

Grandparents and grandchildren: impact of migration in Moldova

HAI/UNICEF project: findings and recommendations



Most of the children of migrant parents live with their grandparents

Parental care in the families of migrant parents is best replaced by older people

The older carers need support in bringing up their grandchildren

**HelpAge
International**

Leading global action on ageing
www.helpage.org

Edited in February 2008 by
HelpAge International in Moldova

57/1, Banulescu-Bodoni str.,
QBE ASITO, of.431 & 433
Chisinau, Moldova

Tel: /373-22/ 22-50-98

Fax: /373-22/ 22-46-72

Email: tsorocan@helpageinternational.org

The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of HelpAge International.

Any parts of this publication may be reproduced without permission from HelpAge International for educational and non-profit purposes if the source is acknowledged.

Front cover: Elena Donighevici, the grandmother and Mihail, her grandson, Balti town, Moldova

Why Moldova

The economic collapse in Moldova caused by the long transition period from central planning to a market based economy has led to poverty and high migration of labour force. Moldova is now the poorest country in Europe, with a GDP of \$937 per capita in 2006, and an economy still recovering from the break up of the former Soviet Union.

Poverty and migration phenomenon has led the vulnerable families to difficult times, especially the older carers. Usually grandparents find themselves having to care for grandchildren at a time when their own health and economic situation is deteriorating. The average state pension in 2007 was of 552 MDL (around 33 Euros) a month is less than half the subsistence level and government budgets for social assistance are not effectively targeted.

The **poverty** has affected the vulnerable and even those ones with higher education and the employment. In conditions of low salary level and economic instability, **migration** is seen as the first solution. According to IOM (2006) survey every third Moldovan able to work has left the country to find employment overseas.

The situation created by migrant Moldovans back home is an appalling number of children left behind by parents growing up in extended families of grandparents or relatives, or placed in institutions. Government/UNICEF data indicate some 75,000 children with at least one parent abroad, and 35,000 living with neither parent; and these figures have been rising since 2000.

Remittances: good and bad

One may wonder about the **remittances**, which play such an important role in the country's economy? In the first ten months of 2007 Moldovans abroad sent remittances of 972.18mln USD through commercial banks, which is 14% more than the same period of the previous year. Remittances represent 36% of GDP, raising Moldova to first place in the last World Bank classification. Despite the large amount of remittances, they do little for the most vulnerable. According to field interviews, they: arrive intermittently; are used to cover debts (mostly for utilities), medicines, clothing and school materials; usually cover basic needs and seldom improve the family's quality of life; and may not be managed and used appropriately.

The grandmother Vera Moraru (59 years old) from the village Lapusna in Hincesti rayon is caring for her granddaughter Anastasia (11 years old). For about 7 months, Anastasia's mother has been abroad hoping to find employment. She did not have a job in Moldova and being divorced, her income was random. This urged her to migrate to Italy. She barely managed to collect by borrowing four thousand Euros (the cost of illegal migration) and another one thousand Euros for pocket expenses. In the first month, she could not find a job and she spent this money on living. Then, she got a job for 600 Euros per month, from which she sent home 150 Euro for food and school materials. One month later she had a car accident. The grandmother doesn't know how much money she needed for the treatment, but assumes it is a huge amount. The accident meant the loss of her job. After some time she found another job, with about 700 Euros monthly salary. Her expenditure against earnings and savings was huge considering that out of seven months of her work in Italy, she worked only five months and the rest she spent on hospital treatment.

It is true that many of older cares receive remittances from their parents working abroad. From the interviews held with older people during HAI project, the remittances are random, once in 2-3 months, and are about 150-200 Euros. It must be remarked that the financial situation of such families does not change to a great extent; they still remain poor as remittances are used to cover primary needs and debts. These amounts are not invested in a business and are not used to form stable income. This is why, even if remittances in some cases reach the poorest, they do not solve the poverty issue.

The parents' migration to work overseas has **both positive and negative effects** on the children left back home.

The main **positive effects** are related to the welfare of the children (better living conditions, mobile phone, computer, spending holidays abroad with their parents etc.), in cases where parents have found a job and have maintained contacts with the family.

Among the **negative effects** of parents' migration we find:

- deterioration of the child's relationship with the parent who remained at home to raise him
- consequences on the psychological level: frequency of depression symptoms for children, feeling of separation, loneliness
- older people have the burden of bringing up children and doing the household work with no additional support and allocations
- intergenerational gap appears in the communication of grandparents with their grandchildren

Migration affects:

- immediately – children
- indirectly – older people caring for grandchildren
- generally – the family situation (stability, values, integrity)

On the short-term, migration generally improves the financial situation of the family
On the long-term, migration affects the children's emotional and psychological side

Supporting older people caring for children whose parents have migrated abroad

This paper is based on a short-term (6 months) HAI/UNICEF project "Building capacity of volunteer networks to support older people caring for grandchildren to prevent institutionalization and reintegrate children with their families" implemented in two regions of Moldova, Lapusna village in Hincesti rayon and Balti city. The project addressed 514 older people headed families from the two regions, including both rural and urban areas.

What is the issue the project sought to highlight? Children of migrant parents are far from being considered victims by Moldovan society. It is supposed that these children are privileged due to a better financial situation. In reality they are exposed to a wide range of risks and psychological traumas. On the other hand, older people, who often become carers for these children, are not supported by the state and suddenly have the responsibility of bringing up children and doing the household work all by themselves.

Grandparents and grandchildren

According to HAI/UNICEF research, older carers are mostly women (92.11% in the urban area and 64.81% in villages). The number of children living with their grandparents who suffer from chronic disease is considerable; in the village this group represents 14.28%, while in the town it rises to 50.70%. The average income of families is 560 Moldavian lei in the village and 724 Moldavian lei in the town (about 34-44 Euro), which cannot cover the basic needs of the family.

What is the regional distribution of children in care of grandparents?

The official data of the Ministry of Education for 2005 show that the largest number of children left by both parents is found in rural areas (63.8%), than in small towns (25.4%).

The situation is similar for children left by one parent (57.8% in villages and 22.4% in small towns).

What should one consider when dealing with the extended families of older people caring for grandchildren?

The child

- is affected emotionally, experiencing feelings of separation and suspense, which often causes sadness, grief and withdrawal
- feels disadvantaged compared to his friends
- often loses the feeling of trust, which damages self-confidence and influences his perception of the future

The child and the carer

- the child's connection with the parents suffers most, being limited to phone calls and remittances/presents
- the child and the older carer cannot a relationship to replace that with the parents
- the child and older carer more often have communication problems

The older carer

- lacks support in child education and other needs,
- the older carer often has limited financial means and requires extra state help
- the older carer is more predisposed to illness, at a time when the medical assistance system in Moldova is not working properly in Moldova

Risk exposure of an older person headed family

The primary risk for an older person headed family defined by HAI during project implementation is related to grandparents state. Due to their advanced age, the older carers are inclined to diseases and most dangerous to death. These causes affect the child directly, as the child is deprived of the family environment and suffers from the loss of the carer.

The family with an older carer (60 years old) from Balti city is experiencing a situation described above. Four years ago, the grandmother became a tutor for her two grandchildren, a boy 9 years old and a girl, 14 years old. The older woman's only support was her brother, who helped her with some money to care for the grandchildren who attended school and lived in the family. The grandmother had fragile health and suffered from several diseases: diabetes, hypertension, trophic ulcer, and very recently her left foot were gravely affected by dermatological erosion, which made her bedridden. Since then, the carers were the grandchildren and the one in care was the grandmother. As the grandmother could not offer any help at all, the children were shifted to study in the Internat (children's home) from Balti. The granddaughter comes home everyday after school and cooks for the grandmother, does the entire household work, washing, ironing, and cleaning. The grandson does shopping, buys medicines and pays the bills. They are waiting for the day when the grandmother will walk again and will take them for a walk outside. We can see how the older carer can be in need for care and how things can change radically for the children, they take the care giving role and risk to be placed in institution for the state care.

Another risk typical for older people headed family is related to child's emotional instability as a result of separation with the parents. Grandparents, most of the time, are not prepared to cope with the difficult psychological state of the child and find the upbringing and education difficult.

In Lapusna village, rayon Hincesti, we met a little beautiful girl, who seemed to be an elf among her mates. Her parents passed away 6 month before our meeting and she was very affected by the loss of the most loved people in her life. Her brothers work abroad and can not take care of her. They were thinking to place the girl in an institution, but being involved in HAI project, were advised for the grandmother to bring the girl up. Although the grandmother is 65 years old and very ill, she is cooking for the granddaughter everyday and helps the girl her in the household work. From the interview with the grandmother, she admitted that

she is doing everything necessary for living, but can not help the girl get over her childish deep thoughts and is powerless in what concerns her delicate emotional state. She would appreciate the help of a teacher and a psychologist, or any person who will bring back the girl's self-confidence and remove the pain from her fragile soul. She said "It is very hard to see my dear granddaughter bottomed up in mature thoughts and hard to think that she will never regain peace in her heart."

Other risks related to older people headed families would be the misunderstandings in the relationship of older cares, parents and children; difficult stages of child development, especially adolescence; discrepancies in intergenerational communication; lack of entertainment for children as they spend almost all the time near the grandparents' house etc.

The grandmother from Balti city is bringing up two grandchildren

The grandmother Eugenia was a mother for her two children and now time came to play the role of the mother to her two grandchildren.

In the family of two beautiful children, Maria and Ivan, from Balti city, of the same age of 11 years, we can't find the father or the mother. Instead, we find the grandmother and the great grandmother taking care of the kids. Six years ago, when four families (great grandparents, grandparents, the daughter's family and the son's family), were living together in the same house with just two rooms, The little girl's mother went to Russia to look for a job and since then, the family lost all connection with her. It is true that the mother used to be a drug user and was HIV positive but the reason she disappeared in Russia, never came up. Maria spent her first two years in the Internat (Children's home) from Balti city. Later on she was subscribed to a special school, as she suffered of dystrophy.

As for the boy Ivan, the fate wasn't more generous to him. He is a disabled kid, without the protection of his mother and with a father locked in prison and convicted for drugs and crimes.

What does it mean for a grandmother to take care of two disabled children, what does it take for an older woman to do the household work with no support from the state, from the children, from society?

The family was visited by the volunteers of NGO "Second Breath" from Balti, the project partner of HAI in Moldova. The first thing the volunteer did was support offered to the grandparents in the process of receiving guardianship on grandchildren, as their parents are deprived of parental rights. As the great grandmother's pension of 438 lei (about 26 Euros) and random profit from the sales of second hand clothes are the only sources of income for this family the tutorship entitlements of 450 (27 Euros) lei for each child would represent a considerable financial aid. This money is evidently insufficient to the needs of children left in the care of the grandmother even though it is a double amount compared to the pension.

The second problem solved by the volunteer was placement of the girl in a special institution for disabled children. And finally the volunteer addressed the family needs to local Primaria and to the social assistants in the community who overtook the support to them.

The granddaughter from Lapusna in Hincesti is calling "mother" her grandmother.

Nastea is a nice fragile little girl of 11 years old with a great soul. It is not accidentally that she is too shy and emotional. Her story of life is so touching, that only the flashbacks of memories make the tears come to her childish eyes. Nastea was only 9 months when her father died in an accident and the stepfather was a nightmare for the girl. While she grew up next to him, everyday was a day of cursing, beating and insulting. It often happened that Nastea slept outside in the rain and in cold weather and every little mistake she did was followed by a cruel punishment. With time a little brother was born in their family, but the



Grandmother Vera from Lapusna village in Hincesti rayon became mother for her granddaughter

life didn't turn up better. The teachers remember Nastea as a quiet, shy girl, never speaking and playing. Trapped in loneliness the life of a little girl seemed like a world of silence. The world in her eyes was a picture in grey and the future was dark.

One day the grandmother Vera (59 years old) saw Nastea in such a state of depression and suffering and decided to take the responsibility for bringing up and educating her granddaughter. The grandmother Vera started to care for Nastea and with time, when their mother left to Italy to find a job for, she took care of the Nastea's little brother Gheorghe. The teachers at school remarked that after Nastea moved with her grandmother, the situation improved much. She is now a good pupil, more active and sociable, but still shy and reserved.

It is not easy for the grandmother Vera to care for Nastea and her brother all by herself, with a pension of 500 Moldavian Lei (around 30 Euro). Their mother is abroad illegally and did not yet manage to return the debts she had in Moldova. However, she managed to send some money for the grandmother to buy a TV, food and clothes for the grandchildren. Regardless of difficulties the grandmother makes sure the children are feeling comfortable and safe and have lots of care and attention. She never raises the voice to children and never forces them to work. When asked what the grandmother needs to better care for her two grandchildren, she answered she prays for God to give her health and more years to live. For the children she wants a vacation, as they always stay at home and have never seen other places, Nastea also needs a psychologist to work on building her self-confidence and overcoming fear.

It is not surprising that Nastea calls her grandmother "Mum", as she brought her to a normal life and she treats her with love and affection.

The grandmother Tatiana from Balti city cares for her sick daughter and two grandchildren

In Balti city, the grandmother Tatiana is leaving through very hard times and has recently lost her daughter who died of a knee cancer at the age of 32, in February 2008. The daughter lived in Israel for 5 years but her life was marked as she was engaged in prostitution and became HIV infected. But she managed to earn and gather money to buy an apartment for her children back in Moldova. The grandmother was living in tough conditions and the only financial source for the entire family was her pension of 540 Moldavian Lei (around 32 Euro). She could hardly look after her sick daughter and the money was never enough for medicines. "My heart was bleeding when I was looking at my daughter as her health was getting worse and worse day by day. She was hospitalized and I knew, says Tatiana, eventually I would have to take her home and assume the care for the grandchildren".

During HAI project, the volunteers were able to address Tatiana's family to the social assistance department which provided her with a part of the medicines for free, and some money for her daughter's funerals. They have also assisted Tatiana in accessing the tutorship on her two grandchildren, Eugenia (13 years old) and Serghei (5 years old).

A few years before, when the mother lived in Israel, and the grandmother Tatiana could not offer the children good living conditions and all the necessary things for the school, Eugenia was institutionalized. She lived outside the family for two years. When her mother managed to buy an apartment, the grandmother took her home. Both children suffer from some disabilities. It's a hard life Tatiana is living, with no support to care for the two grandchildren and for her own health. She believes that "children are our life" and everyday she finds courage, love and hope to dedicate it for her grandchildren. Her aim is to make a future for the two children and to be their family, as all children deserve one.

In Balti city the volunteer visits the family of grandmother Ala who is caring for two grandchildren



In Balti city, the grandmother Victoria picks up the two grandchildren from Internat school every evening



In Lapusna village in Hincesti rayon the grandparents Doncu are bringing up 11 grandchildren

The grandmother Anastasia from Lapusna in Hincesti has taken back home her two grandsons from the Internat.

Some time ago, Sergiu (10 years old) and Tudor (11 years old) were brought by their mother to the Internat “to stay for a while” as the mother had told them then. For about 3 years this became their home.

The grandmother did not have possibilities to bring up the two boys, as her only source of income is her pension and it is hardly enough to manage the household and buy medicines for herself. But most of all, the grandmother feared taking such an important responsibility as bringing up and looking after two grandsons. Although, she was taking the boys home from Internat for the period of vacations and holidays she was afraid to go beyond that.

In the summer of 2007, the grandmother with the grandchildren was invited to participate in the Summer School organized within the HAI project. As the school was aimed at improving the intergenerational links and strengthening the family role, the various activities had an influence on the grandmother’s view on child care and institutionalization. She is remembering an episode from the social theatre activity: “We played the scene with the inversed roles, so I was the grandchild and my nephew was me. I felt humiliation when he was yelling at me to do my homework. The worst was to hear my own words from my nephew – You are still young, you don’t know anything”. The trainers of the summer school remarked the grandmother’s changed behaviour. If earlier she was forbidding her grandchildren many things and was not considering their opinion because they are children, then after the school, she became more flexible and cooperative and counted children’s opinions and ideas more. For the second round of the school Anastasia came with 4 grandchildren instead of two.

After the summer school, we found out that Anastasia decided to take Sergiu and Tudor from the Internat back to her family and in the new school year September 2007, the boys were already attending an ordinary school from Lapusna, and this time, after the school they were coming home to their grandmother not to the Internat.

“I am proud that my grandsons are good students at school. I feel joy when they are working with me. They are giving me hope and power, and this makes me happy every day”.

The successes of the HAI/UNICEF project in Moldova:

Improved community-based care for the vulnerable OP headed families caring for children

The capacity of the network of volunteers was built up in counselling and assisting vulnerable families where older people care for children of migrant parents. They were trained in social assistance, legal, psychological, NGO development and child protection issues relating to the situation of children living in the extended family of grandparents. The volunteer older people were effective in providing moral support to older carers and identifying their needs, which include: house repairs, clothing for children, and support in completing guardianship and ID documents, free medical assistance, subscription to special kindergarten/schools, as well as the problem of human trafficking (both parents and children), child abuse and HIV. The volunteers identified the needs in each family and addressed them to local authorities and Social Assistance Departments in the community to be resolved in close cooperation.

The volunteers also provided regular assistance and counselling to the most vulnerable families through peer-support home visits. Their role was strengthening the relationship between older people and local authorities, and enabling access to information.

An efficient model for older people and children to be together

Grandparent and their grandchildren, including institutionalized children, were involved in joint demonstration activities which improved communication between the generations and facilitated the educational process. Children and older people learned to be together,

to talk to each other, to play together, to work and study together, and to be involved in social life. By the end of the project, the children were aware of their rights, the dangers of smoking, alcohol and HIV, as well as ethics and behaviour. The older people became more responsive to children's needs and understood that the more care and attention the child receives, the more he is willing to give back. This is an efficient method to keep children away from street life and integrate them in social life. This model can be used by teachers, social assistants in communities and by older people.

A problem well stated is a problem half solved

Through the volunteers' work, the project showed how poverty and migration affects the the most vulnerable groups in society. For Moldavian social policy, it is important to consider the children of migrant parents as being at risk and older carers as being in need of moral, social and financial support.

The effect of the sum is greater than the sum of effect

The project created a synergy of efforts by civil society (the volunteer networks), local state authorities (Primarias and Social Assistance Departments) and society itself in addressing the issues faced by the most vulnerable in a situation of high migration, which directly affects children and older people who care for them

The specific features of vulnerable families headed by older people caring for children of migrant parents are:

- the child remains in the family, which is constructive and beneficial for child education
- the child is at greater risk of discrimination and emotional instability, as well as reduced access to adequate food, clothing, educational materials, and greater risk of institutionalization
- contact between the child and the parents can be weak (intermittent phone calls, remittances and gifts) or missing completely if the parents disappear or abandon the child
- the older carer assumes the whole responsibility for bringing up the child and doing the household work while facing social, emotional and financial difficulties
- the relationship between the older carer and the child is affected by the intergenerational gap and communication barriers
- the child living with grandparents tends not to have access to extra school activities and vacations. They spend all their time near to the house and the child is limited in the possibilities for recreation and development of skills and creativity

Our learning and findings regarding older people headed families:

- According to the estimations of residential institutions, in Moldova 10 out of 11.500 children in institutions, have one or both parents alive.
- In the conditions of poverty, economic instability and inadequate social protection, priority should be given to family integrity and values, which have a direct impact on the child.
- Within the migration issue, attention is focused on, the quantitative aspect (number of emigrants, amounts of remittances), while the psychological and emotional influence on the child is neglected.
- In Moldova children left behind by parents who move abroad are cared for by grandparents or other relatives, or in final instance placed in institutions temporarily or permanently.
- Older people play an important role in Moldovan society as child carers, especially women.
- Of the 514 older people headed families included in this project, both in rural and urban areas, 94% had limited access to information and more specifically to free medical insurance, legal procedures regarding guardianship, passports for children, property

rights and inheritance, child abandonment, migration issues, child care services, child abuse issues, state allocations for child care, degree of disability and others.

- In the opinion of many older carers, institutional care is considered advantageous from the financial point of view, because children have free food, shelter, education and medical assistance. The impact on the child's behaviour and emotional side in the long run is being ignored, and so is the family's role in the child care. Generally, institutionalized children are less integrated in society, lack skills for independent life, and have difficulties in communication and in forming their own view

Conclusions:

- Children left behind by migrant parents should be considered at risk and given priority in state policy.
- In terms of emotional effects on children living without parents, there is a lack of psychologists in schools and communities. The social assistant in the community is not necessarily a specialist in the field of child protection and sometimes misses or does not have the capacity to cover the large number of people in need.
- OP headed families have limited financial resources and often live in poor conditions (no heating, running water, sanitation, food) so that the children have limited access to clothes, school supplies, food.
- The reasons why older carers decide to put children in institutional care are primarily scarce financial resources, state of health and the need to work.

Recommendations:

- Measures needed to improve the situation of children at risk include strengthening relations between educational institutions and the social assistance system. Actions should be focused on prevention and rehabilitation through a series of community services and initiatives for vulnerable extended families where grandparents care for their grandchildren.
- Social services should be put in place for children whose parents are abroad and for older carers bringing up these children. These should include special counselling, support in educational process, facilities for spare time, home visits, community centres etc.
- The state should develop flexible financing mechanisms for social services and support to civil society organisations to complement the social protection system and improve community services rather than residential care.
- The state should consider older people as an important resource for child care and provide special entitlements and support at community level. Volunteering is a solution in identifying and addressing the needs of older people headed families caring for grandchildren. Volunteers can cover the information gap and undertake home visits for counselling and support purposes. Thus, investing a little money in supporting volunteer networks can help to resolve key social issues.
- As older people play an important role in caring for children of migrant parents, especially women, special attention must be given to social integration of vulnerable older people, improved access to information and social services, revision of social pensions, stimulation through special entitlements and support at community level.
- The Government should work towards social policies based on the successful models developed for older people headed families caring for grandchildren: to support and build the capacity of volunteer networks; to improve the cooperation between local authorities and civil society; to provide personalized counselling and assistance through home visits; to undertake activities for children with other children and with adults for education and entertainment; to ensure access to information for vulnerable layers through activities at community level, training, and information materials.

HelpAge International
PO Box 32832
London, N1 9 ZN, UK

Tel: + 44 2072787778
Fax: + 442077137993
www.helpage.org

HelpAge International has a vision of a world in which all older people fulfil their potential to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives. HelpAge International is a global network striving for the rights of disadvantaged older people to economic and physical security; healthcare and social services; and support in their caregiving role across the generations.

We used to know that older people tell their grandchildren interesting stories and give them candies.

The older carers educate grandchildren, teach them life skills, feed them, are always next to them.

They are the ones to wake up the grandchildren with a kiss in the morning and prepare them for school, and also the ones to kiss them for good night.

The grandparents assume the parental responsibility.



HelpAge International
str. Bănulescu-Bodoni 57/1,
Chişinău, Moldova
Tel: + 373 22 225098
Fax: + 373 22 224672
tsorocan@helpageinternational.org

HelpAge International
PO Box 32832
London, N1 9 ZN UK
Tel: + 44 2072787778
Fax: + 442077137993
www.helpage.org