

The benefit of first-hand experience

A visit to one of Spurgeon's brightly painted, relatively well resourced kindergartens, where the standards of teaching and care are high and the children seem generally well dressed and well cared for, can leave a visitor wondering where the need is.

It was only when I ventured outside the confines of the kindergarten that the answer became clear.

Most of the children attending the kindergarten come from desperately poor city families, often living in just two rooms in run down blocks of flats with no heating and sometimes no hot water. In the village in Moldova many of the children live in mud brick huts with corrugated roofs, with only one electric light bulb to illuminate the house and only one source of heating - and this in a country where the winter temperature drops to minus 20°C.

Just as for Spurgeon's orphanages in early twentieth century Britain, the Romanian homes now generally house children who are not technically orphaned, but who have at least one parent alive but unable to care for them - a significant development from the shocking pictures coming from Romania in the early 1990s.

One of the benefits of being there first hand was that it gave me the opportunity to make on the spot decisions on the basis of having all the relevant facts at my disposal, something which would not have been the case I been in the UK.

For example, Spurgeon's is trying to extend its work with children with special needs, who are often overlooked in the state system. At one of the centres we met a volunteer who was working very effectively with a child with cerebral palsy.

Unfortunately, the volunteer (who had a paid part-time job elsewhere) was only able to come in two days a week, which meant that the child was only able to attend on those two days, instead of the five days

that the other children benefited from. Having met the individual and assessed the situation meant that we were able to make an instant decision to offer the volunteer a full-time job as a teaching assistant.

Another visit I made during my trip was to an independent kindergarten in Suceava in the north of the country, where a foreign funding consortium had collapsed, leaving the three staff working without pay for the previous three months.

Having assessed the situation and after returning to the UK, I am please to say that we have been able to identify new sources of funding for the kindergarten such that the staff are getting paid once again and their work is able to continue.

While the direct supply of funding to projects such as this is important, a major benefit of foreign aid is the transfer and exchange of knowledge and ideas.

A graphic example of how its good practice is being copied by others came at the opening of our new Family Centre in Vaslui. The opening was attended by the Mayor of Vaslui, who was intrigued by the brightly painted playground equipment outside the new centre. The wood had been brought from the UK and designed, assembled

and painted in situ by a team of British volunteers. The ingenuity of John Smith, Spurgeon's Overseas Manager, ensured that the remaining off-cuts of wood were used to construct a double swing. Several weeks later, staff noticed that playgrounds across the city were being constructed as carbon copies of that at the Family Centre, complete with double swings! In total, 29 identical playgrounds appeared across city!

The issues of EU accession

The financing of charity work is never very easy although the strength of Sterling over the Romanian Lei has made the task considerably easier than it might have been. For example, the average daily pay for one of our centre workers is around £5.

However, one of the major concerns for the future is that one of the effects of Romania's entry into the EU will inevitably be to swing the exchange rate trend in the opposite direction, making it increasingly difficult for charities like Spurgeon's to continue to fund existing work - an increasing level of funding will be required just to maintain existing services.

Ironically, while this will improve the standard of living for the fortunate within the country, it may well lead to a significant rise in unemployment and hardship and an increased strain on our services.

In order to try to pre-empt this, Spurgeon's is already looking to find match funding from the statutory sector, and discussions are now taking place with local authorities in Romania to encourage them to fund the vital work that Spurgeon's is engaged in - and perhaps at last to receive some recompense for the intellectual property represented by the playground equipment!

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If you would like to find out more about Spurgeon's work, please visit their web site at www.spurgeonschildcare.org

Staff at the kindergarten in Suceava, who had not been paid for 3 months. The shelves in each of the classrooms were stuffed full with hundreds of soft toys, sent by well meaning donors from western Europe. The pressing need was for cash to pay the teacher's wages