in care and some in after care) from different locations, assuring a good representativity. To adjust and clarify expectations, it is fundamental that these invitations clearly state the main goal of the meetings.

The second challenge is the communication between participants. It is very important that everyone feels comfortable and safe in these meetings, particularly the youths. Sharing ideas and life experiences is fundamental in this work but involves some personal risks: young people may feel that their opinion is not as valid as the one from the professionals; professionals themselves may feel that their work is being criticized; both may feel that they are not fully understood. To provide an answer to these challenges, it is very important that the project team assures participants that all opinions are equally valid, encouraging an empathic and respectful attitude among all.

Given what was mentioned before, the positive impact of the project is highly related to the process of institutional cooperation and participation of all. The constitution of working groups involving different professionals and young people, allowed not only the sharing of perceptions and different points of view, but also the opportunity to establish and strengthen these connections. Even after the end of the project, some of these networks remained, optimizing the work processes, and all these participants became more involved in the process of raising awareness of care leavers situations in the community.

All this work constituted a learning process for all stakeholders, professionals, young people and policy makers. All were challenged to put themselves in the other's shoes and fight for a cause, thus resulting in the empowerment of all of them and in important changes in the support of young people who leave care to live an independent life. Even if, there is still a long way to go, we believe the project has opened important paths in this journey.

Future intervention and investigation lines

The implementation of this project reinforces the need of developing future research about alternative care trajectories. It is also important to promote interventions in the field of vocational guidance and professional insertion for young people who live in foster care. At the same time, it is important to invest in advocacy actions that allow the creation of support measures that provide for example an easy access to mental health services or an easy access to housing for care leavers.

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Rol de Contribución	Autor (es)
Conceptualización	João Pedro Gaspar (principal), Francisca Pimentel (apoio), Joana Antão (apoio)
Metodología	Francisca Pimentel (principal), Joana Antão (apoio), João Pedro Gaspar (apoio)
Software	Não se aplica
Validación	Joana Antão (principal), Francisca Pimentel (apoio), João Pedro Gaspar (apoio)
Análisis Formal	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Investigación	Francisca Pimentel (principal), Joana Antão (apoio), João Pedro Gaspar (apoio)
Recursos	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Curación de datos	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Escritura - Preparación del borrador original	Joana Antão (principal), Francisca Pimentel (apoio), João Pedro Gaspar (apoio)
Escritura - Revisión y edición	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Visualización	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Supervisión	João Pedro Gaspar (principal), Francisca Pimentel (apoio), Joana Antão (apoio)
Administración de Proyectos	Francisca Pimentel, Joana Antão, João Pedro Gaspar (igual)
Adquisición de fondos	Não se aplica