

Covid-19 Pandemic

News from Caritas Romania - Mai 2020

Overview general situation

Until Mai 13, a number of 16,002 people got infected by the new coronavirus in Romania. 1,016 persons have died.

The state of emergency has been decreed on March 16 and lockdown measures have been introduced successively. People are allowed to leave their homes only for certain reasons (job, buying food and medicines, caring for elderly, agricultural works, etc.) and are obliged to carry a written declaration about the purpose of leaving their house.

The state of emergency will end on May 15, when some restrictions will be eased. Schools will remain closed until September (with exception of 8th and 12th grade for final exams in June).

According to statistics offered by the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection, until May 8, a number of 889,622 of working contracts have been temporarily suspended since the beginning of the crisis. Another 331,709 persons definitely lost their job. This means that 1,221,331 persons out of a workforce of 7 million (October 2019) are not working any more (17.5%).

In order to support persons, who lost their jobs, the government introduced a support scheme (called "technical unemployment") paying 75% of the salaries of persons, whose contracts have been temporarily suspended. Parents, who have to stay at home with their children due to the closure of kindergartens and schools, have the right to get paid holidays – the costs are also supported by state.

The population groups most vulnerable to the economic impact of the crisis are persons, who worked in the informal sector: due to lockdown measures, they do not have access to their jobs anymore, but since they have not been formally employed, they are not eligible to government support.

Schools and kindergartens are closed already since beginning of March and will not be reopened until summer holidays. In theory, all schools have to continue at least a part of the teaching online using online lessons in video-conference and teaching platforms like google classroom. Online schooling remains chaotic with many teachers not being prepared, lack of strategies, methodologies and regulations and high numbers of children without access to the necessary technical devices and internet access. Especially children from socially vulnerable groups are excluded from this new form of education and there are hardly any concrete initiatives to improve their access to education during the crisis.



Caritas volunteers distributing food packages in the Diocese of Iași

Caritas Romania in the Covid-19 crisis

Direct impact on the organizations in Romania

Lockdown regulations and safety measures forced Caritas organizations in Romania (there are 10 diocesan Caritas organizations offering a wide variety of social services) to suspend many of their social services: 64 out of 146 social centres and programs have been closed, affecting almost 3,300 beneficiaries. Most of the 280 employees of the closed centres benefit from the 75% salary payments of the government (at least for the moment, since it is still unclear what will happen after the end of the state of emergency on Mai 15).

Most affected centres are so-called day centres including kindergartens, after-school centres, therapy-centres for children and adults with disabilities and day centres for the elderly. All these centres have been closed due

to government regulations and it is not yet known, when and under which conditions these centres will be opened again. Some of the centres developed their own methods to stay in contact with their beneficiaries, using phone, internet or work-sheets distributed to the children.

Day-centres are also seriously affected financially: Most of them have been funded (at least partially) by local authorities and subsidies from the Ministry for Labour. Since programs are not offered any more, also funding has been interrupted (and only in a few places authorities have accepted to continue to fund online and distance learning programs). This brings several diocesan Caritas organizations in a critical financial situation.

Social services and programs continued during the crisis

All 20 residential centres (homes for elderly, children and persons with disabilities) run by diocesan Caritas organizations continue to offer their services for almost 500 beneficiaries. Strict quarantine measures have been introduced. Due to government regulations, the staff (291 persons) of the centres is obliged to work in two-weeks shifts without leaving the centres and staying in home-isolation between their shifts.

Home care centres organized by almost all diocesan Caritas organizations in Romania prove to be essential during the Covid-19 crisis, when access to hospital and medical services is limited. The staff (330 nurses, care-takers, and social workers) of the 44 centres offer medical and social services at home for 4,500 beneficiaries.

Special safety measures have been introduced in the centres to protect both the staff and the beneficiaries.

Caritas social kitchens are another important social service for the most vulnerable groups during the crisis – the elderly and children. 330 beneficiaries receive daily warm meals in 8 centres.

New programmes responding to the Covid-10 crisis

- Distribution of food and hygienic materials to vulnerable families and persons: Several diocesan Caritas organizations started to distribute relief packages to those most affected by the economic impact of the crisis. Packages are delivered for example to beneficiaries of (meanwhile closed) day centres,

Schools are not closed - School buildings are closed. Caritas Alba Iulia

In our Hand in Hand Day Center from Sîngeorgiu de Mureş (Mureş county) we have been continuing our after-school activities online since the end of March. In this way we can work with 35 children coming from vulnerable families (families with low income, roma communities), aged between 5-11.

In addition to activities that include individual development, development of movement, various do-it-yourself developmental games, during the online classes we also include activities aimed to improve the writing, reading and numeracy skills of the participating children. At the same time, our colleagues find it of great importance to create and share pastoral videos with the children.

Mária Récsei, the program manager, sees the work, the struggles, difficulties and challenges involved in the implementation of the task as worthwhile:

"It is a huge challenge. My main idea was to try everything we can to stay in touch with whoever we can.

The feedback is positive, our clients are grateful, they feel we are doing everything we can, we are really there for them. I don't think there's anything more important in this situation. Parents and children from our target group know they can count on us, they know we are there, we try to educate the children based on the given possibilities, and at the same time we bring a little fun, a little joy, a little relaxation into their lives."

The parents were positive about the idea of online teaching from the beginning, ever since the feedback in-



Online sports exercises

cludes gratitude, and the children are constantly looking forward to the next session, for more and more tasks and game ideas. If a child misses out, they ask about the possibilities of repeating the class, other children are ready hours before the session. The smaller siblings often participate as well.

The list of exercises, tasks, games that can be presented and managed online, what is not more and not less than the needs of children, it is not only shaped by experience, but it depends at least as much on the instincts and feelings of the colleagues. As an example, at the beginning the online gym classes hid difficulties for the teachers, as until now the development of movement of the children took place in an equipped gym; the personal encounters and proximity have made it possible to correct the child's movement and repositioning their legs, arms. Today, however, our professionals have to work with the toolbox that can be found in every home: this is how a cherished teddy bear or a scarf that was only used in winter, will be an integral part of a rhythmic gymnastics class.

Krisztina, who, as a teacher, develops children's mobility, writing, reading and numeracy skills, started the task with fear, but as soon as she saw the success of her work, her fear turned into enthusiasm.

"I had a big fear of standing in front of the camera and doing gymnastics. I was really anxious the first two or three times, but after that it turned out quite well. And I see that the kids also enjoy it. It gives me so much motivation when I see us participate to the group and doing gymnastics, they count, they enjoy it all. It will get better and better and I hope we can reach more people with this possibility."



Learning at home



Home care by Caritas Blaj

elderly people, or vulnerable communities like Roma communities.

- Support services for isolated elderly persons: Groups of volunteers organized by Caritas organizations procure food and medicines, pay bills (electricity, heating, water, etc.) and assist to solve other problems.
- Remote (online and phone) programs for beneficiaries of (closed) Caritas day centres, but also for other persons. These programs include mentoring for pupils, instructions for sports activities, psychological counselling, spiritual programs.

The Ray-of-Sunlight Project

The Ray-of-Sunlight project is an initiative of the diocesan Caritas Iasi and a group of volunteers, who, being unable to get in direct contact with other young people and children, developed their own online social-media page. The site offers good thoughts, recommendations of films, prayers, stories read by volunteers for children and a lot of other content making it for followers easier to spend their time in lockdown.

"I am a physiotherapist and know that practicing physical exercises regularly and correctly improves our physical and mental wellbeing, since we, human beings, are physio motoric creatures.

The activity for our site Ray-of-Sunlight offers me a lot of joy, since I know that this is a period, in which our activities are pretty disturbed. During my online instruction sessions I feel that I can influence the wellbeing of at least some of us in a positive way."

- Sergiu Partac-Solomon – a volunteer physiotherapist at Caritas Iasi – gives instructions for physical exercises twice a week for those following the Ray-of-Sunlight site.

„When I agreed to participate in this initiative, I got involved with all my heart. I like to help people and make them smile – it does not matter if I can smile at that moment or not.

This project, Ray-of Sunlight, brought also some sunlight into my heart, since I know that I can do something good



Lavinia Dulcele - online story-telling



for others. It helps me personally – I am a bit shy, but with many dreams – to do live sessions on facebook reading stories full of emotions in my soul. This helps me to understand that I will be prepared to do good also in the future as a teacher, the profession I am getting trained."

- Lavinia Dulcele – volunteer of Caritas Iasi, who reads stories on the site Ray-of-Sunlight.

„My life-principle is that people need each other to develop, to encourage and to complete themselves. That is why God has created us different so that everyone can offer from his uniqueness and we all create this “together”, without which the world would not be as it is.

My participation in the activities of Ray-of-Sunlight has delighted me since I could use all the qualities, I have been gifted with, to offer a good thought, a reflection, and a dose of optimism for those following the site. I am also happy about the collaboration with the team of page administrators and I got “infected” by their enthusiasm and their wish to be close to the others, even if it happens only in front of a screen.

Giving for others, you become richer. At least that is what has happened to me. Writing my reflection messages, I often wished that people will learn to bring silence to their lives and to look inside themselves, since there they can find their power, their qualities, often covered with the dust of mistrust or abandoned due to lack of courage or prejudices, and there they can find God. I wished that during that period of the pandemic people will re-discover and re-invent themselves, that they will love more, will forgive more often and will view probably the same horizon, but with new eyes... not to change the landscape, but the way they look at it. They will experience again the joy of the small things, which form the real essence of life."

- Bianca Farcaș – a volunteer teacher at Caritas Iasi who is active also on the Ray-of-Sunlight site.

Lobby and advocacy

Since the beginning of the crisis, Caritas Romania together with other NGOs working in the area of social services are in permanent contact with the government, especially the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection to advocate for better protection of the most vulnerable groups but also to create conditions for Caritas organizations to maintain their activities and to receive support for their closed institutions and employees, who are not able anymore to continue their activities.

Representatives of Caritas Romania participated in meetings with the prime minister, the minister for labour and social protection and other state authorities. Some of the subjects covered in these discussions:

- Advocacy-messages for the most vulnerable groups of the population: families earning their income in the informal sector and therefore not being eligible for new support mechanisms by the government.
- Eligibility of employees of NGOs working in social services for "technical unemployment" (payment of 75% of their salary by state), in case their centres are closed. This has been achieved and hundreds of Caritas employees, who otherwise probably would have lost their job, receive these payments. At the moment, Caritas and other NGOs are in negotiations with the government about the continuation of this support measure until centres can be re-opened again and services will again be funded.
- Continuation of subsidies paid by the ministry for social services during the period of crisis, even if these services have been modified (for example day centres supporting children online): There have been some promises, but new regulations are still unclear and most Caritas organisations do not receive these subsidies anymore.
- Access to protection materials (masks, gloves, disinfectants) for staff offering social and medical services during the crisis (for example home care, residential centres). Even if there have been some promises, until now state did not provide any support.
- Clarifications for the period of re-opening of social services. Since schools have been closed for a long period and children from vulnerable groups do not have access to new forms of "online schooling", Caritas suggests to re-open day-centres for children during summer (even if with special safety rules like smaller groups, etc.) to support the children to recover what they have lost at school.
- Re-opening of therapy centres for disabled children and adults: Since therapy-sessions in these centres are organized individually (therapist with one child, maybe parents), these institutions should be treated like medical ambulatories and not like day centres. Especially for small children it is essential to resume therapy programmes as soon as possible.

Discussions about the re-opening phase are ongoing and even if there are no concrete results for the moment, Caritas appreciates that there is at least the possibility of dialog on highest level and hopes that solutions both for the organizations' beneficiaries and employees will be identified and implemented.

Diocesan Caritas Satu Mare: Roma Communities - amongst the most vulnerable

About 550 persons live in the Roma settlement in the village of Turulung in northwestern Romania, many of them at high risk of poverty even without Covid-19. Until March, most of the children of the community attended the Caritas Saint Martin of Tours Day Centre, where they have been supported to learn, to do their homework and where they also received daily meals. Now the centre is closed and the community under lockdown.

A team of Caritas talked to one of the families:

"There is no work anymore. And we do not dare to go out of the settlement. Somebody tried to get to his land to work there. He was stopped by police and fined, since he had no papers. When we asked the mayor for help, he say that we should get along by ourselves.

During summer we usually work in Germany, harvesting cucumbers. We still hope that it will be possible also this year, but nobody knows. They say we can get to Germany only by plane..."

Asked about education and school, the mother calls her son to show his exercises. The teacher prepares worksheets, takes a picture of the sheet and sends it by Whatsapp. The family is lucky, they have a smartphone (with broken screen) and internet access.

"This is very difficult. Often, I do not understand the exercises by myself, so how can I help my son. He has to copy all the exercises into his booklet, then solve them and send back a picture to the teacher."

The coordinator of the Caritas centre explains: "The school does not really care for these children. They send their lessons and exercises online. If a family does not have internet access, the children are completely excluded, and that is the case in most families living in the Roma community. Before the crisis I worked with children attending 4th grade. After six months without school, they will have forgotten almost everything. Four years of work with them will be lost. I asked some of my students, what they are doing now. Nothing, we do nothing- was their answer."

Meanwhile Caritas started to develop new methods of collaboration with the families and the children. The children received sets of stationary and printed worksheets, which are distributed to them directly in the community. After a week, they will exchange the completed worksheets with a new set of exercises.

