



# WWO Bulgaria Annual Report 2017

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

YEAR IN REVIEW ..... 2

PROGRAMS ..... 3

    OPERATIONAL CONTEXT ..... 3

    TARGET POPULATION ..... 5

    INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT ..... 8

    PARTNERSHIPS ..... 22

    LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE ..... 28

    CAPACITY BUILDING ..... 30

MONITORING AND EVALUATION ..... 35

MANAGEMENT ..... 38

PLANS FOR 2018 ..... 39

ANNEX ..... 40

    Dilyan ..... 41

    Nilai ..... 42

    Ani ..... 42

INNOVATION ..... 43

## YEAR IN REVIEW

2017 was very rich in events both national and international. Worldwide Orphans Foundation in Bulgaria continued the tendency of focusing on working with vulnerable groups of children and their families, developing new and strengthening existing partnerships and capacity-building. The organization continued to support the most vulnerable children wherever they receive care and services – state-run institutions, Family Type Group Homes for children with disabilities, community-based service providers, remote rural areas and disadvantaged communities from ethnic minorities.

Because of WWO Bulgaria’s successful partnerships with **26** partner organizations, our programs reached some of the most vulnerable children and their families in **15** different locations throughout the country in 2017. WWO Bulgaria served **1542** children and their families through our Toy Library Network partners and the “Library on the Road”, “Play for Achievement”, “Restart Play” and “Mission Play” projects. The Foundation expanded its work in seven new settings – three children’s units in Pirogov hospital, at the refugee integration center managed by Caritas Sofia, at the Community Cultural center in the village of Davidovo, and at the Roma communities in Sliven and Sofia. As a result, 7 new Toy Libraries were launched.

WWO Bulgaria remained committed to supporting our network of partners in Bulgaria by providing capacity-building trainings for professionals to help them integrate the concept of play into their work with children and families. 2 Toy Library Network trainings took place in 2017 during which the participants were able to learn new methods of working with children using the Toy Library and Music in Motion programs as well as learning about WWO’s new program - Storytelling.

WWO Bulgaria was very privileged to host the WWO Strategic Planning Meeting gathering the CEO, US program staff and Country Directors from Ethiopia, Haiti, Vietnam and Bulgaria. A visit was paid by the Board member Alex Mimis. Another Board member, Susan Neisloss and her Big Bite film crew visited Bulgaria in September to shoot three videos about the work in the hospital, the Roma community and the refugee center. In addition to working on capacity-building projects, WWO Bulgaria promoted the organization’s work and participated in two international forums – the International Step by Step Association’s Conference in Ghent, the Netherlands and at the WWO 20th gala evening.

WWO Bulgaria will continue to make play and early childhood development an essential part of the social discourse in the country and is determined to reach out to more vulnerable children and families in 2018 as well as to establish itself as a leading organization in the field of early childhood development in Bulgaria.

## PROGRAMS

### OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

#### Growing by Mutual Partnerships



When WWO began working in Bulgaria in 2009 most children without parental care were placed in residential care institutions. Motivated by the general lack of response to the socio-emotional and developmental needs of these children, WWO set out to build a comprehensive model to address the challenges they faced. WWO's goal was to introduce the concept of play as a key developmental tool and to train staff and caregivers working in residential care institutions in how to use toys to help children achieve developmental milestones. Within the next four years, WWO established partnerships with **11** residential care institutions in Bulgaria where our programs provided children with socio-emotional support and addressed their developmental needs.

The understanding of children's needs and child care has developed significantly in recent years and these changed attitudes of professionals and society necessitate a shift in WWO's focus in Bulgaria. In 2010, the Bulgarian government embarked on an ambitious plan to reform the protection system for children without parental care. The plan for reform was laid out in the National Strategy called "Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Bulgaria 2010-2025". The deinstitutionalization process involves replacing institutional child care with family care or community-based care in a family-like environment while taking integrated measures across social services and social assistance sectors to prevent child abandonment by supporting vulnerable families through a network of community-based service providers.

WWO Bulgaria has followed the dynamics of the deinstitutionalization process and transitioned from partnerships with residential-care institutions to partnerships with community-based service providers, educational institutions and hospitals in the country. During a Strategic Planning meeting in 2015 with local partners WWO Bulgaria decided that the organization's capacity-building role in the field of early childhood development is key to supporting our partners and following the needs of the deinstitutionalization process. In addition, an independent evaluation of WWO Bulgaria's activities in 2016 showed that WWO Bulgaria's programs are relevant to the needs of children at risk between the ages 0 and 7 and correspond to the policies on deinstitutionalization and early childhood development. The report recommended that WWO Bulgaria

partner with motivated organizations which have a proactive approach to partnerships and a shared vision for early childhood development.

As a result, WWO Bulgaria has gradually phased out its partnerships with residential-care institutions and is focused on strengthening the capacity of our partners and becoming a leading organization in the field of early childhood development field in Bulgaria. To that end, WWO Bulgaria has established a network of WWO partners across the country with a shared understanding of the importance of play for early childhood development. Through capacity-building trainings and supervisions, WWO Bulgaria is making efforts to foster a community of like-minded professionals and practitioners from its partner organizations that are motivated and inspired to leverage the power of play in their work with children and families.

WWO Bulgaria's Toy Library network has grown from **19** partner organizations in 2017 to **26** partner organizations in the beginning of 2018 in **15** different locations throughout the country. Established non-governmental organizations and representatives of governmental organizations working with different target groups in the country have sought partnerships with WWO Bulgaria and expressed interest in using Element of Play® programs in their work. As a result, WWO Bulgaria has developed important partnerships with some leading organizations working to support the development of children from vulnerable communities, such as For Our Children Foundation, Health and Social Development, Romany Health Foundation and Caritas.

Significant progress was made in 2017 in adapting WWO Bulgaria's programs to the individual needs of our partners and integrating them in their work with vulnerable children. Thanks to the professional support of WWO's team and Lois Heymann, **40** specialists from partner organizations gained in-depth knowledge of the Element of Play® programs and developed skills for integrating them in their practices. These results led to a new partnership attitude among our partners who now see training for their teams as a precondition for implementing our programs in their work. The changed attitudes among our partners as well as the success in building the capacity of the professionals in partner organizations are evidence that WWO Bulgaria has established itself among the few organizations that not only provide effective ECD programs to partner organizations, but also reach a high number of vulnerable groups of children and families.

## TARGET POPULATION

### Born Different but Growing Equal

In 2017 WWO Bulgaria's programs reached **1542** children and their families from different vulnerable groups in 10 locations throughout the country. Throughout the year, specialists from **26** partner organizations worked tirelessly with the support of WWO Bulgaria to meet the needs of the following groups of children:

#### Children from vulnerable communities

Most children supported by WWO Bulgaria come from vulnerable communities where parents find it very difficult to create an environment conducive to early childhood development and to meet their children's early learning needs. Some live in closed communities with limited access to health and educational services, which creates risks for their healthy development and adaptation in the school system. Their inclusion in informal ECD programs, such as WWO's Element of Play®, meets the children's needs to develop their social, language, cognitive and motor skills as a precondition for their successful integration in the educational system. The children's parents, some of whom receive social services, need to feel successful as parents and develop a sensitivity to the problems of the early childhood as well as gain positive parenting skills.

#### Children with disabilities

The professionals working with this target group prioritize a variety of specialized and rehabilitation services over early childhood development programs. Often children with disabilities are not enrolled in kindergarten or school due to the educational system's inability to respond to their needs and the children's lack of basic skills and knowledge. Children with disabilities, their parents and the professionals who work with this target group need programs allowing the child to experience being successful in gaining skills and knowledge through the natural conduit of play. In addition, such programs should give the child an opportunity to function independently and to adapt among his/her peers.

## TARGET POPULATION



*Play Sessions with Vulnerable Children in the Targovishte region*



*Play Sessions with Vulnerable Children in the Targovishte region*



*Rehabilitation Session for Children with Disabilities in Karin Dom*

## Born Different but Growing Equal

### Children in residential-care institutions

WWO Bulgaria still partners with four of the biggest residential-care institutions remaining in the country where children with severe disabilities live and receive primarily medical care or children from the community receive specialized health and social services. Even though these children need social rehabilitation as well, the team of specialists in the institutions is primarily focused on providing medical care and does not stimulate their cognitive and social development.

### Children in a hospital environment

Children in a hospital environment is a relatively new target group for WWO Bulgaria. It emerged out of the need to support the development of children's units in hospitals by providing children with an environment close to home and alleviating their hospital stay. Helping children overcome the stress caused by the hospital stay and the treatment procedures contributes to their recovery process. The opportunities for play that WWO Bulgaria creates for the children and their parents during their hospital stay also support positive parent-child communication.

### Children in kindergartens

The Bulgarian educational system is facing challenges to provide a stimulating environment for children in kindergartens. The problem is particularly pronounced in communities with bilingual children for whom the process of adaptation in kindergarten is hindered by the fact that they cannot speak Bulgarian and need additional language classes to overcome the language gap. On the other hand, kindergartens do not engage parents with the education and development of their children, thereby distancing them from opportunities to support their children's early learning. The teachers often do not have enough technical resources to facilitate their work with bilingual children and children with educational difficulties.



*Music in Motion Session in DMSGD Burgas*



*Children in the Targovishte Hospital*



*Kindergarten Group in Targovishte*

## TARGET POPULATION

### Born Different but Growing Equal



### Refugee Children

Refugee children and their families comprise the newest target group that WWO Bulgaria began supporting in 2017.

Because of the dynamic political situation related to the refugees in Europe, the number of families from the Near East who choose to stay in Bulgaria has increased in the last years. According to the information provided by the State Agency for Refugees a total of 12 477 people got a refugee status and 10 479 got a humanitarian status between 1993 and 2017. The data for 2017 shows that 348 children coming with their families from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq got refugee status, 98 of them being aged 0 to 4 and 250 – between 5 and 17 years. Only 35% of them are enrolled in school.

The adaptation of the children in schools and kindergartens is hindered by their poor command of Bulgarian, the limited number of social skills and the lack of stimuli for their cognitive development caused by the constraints their families face in their adaptation process. WWO Bulgaria is one of the few organizations that addresses this problem with play-based educational programs for children from families with refugee or humanitarian status in Bulgaria who want to remain in the country.



*WWO Bulgaria's Play Specialist Working with a Child with Refugee Status on the "Restart Play" Project*



*WWO Bulgaria's Play Specialist Working with a Child with Refugee Status on the "Restart Play" Project*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children from Vulnerable Communities

Children from vulnerable communities comprise the largest group of children that WWO Bulgaria serves. More than 650 children in this target group were reached by the organization in 2017 within the scope of 9 partner programs and projects throughout the country. WWO Bulgaria serves children from vulnerable communities through partnerships with social services, such as Family Counseling Centers, Centers for Community Support and Community Centers.

The leading projects for this target group in 2017 were “Mission: Play” in Sofia and “Library on the Road” in the village of Davidovo.

#### Library on the Road: Toys and Music in Motion

For the third year WWO Bulgaria in partnership with the NGO Club in Targovishte supports a large group of children and their parents in the small village of Davidovo in the Targovishte region. Lacking any educational and social services in the village, these families continue to find meaning in the weekly activities organized in the local community center by WWO Bulgaria’s project coordinator.

A total of **85** group play sessions have taken place in the three sites and close to 50 children and their caregivers have participated in the activities between January and December 2017. There is noticeable progress in the children’s development. According to the project coordinator’s observations, “children who attended the sessions regularly and received support not only from the play specialist but also from their parents showed the best results. They knew the session structure and rules. They did not shy away from new activities and were not afraid to ask questions if they did not understand something. They helped their peers and tried to speak Bulgarian most of the time.”

Piloting WWO’s Storytelling program with these children yielded good results in terms of improving their language skills and school readiness.



*Photos from play sessions in Davidovo*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children from Vulnerable Communities

#### Library on the Road: Toys and Music in Motion

The children's results and their parent's engagement motivated WWO Bulgaria and the NGO Club to expand their support to the community by renovating the Children's Unit in the Davidovo Library. The initiative became a community-building activity and received the support of the entire community. The Targovishte Municipality also funded the initiative by donating 10,000 BGN to renovate the building. Private donors covered the costs of changing the lighting and the floors.

WWO Bulgaria provided 11,000 BGN for the renovation of the Children's Library and building a Reading Corner for the children. The floor and ceiling of the facility were entirely renovated and an additional window was installed to allow more light to enter the room. New shelves, toys and books became a part of the Library's collection. The Reading Corner also houses a Toy Library and other play materials.

One of the biggest accomplishments of the initiative was the active involvement of the local community. People from the community volunteered their time and labor to renovate the building. Elderly people from the Senior Club in the village cleaned the yard while the fathers of the children in the project assembled the furniture. The children's mothers and grandmothers also assisted with anything that was necessary.

The renovated library meets the needs of the children for a secure and friendly space which stimulates their development through play and reading and encourages the parent-child interaction. Since the renovated Library's launch in November 2017 children have an opportunity to communicate with their peers and improve their social and language skills in a secure and supportive environment. The Library is also a space for parents to communicate and support their children's development, as well as to share with other adults and get information about positive parenting.



*The Children's Library Before and After the Renovations*



*The Renovation Project Engaged the Entire Community*



## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

*The Children's Library Before and After the Renovations*

**Community Feedback from Davidovo:**

“The children say many nice things. They want to visit the Community Center all the time.” */grandmother/*

“There’s no need to thank me. I am doing this for the children. They always ask about you and want me to take them here.” */father/*

“They tell us everything when we get home. Our younger girl has also made progress. She is not so violent anymore. She used to push, pinch and hit her sister when she didn’t give her a toy she wanted immediately.” */grandmother/*

“Are these cups for the Community Center? You don’t own me anything for them.” */local storeowner/*

“When organizations, institutions and parents work together, the results are inspiring!” */Nelly Nikolova – community center expert at the Targovishte Municipality/*



*The renovated library is a secure and friendly space which stimulates child development through play and reading.*

## Children from Vulnerable Communities

### Mission: Play

The project “Mission: Play” took place between June and December 2017. WWO Bulgaria’s early childhood development programs were provided in For Our Children Foundation’s Center for Community Support and a Family Type Placement Center for children and adolescents requiring constant medical care in Sofia. The programs were applied individually and in group sessions. **40** children between the ages of 2 and 8 years old and **5** adolescents with special needs between the ages of 12 and 16 years old were included in the programs. **144** individual Toy Library play sessions (including 25 mobile sessions) took place during the project. 43 group play sessions took place in which the Music in Motion and Storytelling programs were used.

All children who participated in the project were administered a child development rating scale using the Developmental Profile 3 tool, which is standardized for the Bulgarian population. The evaluation took place at the initial inclusion of each child in the programs. Parents received counseling about their children’s results.

WWO Bulgaria’s ECD programs complemented For Our Children Foundation’s holistic psychological, rehabilitative and social approach to child and family support. WWO Bulgaria conducted 2 practical trainings with For Our Children Foundation’s staff and caregivers and provided them with techniques and methods for stimulating early childhood development through play.

The project team participated in 2 specialized trainings with Lois Heymann, a leading Speech and Language Pathologist from the US. For Our Children Foundation now has a trained staff and a full set of toys, musical instruments and books to continue working with WWO’s Element of Play® in the future. The project was terminated due to a lack of readiness to launch a Center for Early Childhood Development based on a holistic approach to childhood development rather than distinct social services.



*Music in Motion Sessions with Children from the Family Type Placement Center*



*Music in Motion Sessions with Children from the Family Type Placement Center*



*Toy Library at For Our Children Foundation*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children from Residential-Care Institutions

WWO Bulgaria's programs reached **314** children in residential-care institutions. Currently, residential-care institutions are in the process of transition to becoming centers for specialized services for children with disabilities. While some children still receive full-time residential care in the institutions, others only use the new services they offer. WWO Bulgaria's programs support the specialists in their work with families.

The residential-care institutions are becoming increasingly open to the parents of children with disabilities who appreciate the contribution of WWO Bulgaria's programs to the development of their children.

#### Parent Feedback

"I use the [Toy Library] program daily in my work with children. It is a great tool that helps me reach the goals I have set for each child and a source of new ideas and methods that I can use in my future work. The programs are exciting for the students I work with who conduct their internships in the institution." – art therapist, DMSGD Burgas

"The results of the Element of Play® programs in my work include shared communication, play development, language improvement and lots of smiles" – psychologist, DMSGD Burgas

"As a mother I saw how much the children love the toys. I enjoy playing with them and they are beneficial for me as well. I cannot afford to buy such toys, so I invited the social workers to visit my home in order to provide my children and my neighbors' children an opportunity to play with them."

### Children with Disabilities

**8** of WWO Bulgaria's partners worked with **208** children with disabilities. For most of these children WWO Bulgaria's programs are the only way to improve their cognitive and social development and feel a sense of accomplishment while mastering colors, shapes, etc.

#### Parent Feedback

"Thanks to the Toy Library my child learned the colors and now comes willingly to the center" /**mother**/

"The child's fine motor skills improved significantly, and he now tries to build towers on his own" /**parents**/

"I can't believe that my child is standing still" /**parents**/

"My child told me about a toy you played with, what is it?" /**mother**/



*Music in Motion Sessions with Children with Disabilities in Karin Dom Foundation*



*Toy Library Session with Children from the Residential-Care Institution in Varna*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children in Kindergartens

Over **80** children in kindergartens in the region of Targovishte had the opportunity to participate in Element of Play® activities with their teachers and WWO Bulgaria’s play specialists in 2017. The play sessions provided many of the children with an opportunity to develop their cognitive and social skills and to adapt more successfully in the kindergarten.

#### Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”

The goal of working in Kindergarten Pchelitsa was to track and facilitate the children’s transition from nursery school to kindergarten through play-based programming. The partners (WWO Bulgaria, the NGO Club and Kindergarten Pchelitsa) were united in their decision to carry out this project with the goal of testing a model for working with children transitioning from one group in kindergarten to the next one. Children had the opportunity to get to know and communicate with the same specialist on a weekly basis both in nursery school and later in kindergarten. As constant and repetitive elements, the programs helped children to overcome their anxiety arising from the changing environment and requirements in kindergarten.

As a result of the project activities, **24** children participated in **100** sessions and transitioned successfully from nursery school to kindergarten in the fall of 2017. Building the capacity of the kindergarten staff was key during the project. The teachers participated in trainings organized by WWO Bulgaria and were supported by the play specialist while they learned how to implement the Element of Play® programs in their work. As a result, since October 2017 the teachers started conducting group play sessions using the “Toy Library” and the “Storytelling” programs with the support of the play specialist.

Coordinating the project with the children’s parents was one of the major successes of the project. The parents’ involvement evolved from being informed about the play sessions to actively participating in some of them with their children.



*Group Play Session in Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”*



*Group Play Session in Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”*



*Group play session with parents in Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children in Kindergartens

#### Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”

The observations showed that WWO Bulgaria’s programs helped the children adapt easier to the changes in the environment and the activities from nursery school to kindergarten.

The results and the motivation of the kindergarten staff led to an expansion of the activities in an affiliate of the kindergarten in the village of Vardun where children are raised in vulnerable families with limited knowledge of the Bulgarian language. Initial results show the children’s desire to participate in the activities and the specialists’ interest in continuing the work in 2018.

#### Teacher Feedback

“To be honest, I was a bit skeptical at first about Storytelling. I thought it would be difficult, but it worked. It worked very well. I am happy.” */teacher/*

“We can only regret that Element of Play® programs are not implemented [with the children] in our groups” */head teacher/*

“Children feel happy. They see the Toy Library toys as different than the ones they play with in the kindergarten. They impatiently await the sessions, participate actively and have fun” */teacher/*



*Group Play Sessions in Kindergarten “Pchelitsa”*



*As part of the project sustainability plan, teachers are trained to conduct Element of Play® activities independently.*



*Children can play independently as well.*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children in Kindergartens

#### Play for Achievement Project

In the beginning of 2017 WWO Bulgaria launched a new project with Kindergarten “Slaveyche” and the NGO Club. The project called “Play for Achievement” aimed to support the development of children aged 3-5 to their full potential by making them part of educational activities in kindergarten through play.

The kindergarten staff contributed significantly to the success of the project by being proactive and attending a series of trainings within the project scope. Several workshops between the kindergarten staff and WWO Bulgaria led to a common understanding about the goals of the project and the approach in the work with children. Children’s development was periodically screened using the Developmental Profiles III (DP3) with the informed consent and the participation of parents and a screening specialist. The screening helped the specialist identify developmental delays in some children and set adequate goals for each child. The project allows tracking the program effectiveness by comparing the results of two groups of children within the same kindergarten – a control group who does not participate in the play sessions and an experimental group who participates in the play sessions.

The initial screening results showed that most children are bilingual and have language and cognitive difficulties. A play specialist carried out play sessions with the **20** children in the experimental group three times a week. Children with identified developmental delays had the opportunity to participate in individual play sessions coordinated with their parents and including specific tasks. Meanwhile, parents took part in educational seminars about topics such as child development and learning, attachment, positive parenting, etc. The seminars also provided parents with an opportunity to exchange experience, discuss various topics of interest and support each other.



*Storytelling in Kindergarten “Slaveyche”*



*Storytelling in Kindergarten “Slaveyche”*



*The kindergarten staff contributed to the success of the project by being proactive and attending trainings.*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children in Kindergartens



#### Play for Achievement Project

The results as of 2018 show that:

- **Children in the experimental group have made significant improvement compared to the control group, particularly on the scale of cognitive and language development. The children's scores have improved by several points in each developmental domain.**
- **Children with Bulgarian as a second language have significant improvements in their language acquisition since the beginning of the year.**

Even though the project continues in 2018, the results from 2017 give us reason to believe that WWO Bulgaria's programs are effective and have had a positive effect on the children.

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

### Children in a Hospital Environment

Over 330 children and their parents have benefitted from WWO Bulgaria's activities in the Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment in Targovishte and the Pirogov Hospital in Sofia. The project's activities are among the few good practices in the country which are changing the hospital environment in the children's units in these hospitals and create conditions for faster recovery of children by allowing them to participate in play-based programs and activities.

#### Children's Unit in the Targovishte Hospital

In the beginning of 2017 WWO Bulgaria signed a partnership agreement with the Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment in Targovishte and the NGO Club which marked the beginning of the project "Library on the Road: Toys and Music in Motion". The project emerged as a result of the two-year efforts by the two NGOs to support the development of vulnerable groups of children in the region by creating opportunities for early childhood learning through play-based programming. The mobile approach for reaching children with limited access to social and educational services which was developed by WWO Bulgaria and the NGO Club was in line with the hospital's desire to improve its social rehabilitation activities for children receiving treatment there.

The goal of the activities is to support the recovery process of the children who are receiving treatment in the Children's Unit of the Targovishte Hospital by giving children and their parents the opportunity to participate in educational and recreational activities led by a play specialist. As a result, children enjoyed guided play sessions twice a week while their parents played along or communicated with other parents.

The newly created Reading Corner in the Targovishte Hospital is among the first in the country and provides children of all ages with an opportunity to find not only their favorite books but also enjoy a pleasant and comfortable place for reading.



*Children and their parents play in the Reading Corner*

**More than 80% of the children who were admitted in the Targovishte hospital in 2017 have taken part in the play sessions and used the toys and the Reading Corner. Over 70% of their parents joined their children during the play sessions.**



*WWO Bulgaria's project coordinator visits the hospital twice a week and organizes group play sessions for the children there.*

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

## Children in a Hospital Environment



*The Reading Corner in the Targovishte Hospital is a safe environment where children can play, read books or relax.*

### Children's Unit in the Targovishte Hospital

The play specialist's communication with the parents helped to sensitize them about the importance of play and helped some parents get important information about specific issues in their children's development. WWO Bulgaria's partnership with the Targovishte Hospital continues to develop and we will focus on building the capacity of the hospital staff to use play in their work, thus achieving sustainability of the results.

### Feedback

*"It is wonderful that these interesting toys exist" – /mother of a 6-year old/*

*"They give [toys]. They give us books, too. The day before yesterday we took the train and the puzzle. Yesterday we returned them and took other toys. We are very happy that there are such wonderful things for the children. It's interesting for us, too." /grandmother of a 7-year old/*

*"Thank you. Do I owe you anything?" /mother of a child with special needs/*



## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

## Children in a Hospital Environment

### Multi-Profile Hospital for Emergency Medical Help Pirogov

WWO Bulgaria supported the “Little Heroes” initiative for the modernization of the children’s unit in the Pirogov Hospital – one of the biggest hospitals for emergency care in Bulgaria. “Little Heroes” aims to create an environment where children and young people will feel special in a truly supportive, child-friendly setting. Pirogov’s clinical excellence in providing medical and surgical care to children and the new child-friendly setting will bring it on par with leading children’s hospitals in the world.

WWO Bulgaria supported the initiative by setting up 3 Toy Libraries worth 4,291 BGN in the Pediatric Traumatology Clinic, Pediatric Thorax Surgery and the Nursing Unit. The Toy Libraries are spaces where children feel safe and free to play and explore the world. Once a week, a specialist from WWO Bulgaria team works with the children in the units.

Providing children the opportunity to play in the process of treatment has a significant impact on their recovery. During play children forget about their physical pain, they laugh, think, make friendships and have fun. Parent feedback is also positive. They share that they see their children refreshed, calmer and happier. The medical staff in Pirogov see the play rooms and the support of the play specialist as important parts of their hospital. Doctors and nurses often visit the play rooms to talk to the children.

Children in the Children’s Units are between 0 and 18 years old and primarily need surgical interventions. Their hospital stay varies between 5 and 15 days depending on their condition. Younger children are more interested in the play rooms. In the early stages of piloting the programs in the Children’s Unit parents show a desire to learn through play and share that they want their children to have more opportunities to play.



*The renovated Children’s Units and the opportunities for play are an innovative good practice in the field of children’s healthcare in Bulgaria.*

**Over 2000 children annually from different parts of Bulgaria receive treatment in Pirogov for emergency interventions and treatment.**

## INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT

## Refugee Children

### Restart Play

Bulgaria has been affected by refugee flows into Europe. Due to the prolonged state of conflict in Syria and the broader Middle East, an increased number of refugee and migrant children have been entering Bulgaria daily. Since the Bulgarian government does not provide comprehensive services to these children, there is a dire need for recreational and psycho-social programs to help alleviate the traumatic experiences these children have endured and continue to experience.

In March 2017, WWO Bulgaria launched “Restart Play” – a new partner project with Caritas Bulgaria. The project serves refugee children ages 1 to 12. Three times a week, children learn through play with the help of two play specialists and WWO’s educational programs. WWO Bulgaria’s play facilitators, a Bulgarian and an Arab woman – both with extensive experience in the field of early childhood development – lead the activities with the children. They have created a safe space where the children can relax, have fun, thrive and build trusting relationships with their mothers who attend Bulgarian language classes while their children play. The mothers receive updates from the specialists about their children’s successes and challenges.

The project took place in three stages, which were determined by the characteristics of the target group and the partner organization’s activities with the parents of the children. Initially children needed to gain skills for participating in structured individual and group activities. The play facilitators gradually introduced WWO Bulgaria’s programs – Toy Library, Music in Motion and Storytelling.

While in the beginning of the project the mothers only participated in the beginning of the play sessions and were engaged with learning Bulgarian independently, by the end of the project they eagerly awaited the play specialists’ feedback about their children’s progress.

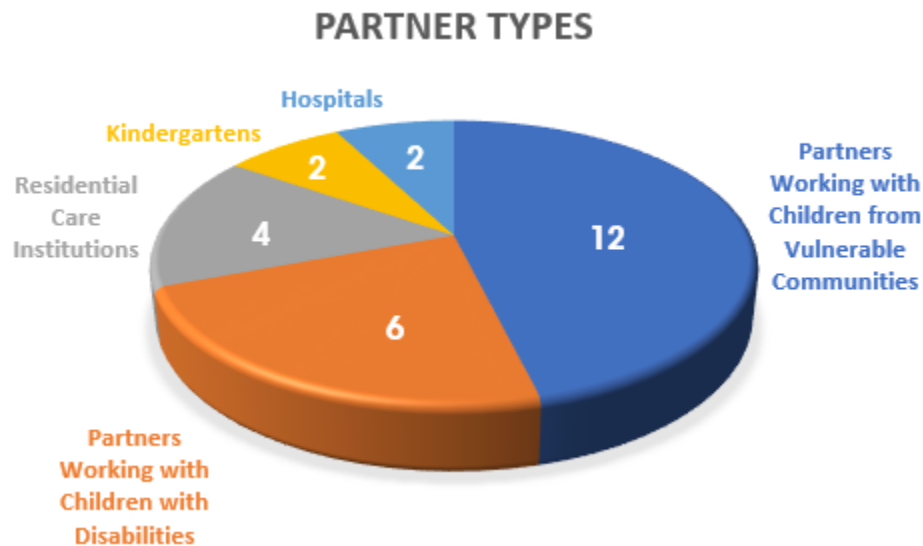
**30 children overall took part in the group activities and made significant progress in their cognitive and social skills. For most of the children learning Bulgarian significantly helped their preparation for integration in kindergarten and primary school.**



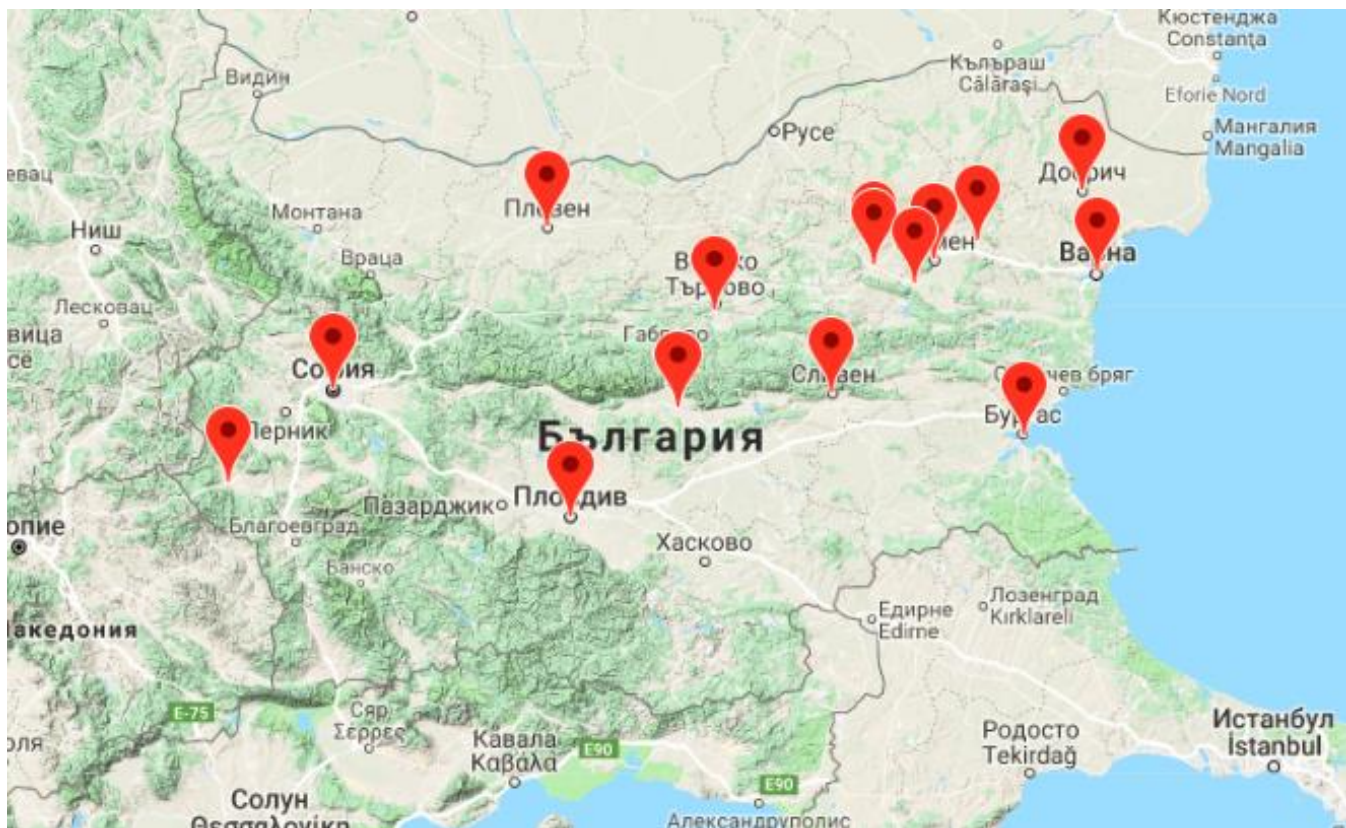
## PARTNERSHIPS

### Partner Types

In response to our partners' observations and questions related to the implementation of the Element of Play® programs with their specific target groups, WWO Bulgaria decided that it was necessary to identify the different partner types and goals. An analysis of WWO Bulgaria's partners showed 5 different subgroups of partner types – residential care institutions, partners working with children from vulnerable communities, partners working with children with disabilities, hospitals and kindergartens.



WWO Bulgaria's partnership network is diverse and covers 15 locations throughout the entire country:



## **PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Partners by Target Groups**

#### **Partners working with children from vulnerable communities (12)**

1. Center for Community Support, For Our Children Foundation, Sofia
2. Center for Community Support, Helping Hand Foundation, Dobrich
3. Community Center "Svetlina", Davidovo
4. NGO Club, Targovishte
5. Family Counseling Center, Novi Pazar Municipality, Novi Pazar
6. Family Counseling Center, Veliki Preslav Municipality, Veliki Preslav
7. Family Counseling Center, Shumen Municipality, Shumen
8. Community Center, Plovdiv Municipality, Plovdiv
9. Complex for Social Services for Children at Risk and Their Families, Plovdiv
10. Center Model for Integrated Development, Health and Social Development Foundation, Sofia
11. "The Health of Romany People" Foundation, Sliven
12. Center for Social Rehabilitation and Integration of Refugees, Caritas Sofia

#### **Partners working with children with disabilities and their families (6)**

1. Complex for Health and Social Services, Targovishte Municipality, Targovishte
2. Karin Dom Foundation, Varna
3. Center for Specialized Educational Support, Pleven
4. Day Center for Children with Disabilities, Future for the Children Foundation, Kazanlak
5. Day Center for Children with Disabilities "Winnie the Pooh", Child and Space Association, Ruse
6. Family Type Placement Center, Cedar Foundation, Kyustendil

#### **Residential Care Institutions (4)**

1. Home for Medico-Social Care for Children, Burgas
2. Home for Medico-Social Care for Children, Varna
3. Home for Medico-Social Care for Children, Debelets
4. Home for Medico-Social Care for Children, Pleven

#### **Kindergartens (2)**

1. Kindergarten "Pchelitsa", Targovishte
2. Kindergarten "Slaveyche", Targovishte

#### **Hospitals (2)**

1. Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment, Targovishte
2. Multi-Profile Hospital for Emergency Medical Care "Pirogov", Sofia

## PARTNERSHIPS

### Toy Library Network



**The Toy Library network is a union of the specialists in 27 Toy Libraries who actively work with WWO Bulgaria's programs.**

The Toy Library network builds upon the Element of Play® programs that WWO Bulgaria provides to partner organizations. The project comes in response to the need to support the specialists and develop their practice with children and families, as well as to provide them a forum for networking and exchanging experience, practices and trainings.

The network grew by 6 members in 2017 which increased the number of target groups that WWO Bulgaria works with and also challenged us to enrich our programs and introduce new Element of Play® programs to our partners. The increased network membership is a result of WWO Bulgaria's proactive approach to popularizing our activities and results in the NGO field. This led to an increase in the number of organizations who want to work with our programs and also the inclusion in the Toy Library network of some of the leading NGOs in Bulgaria providing community-based services.

In the last year the priorities in terms of network development were the following:

- Growing by learning – providing practice-based seminars for the network members;
- Identifying subgroups in the network members and analyzing their different needs for support;
- Identifying successful models and practices which can be solidified in the next year;
- Support for sustainable partnerships;

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Toy Library Network Priorities**

#### **1. Growing by Learning**

The focus in 2017 was on building the capacity of network members through trainings on programs they are already implementing and expanding their work with new programs. Two five-day trainings led by Lois Heymann and Mirka Feinstein took place in 2017. During the trainings the members gained new knowledge about the Element of Play® programs that they use in their work – Toy Library, Music in Motion and Storytelling. Participant feedback indicated that the members were very satisfied with the trainings and will implement what they have learned in their practices. The trainings also allowed communication between the members. The increased knowledge of WWO Bulgaria’s programs led to questions relating to the specifics of each partner and tailoring the programs to the needs of the different target groups they work with. Network members recognize each other and find the exchange of experience as well as the supervisions from WWO Bulgaria staff as very beneficial. For most partners monitoring child development over time is becoming an increasingly relevant issue which leads us to think that the partnerships are entering a more mature period.

#### **2. Identifying Successful Models and Practices**

In 2017 WWO Bulgaria analyzed its activities and identified some of the following subsegments of partners:

- Working with children receiving medical treatment (Hospitals)
- Working with vulnerable children and families (Community Centers, Cultural Centers)
- Working with children in kindergartens (Educational Institutions)
- Working with children with refugee/ humanitarian status (specialized centers, community centers)

WWO Bulgaria’s partners differ by target groups, goals and locations. WWO Bulgaria’s partnerships are varied and innovative and yield results for the children served, which motivates us to continuously improve and support the child care system.

#### **3. Identifying Subgroups in the Network and Analyzing their Specific Needs**

As a result of our partners’ observations and questions related to the implementation of the Element of Play® programs with their specific target groups, WWO Bulgaria decided that it was necessary to identify the different partner types and goals. WWO Bulgaria’s Toy Library Network members are practitioners who are willing to develop the programs in their settings and are eager to integrate new programs, such as Storytelling in their practice.

An analysis of WWO Bulgaria’s partners showed that the Toy Library Network members differ in their priorities and target groups. In order to facilitate the exchange of information and experience between the network members in 2018, we have identified five different subgroups of partner types – residential care institutions, partners working with children from vulnerable communities, partners working with children with disabilities, hospitals and kindergartens. There will be a leading organization in each subgroup which will host special study visits. In this way partners are expected to receive training that is not only closest to their programs but also exchange information with partners working in similar settings and with similar target groups.,

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

## Toy Library Network Priorities

### 4. Support for sustainable partnerships

The residential-care institutions partnering with WWO Bulgaria changed their target groups and the services they provide and are moving from providing institutional residential-care to providing community-based services for children with disabilities. These changes have required them to rethink the way they implement WWO Bulgaria's programs in their work. In this regard, WWO Bulgaria organized meetings to discuss the opportunities for effective partnerships in the future and to ensure the sustainability of Toy Libraries. WWO Bulgaria's team provided the institutions with information about grants proposals which can fund our future partnerships with them.



*Toy Library Network Members at Lois Heymann's training discuss Storytelling.*

## PARTNERSHIPS

## New Partners

WWO Bulgaria entered 7 new partnerships in 2017:

### 1. Caritas Bulgaria, Sofia

Caritas Bulgaria is a non-profit organization part of the world family Caritas Internationalis which helps vulnerable groups of children and adults through their network of member organizations and their local structures. In February 2017 Caritas Bulgaria launched a Center for Social Rehabilitation for people with refugee or humanitarian status in Bulgaria. The center's activities include social, legal and psychological counseling, accompanying their beneficiaries to institutions, Bulgarian language courses, etc. WWO Bulgaria's partnership with Caritas Bulgaria started in March 2017 when the first language courses for refugee women began in the center. WWO Bulgaria provided educational play-based activities for the children while the mothers attended the courses. Our partnership developed from mere coordination of activities to reaching a common understanding about the support of children and families with refugee and humanitarian status.

### 2. Multi-Profile Hospital for Emergency Medical Care "Pirogov", Sofia

Pirogov is one of the biggest hospitals in Sofia and it specializes in emergency medical care for children and adults. 2000 children are admitted in the three children's units annually. Even though the medical staff is focused on the medical treatments for each child, they are showing interest in the opportunities that Element of Play® programs show for the children's recovery.

### 3. "The Health of Romany People" Foundation, Sliven

"The Health of Romany People" Foundation is a nongovernmental organization which aims to make easier the implementation of a health promotion system among Roma communities and to improve the health state of the Romany people. The organization's team includes specialists from the Roma community who are enthusiastic about solving the problems of at-risk groups in the city. In 2017 WWO Bulgaria began a partnership with "The Health of the Romany People" and the Foundation joined the Toy Library network. WWO Bulgaria's programs are implemented in the district of Nadezhda (the poorest Roma neighborhood in the town) with children ages 3 to 6 years old. The play-based programs support the children's school readiness and prepare them for entering kindergarten or primary school. For the first time in WWO Bulgaria's history, the Toy Librarian is a male, which is not only new for the Toy Library network but is also expected to increase the inclusion of fathers in the programs in Sliven.

### 4. Health and Social Development Foundation, Sofia

The Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED) is one of the leading non-governmental organizations supporting the health of the Roma community by developing and implementing successful models for early childhood development, health promotion and integrated services for vulnerable Roma communities. The Model for Integrated Development is the first model based on years of professional work in the community which provides a set of integrated services for children. One of its main priorities is the educational support of children ages 4 to 5 and the development of the parenting skills of their parents. HESED approached WWO Bulgaria for support in this area. In 2017 HESED joined the Toy Library network. WWO Bulgaria's Element of Play® programs are currently used in HESED's Social Center for Community Development where children from the local Roma community attend kindergarten.

### 5. Community Center, Plovdiv

The community center is a specialized service provided by the municipality for vulnerable groups in the community. The Community Center in Plovdiv provides support to young children and their families and provides them with access to universal services and specialized interventions. The center's team expressed a desire to begin a partnership with WWO Bulgaria and use the Toy Library program primarily with children with educational difficulties.

#### **6. Complex for social services for children at risk and their families, Plovdiv**

The Complex for Social Services for Children at Risk and Their Families is a licensed social service provider whose mission is to improve children's well-being and ensure the protection of children's rights in Plovdiv municipality through years of experience developing community-based services as effective alternatives to the institutional care of children. WWO Bulgaria's partnership with the Complex began in 2017 when they first started to use the Music in Motion program with children from the Center for Community Support and the Family Type Placement Center. Our long-term goal is to expand the programs to the children's unit of the Plovdiv Hospital.

#### **7. Community Center "Svetlina", Davidovo**

Community Center "Svetlina" is a century old community center in the village of Davidovo. It houses a Library and organizes recreational activities for children and adults as well as cultural events. The closure of the educational and health services in the village in recent years has made the cultural center the only place providing opportunities for early childhood learning and support.

## **LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

### **1. Growing by changing partnership**

WWO Bulgaria's work standards require the achievement of a common understanding and common goals with our partners leading to a tangible change in the lives of the children and families we support. While our work with some of partners has led to lasting change in the lives of children and their families, other partnerships have not been sufficient to effect the change we strive for. We learned that achieving a common understanding about the guiding principles of work and the goals we aim for is key for a successful partnership. When such understanding is lacking or is limited, there is a need to change the partnership.

### **2. Reviewing changing partnerships**

WWO Bulgaria found that a periodic review and assessment of existing partnerships is necessary given the changes in the child protection system due to the process of deinstitutionalization and the shifting priorities and goals of partners. Having a shared vision is important to achieving long-term success and is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of our programs.

Our work with residential-care institutions showed that they are moving towards providing specialized medical care and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities and their families. The new services they will provide will be focused mostly on medical treatments. The transformation of the institutions into specialized medical care facilities changes the nature of our partnership and requires WWO Bulgaria to initiate a preparation period to end these partnerships.

### **3. Assessing the ability to meet the long-term strategic goals of a project**

Not only is it important to periodically assess the nature of the partnerships, but it is also important to assess the progress made on important projects in order to decide whether the initial goals of the project can be met.

Even though our project "Mission: Play" with For Our Children Foundation was successful, we found that some of our initial goals cannot be met due to delays in the plans of the partner organization to launch a Center for Early Childhood Development. The partner organization's delays in the initial plan have led us to freeze the project until such time when there are conditions for meeting the project's goals.

### **4. Developing our partners**

The versatility of our partners and the nature of their work and priorities has meant that sometimes it is difficult to empower them to implement the programs independently. Some challenges in the implementation of the "Restart Play" project with Caritas Sofia arose from the partner's limited resources and ability to successfully integrate the Element of Play® programs in their own work. This led WWO Bulgaria to implement the project activities independently in order to maintain the results achieved in the development of the children participating in the project. On the other hand, this requires us to improve the coordination with Caritas and align our goals and vision.

## **LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

## 5. Attracting closed professional communities as partners

In 2017 WWO Bulgaria became a sought-after partner by NGOs, state and municipal institutions. Thanks to the innovative project in the Targovishte hospital and its popularization we received a partnership request from the Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment in Ruse. In this way WWO Bulgaria's good practices reached the medical community, which is very closed and focused primarily on medical treatment. In addition, WWO Bulgaria's successful work with educational institutions showed that they also see the benefits of play-based programming in their work.

Capacity building (CB) is essential part of WWO Bulgaria work. Recognizing the importance and return on investment of CB, we continued our planned activities to build on the knowledge and skills of staff and partners as well as to raise awareness of our work. By understanding the unique challenges and strengths of every community in which we work, we are able to provide the training, resources and support needed to ensure that every child lives in a nurturing, healing and engaging environment and can develop to their full potential.

### **EOP Training – April 2017**

The 2017 EOP rolling program for the TL network partners started with a 5-day training in April delivered by Lois Kam Heymann, CLP, and Mirka Feinstein – MSW. The training was well attended by more than 30 representatives of the NGO sector in Bulgaria who have lasting interest in WWO play-based programs. Not only did the trainers present recent research on child linguistic development and the need of stimulation, but the training was backed up by practical sessions hosted by one of the partner kindergartens in Targovishte. The event provided a forum for professional discussions, networking and sharing of good practices.



### **CAPACITY BUILDING**

### **EOP Training – October 2017**

The second round of the EOP training run by Lois Kam Heymann, M.A., CCC-SLP, took place in October. Its focus was on experiential-based learning and building up on the Toy Library and Storytelling programs through the prism of the 6 C's - a set of skills that 21st century children need to master to become successful adults - collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation and confidence. The 6 C's are based on the book "Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children" by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph. D. and Kathryn Hirsch-Pasek, Ph. D. Our hosts for the practical part were our colleagues from Health and Social Development Foundation who invited us to conduct the training at DEMO Center MIR.



## CAPACITY BUILDING

### Strategic Planning

WWO Bulgaria is very proud of hosting a leadership Strategic Planning Meeting. This was the first time when all WWO Country Directors - from Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Haiti, Vietnam, and the US gathered in the same room to share experiences, learn from one another and create a systematic approach for our work going forward. There was natural collaboration of highly experienced professionals, sharing successes among vastly distinct cultures which showed how far we have come as an organization over the last twenty years. The sense of confidence and support was strengthened by Chamie Baldwin, the facilitator. Ed Collier captured the important moments from the trip.



## CAPACITY BUILDING

Newest Board Member Alex Mimis's visit

Worldwide Orphans Board of Trustees plays an essential role in the development, capacity building, fundraising and general support to the organization. The newest board member, Alex Mimis, who later on in the year became Chair of the Board came to Bulgaria and together with Melissa Willock, WWO's Program Director participated in a Music in Motion session with the children from the project "Mission: Play", which expands the services offered in For Our Children Foundation's Complex for Early Childhood Development by providing programs supporting early childhood development through play.

Alex comes to us from Goldman Sachs where he is a results-oriented Technology and Operations senior manager with 15 years of experience in COO, CFO, and line management capacity, and executive level expertise in program management, financial and regulatory reporting, cost optimization, and outsourcing. Alex has been recognized as a strategic thinker who designs and executes solutions to achieve high ROI and creates competitive advantage.

### Filming

We were very privileged to have three of our projects filmed and presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary Gala in NYC. Thanks to the outstanding professionalism Susan Neisloss, president of Big Bite Films and her colleagues John Frasse, senior videographer at Channel 11 in NY and Kristin Finkle, producer and writer at Big Bite Films

Susan and her team at Big Bite filmed the newly-opened Toy Library at the hospital in Targovishte, our work with the Romani community in the village of Davidovo, and our partnership with Caritas Sofia, bringing the Toy Library experience to refugees from Iraq, Syria, and the broader Middle East.

### ISSA Conference 2017

ISSA's 2017 international conference "**Local Responses, Global Advances: Towards Competent Early Childhood Systems**", attracted over 450 participants from 60 countries from around the world. Visitors gathered to discuss how the speed of change in today's world affects early childhood development. It requires substantial shifts in the ways early childhood *systems* are designed, equipped, governed, financed and supported. It is time to embrace a systemic approach to address the critical problems that hinder children's and families' rights, and to learn from local responsive approaches to build **competent early childhood systems**.

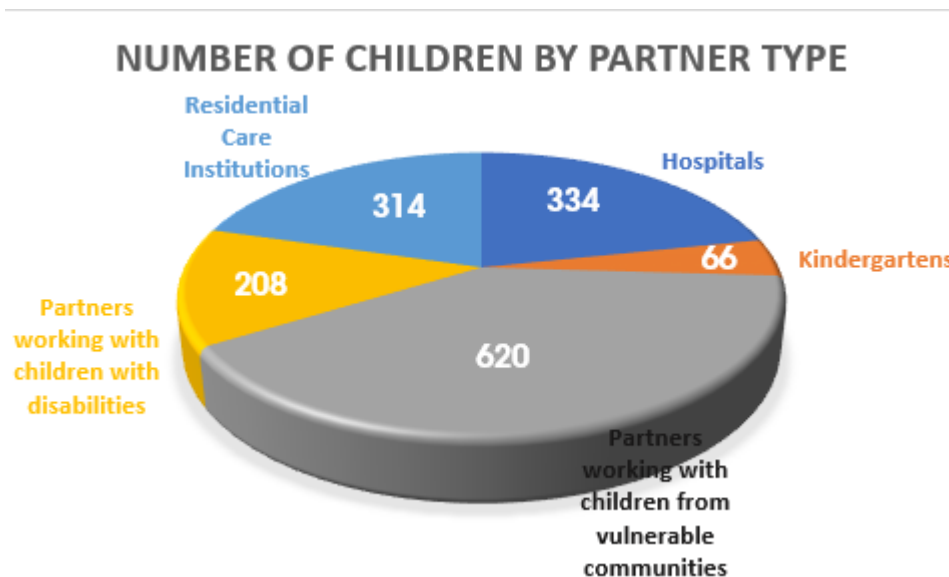
The conference united the knowledge and practice of researchers, practitioners, policy makers, donors and NGOs from around the world to explore themes through discussions and interactive sessions, while participants shared their insights and solutions.

Two of WWO Bulgaria staff members – Rositsa Petrova and Diana Ruseva had the opportunity to attend the conference and contribute to the discussions. Several valuable contacts were made for future partnerships and reference.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

### Numbers of Beneficiaries Served

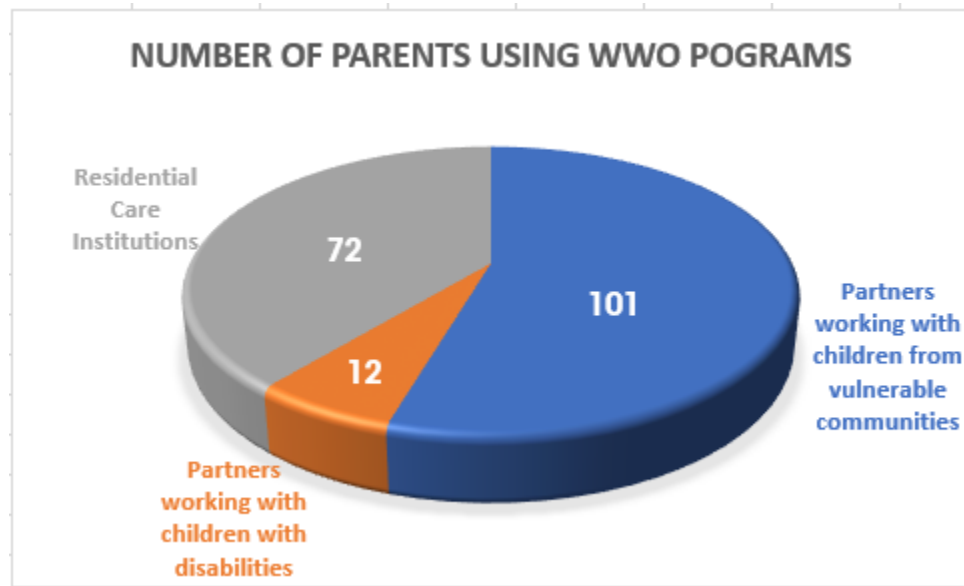
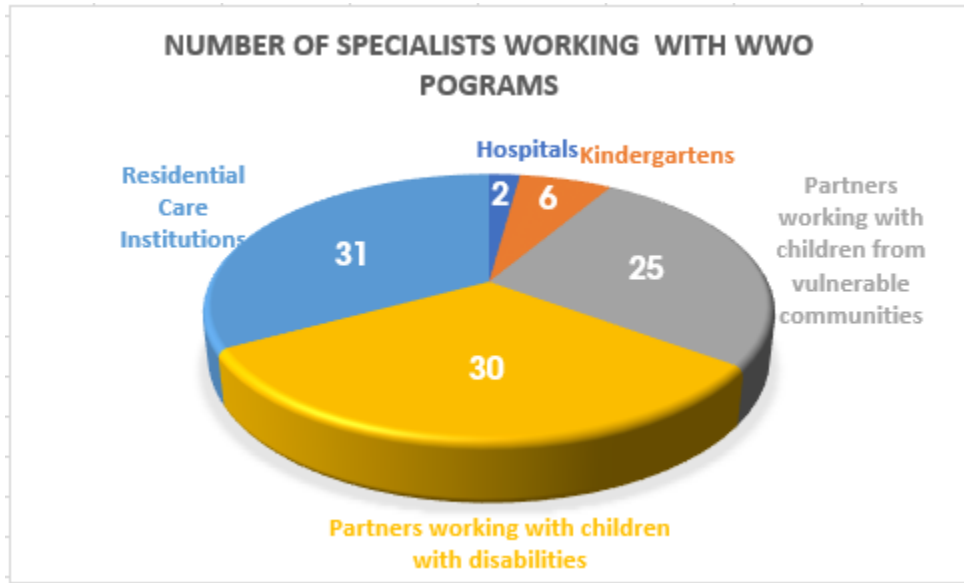
Because of WWO Bulgaria’s successful partnerships with 26 partner organizations, our programs reached some of the most vulnerable children and their families in 15 different locations throughout the country in 2017. WWO Bulgaria served 1542 children and their families through our Toy Library Network partners and the “Library on the Road”, “Play for Achievement”, “Restart Play” and “Mission Play” projects.



More than 1/3 of the children served come from vulnerable communities (Roma children, children with refugee or humanitarian status, children from low socio-economic background, etc.). Even though they are the largest group, our partners are not always able to work consistently with them compared to children from kindergartens whose progress we can track over time to assess the effectiveness of our programs. The second largest group of children are those in the Targovishte hospital. **More than 80% of the children who were admitted in the Targovishte hospital in 2017 have taken part in the play sessions and used the toys and the Reading Corner. Over 70% of their parents joined their children during the play sessions.** The goal of working with these children is to aid their recovery process. Based on the observations of the medical staff in the Targovishte hospital, play has a positive effect on the overall well-being and recovery process of the children who are admitted in the children’s unit. Despite the deinstitutionalization process, there is still a need to support the children remaining in residential-care institutions who are usually children with disabilities.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

## Numbers of Beneficiaries Served



*Note: Data not available for other partner types*

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

## Metrics

Although children in kindergartens is the smallest group of beneficiaries, the regular sessions in the project allow us to track the children's progress over time and use developmental screening tools to assess the effectiveness of WWO programming. WWO Bulgaria uses the Developmental Profiles III Tool with the children in Kindergarten Slaveyche in the "Play for Achievement" project. The project compares the results of two groups of children within the same kindergarten – a control group who does not participate in the play sessions and an experimental group who participates in the play sessions.

The results as of 2018 show that:

- **Children in the experimental group have made significant improvement compared to the control group, particularly on the scale of cognitive and language development. The children's scores have improved by several points in each developmental domain.**
- **Children with Bulgarian as a second language have significant improvements in their language acquisition since the beginning of the year.**

The project continues in 2018 and more long-term results will be available in the upcoming year.



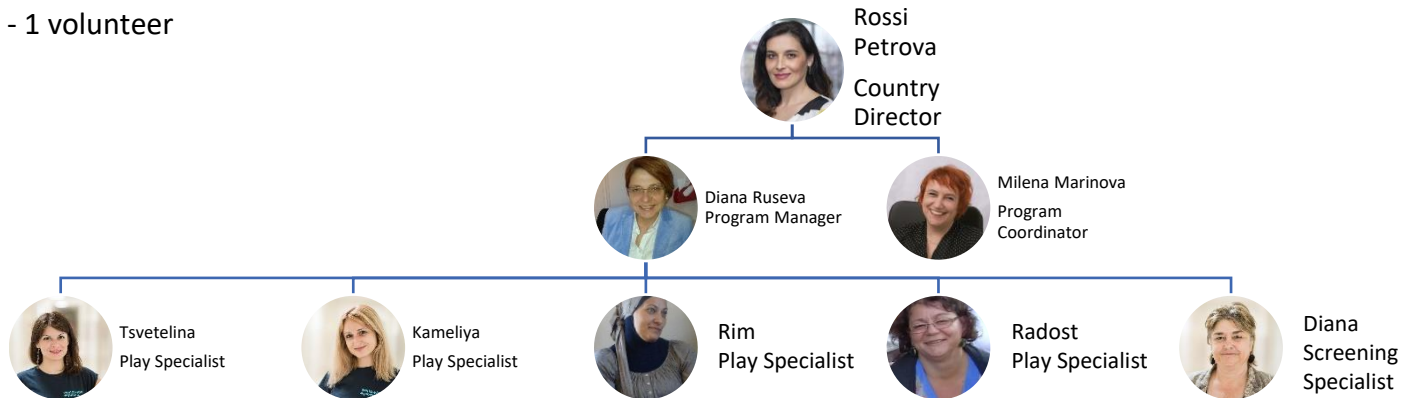
*A Storytelling session with children in the experimental group in Kindergarten Slaveyche.*

## MANAGEMENT

### Financial Management and HR

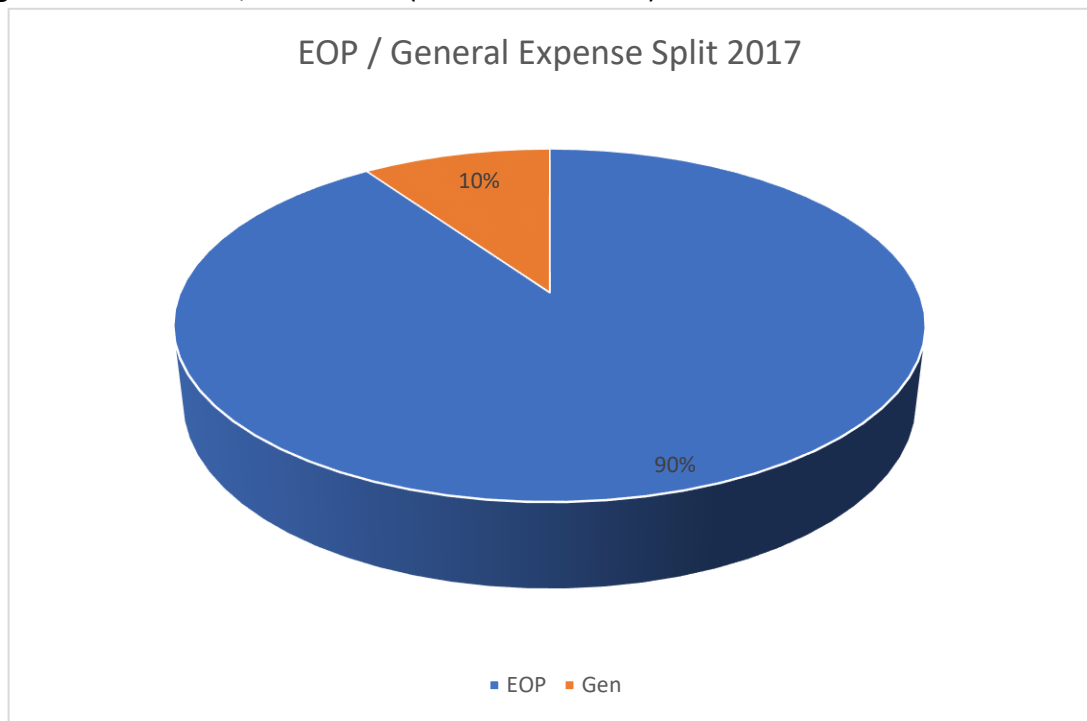
The team of WWO Bulgaria consists of:

- 3 permanent staff members – Country Director, Program Manager and Program Coordinator,
- 5 part-time associates – 4 play specialists, 1 screening specialist
- 1 volunteer



### Spending

The total spending for 2017 was 141,741.85 USD (1 USD = 1.65 BGN).



## MANAGEMENT

### Constraints and Changes Made to Plan After Execution

**2017** was a very successful year in terms of development and expansion. Not only that there were no constraints to the planned activities but with careful spending WWO Bulgaria was able to cover partially several additional activities and events. These are the WWO International Strategic Planning Meeting, the visit of a Board member, the one-week filming process during which 3 videos about the work in Bulgaria were made, the visit of the Country Director to Serbia for the closure of the “Back to the Future” project.

## PLANS FOR 2018

### Developing the Toy Library Network

The analysis of WWO Bulgaria’s 26 partners showed that they are very versatile and include several subgroups with different priorities and target populations. In order to encourage a more intensive and practically-oriented exchange of experience between the network members in 2018, they will be split in 5 subgroups with specific priorities in the coming year:

- Institutional partners (4 residential-care institutions) – the focus will be on achieving sustainability for the Toy Libraries
- Partners working with vulnerable children (12 services working with vulnerable groups of children and their families) – increasing parent involvement in WWO Bulgaria’s programs
- Children with disabilities and their families (6 services) – integrating WWO Bulgaria’s programs into the partners’ activities
- Hospitals (2) – Popularizing the medico-social approach in children’s units
- Kindergartens (2) – popularizing the results and expanding the model in other locations

A leading organization for 2018 will be selected for each subgroup and it will host study visits for the other partners. In this way, partners are expected to receive training that is closest to their own practice and also exchange experience with similar services and programs.

The successful models will be popularized and improved in 2018.

### Working with Refugee Children

In April 2018 WWO Bulgaria will begin the project “Growing by Playing” funded by the International Women’s Club. The project aims to support the development, integration and adaptation of refugee children in Bulgarian education institutions (nurseries, kindergartens, schools) by providing play-based activities for children and their families who have received refugee or humanitarian status in Bulgaria.

The adaptation of the children in schools and kindergartens is hindered by their poor command of Bulgarian, the limited number of social skills and the lack of stimuli for their cognitive development caused by the constraints their families face in their adaptation process. The play sessions in the project “Growing by Playing” will support the process of adaptation of 12 to 15 children ages 3 to 7 years old and their families.

The 5000 lv. project is among the 25 projects selected by the International Women’s Club for funding in 2018. The project activities will take place in the next 12 months and will include play sessions three times a week

with children from families with refugee or humanitarian status who are preparing to be enrolled in the Bulgarian educational system. 10 Bulgarian families with children ages 3 to 7 years old will also be included in the play sessions, thereby encouraging the integration of the refugee children and fostering their communication with Bulgarian peers. Play will create opportunities for developing the children's cognitive, communication and social skills and will also support the parents to learn to recognize and respond to their children's needs in the process of adaptation to the new environment.

Every parent will be able to monitor their children's progress by filling out a screening questionnaire (DP3) which will raise the parents' awareness of their children's development and identify their strengths and needs for additional support. Mothers will not only take part in the play sessions with their children but will be encouraged to share and discuss important ECD topics. To improve the Bulgarian language skills and cultural exchange the refugee and Bulgarian children will be provided the opportunity to communicate informally at a community event where Bulgarian mothers can take part in the group play sessions alongside the refugee mothers.

### Hospitals

WWO Bulgaria aims to popularize the medico-social approach to hospital care in 2018 and expand the Toy Libraries in more children's units in the country. Specific goals for our partnership with Pirogov in Sofia include:

- Organizing seminars and events for the staff in the 3 pediatric units to encourage them to use the Toy Library in their daily work with children
- Providing a volunteer to support the work of the Toy Libraries in the hospital
- Promoting the good practice among the medical community

## ANNEX

### Human Interest Stories

## Dilyan

When I first saw him, the three-year old Dilyan was observing how two other children were racing with cars. He was looking at them anxiously awaiting to find out who the winner will be. He had a favorite. I remember looking at his blue eyes thinking how he is exploring the world, storing memories and knowledge in his developing brain.

Dilyan is part of our Toy Library group in kindergarten “Slaveyche” in Targovishte. He is a curious little boy who loves to play with cars and trucks. He also loves to do puzzles and to draw and, even though he is so young, he already knows how to count to five and which letter his name starts with.

Dilyan’s timidity was the first thing I noticed in the beginning of our work. He was curious about the new colorful toys we carried and even competed for certain toys with the other children, but once he started playing with the toys he was hesitant and unsure what to do. “I can’t”, Dilyan said regardless of whether he was playing with cubes to build a tower, trying to make a sandwich with everyone’s favorite cooking sets, or even doing a simple puzzle. He always chose to play with his familiar cars and trucks sometimes getting upset and refusing to participate in the games. He went to the sides but before that he announced loudly “I am not going to play” to ensure that everyone knew and sat on one of the chairs around the walls.

The world is a complicated place when you are three years old. The walls seem higher, the sounds shriller, the scents sharper and building a tower of cubes can be a real challenge. Dilyan expected that it would be complicated, that he won’t be able to do it, that he will be scolded. The only thing that gave out his desire to play was his voice which often called us to tell us that he will not be playing.

Dilyan needed an ally in the games. He needed an adult to stand by him and support him. To show him that it’s not scary to fail because you can always start again. We responded to his insecurity with support and every time we played an adult sat by him to help him. Each time Dilyan communicated with other children we encouraged him and supported him.

Gradually, Dilyan started having more fun during the play sessions and they became his time for successes. Step by step his confidence grew; his fear of failure decreased and became almost imperceptible. He used his imagination more and more and was happy with his accomplishments.

One day I noticed Dilyan observing children playing with racing cars again. This time, however, he did not stay to the sides. He grabbed his favorite truck and boldly took part in the game. The other children accepted him and the race continued with happy laughter.

## Nilai

The two-year old Nilai first entered the Family Counseling Center scared and crying. Every interaction with an adult scared the little girl and she snuggled closely in her mother's arms. This was the first time she visited a place where so many people spoke a language different than the language spoken at home. Her family lived in one of the poorest parts of town where people speak Turkish and only leave their homes if they work outside. Nilai's young parents wanted a better future for their child and wanted to enroll her in kindergarten but felt powerless to help Nilai overcome her fear of strangers and start speaking Bulgarian. The Family Counseling Center close to their home turned out to be one of the few opportunities to break the vicious cycle.

Nilai first showed interest in the cooking sets in the Toy Library. Nilai's mother had to be constantly present during the sessions and translate in order for us to be able to communicate with Nilai. The toys visibly calmed her down and we encouraged her to explore a new toy with each visit. We gradually started introducing Bulgarian words in the play sessions and sang appropriate songs. Play brought us closer and Nilai now smiled when she saw us. She was able to play with us without the presence of her mother now.

Nilai started using the Bulgarian words she learned at home and her parents were surprised to find that she preferred to communicate with them in Bulgarian. Encouraged by the change, they continued playing with Nilai and singing songs at home. After ten months of work it was possible to enroll Nilai in kindergarten and her parents did exactly that. The news that the little Nilai speaks two languages comfortably and attends kindergarten quickly spread in the neighborhood. As a result of that, 3 more families overcame their fears and sought help from the Family Counseling Center to help their children get ready for school.

## Ani

Ani was almost 4 years old and had Down Syndrome. The second child of older parents, she visited the Day Center for Children with Special Needs in DMSGD Varna. When Ani first started coming to us, she completely depended on other adults for even the simplest daily routines. She could barely say a few words that were difficult to understand – her name, mommy, sister, no. It was difficult to spot a smile or excitement on her face. She did not understand the concepts of color and weight. Her condition made her parents sad as they had tried very hard to make Ani's life easier and enroll her in kindergarten.

The change in Ani happened spontaneously one day when I offered her a flower stacking toy from the Toy Library. It quickly turned into her favorite toy for the next two months. I enjoyed seeing Ani have so much fun stacking the flowers, screaming with joy every time I praised her for a job well done. We gradually started going out of the Library and looking for flowers and different colors in the garden, having fun with all the new things she discovered. She already had a favorite color – orange – which she showed everyone around her with the pride of a discoverer. Ani gladly repeated the new words she learned in the Toy Library in our walks outside. It seemed like the world had just become real for the child and experiencing it was a source of happiness and gave her a reason to smile. In the end of our work, the change in Ani made her parents believe in her abilities to learn and develop.

## INNOVATION

In 2017 WWO Bulgaria started working with two new target groups and developed innovative approaches and practices for working with refugee children and children in hospitals.

Thanks to our partnership with two hospitals in Bulgaria, children receive not only healthcare but also emotional support in order to overcome their fears regarding the shots, scalpels, white coats and everything else that surrounds them in the hospital. Through play they learn more about the new situation they are in, express their emotions and gain confidence that they can deal with the hospital environment. We believe that this is extremely important for physical and emotional recovery process. Play holds a transformative power for both children and adults and WWO Bulgaria protects and supports children's development and psychosocial well-being of all children through play.

WWO Bulgaria is also one of the few organizations in the country that deals with the problems of children and families with refugee or humanitarian status who want to settle in Bulgaria. They receive minimal support from the state and find it very difficult to integrate in the new environment. The state does not provide educational support and language classes to the children and their families and it can be overwhelming to adapt to the new life in Bulgaria. Statistics show that only 35% of the children who have received refugee or humanitarian status in Bulgaria in 2017 are enrolled in school.

WWO Bulgaria's project "Restart Play" and the upcoming project "Growing by Playing" addresses these problems and supports the development, integration and adaptation of refugee children in Bulgarian education institutions (nurseries, kindergartens, schools) by providing play-based activities for children and their families. These projects will allow WWO Bulgaria to formulate principles for successfully supporting the development and integration of children with refugee status, which can be applied and replicated in other locations and by other organizations. WWO Bulgaria will continue developing these innovative models in 2018.

