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Social work in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

The article aims to provide a brief overview of the legacy of social welfare and social work within former Yugoslavia and how it was enacted and practised in Bosnia and Herzegovina (one of six states within it) as well as the key changes that followed during and after the 1992-1996 war in this country. The overview also highlights specific roles of both international organisations and local decision makers during and after the war and how it impacted both grassroots social work practice and the changing needs of people who use services – particularly the ever increasing experience of poverty and its various impacts. Within a complex and politicised governance structure, key issues for consideration of the future role for the profession are highlighted.

Key words

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Social work, Welfare system, War, INGOs

Introduction

This article aims to offer an overview of the changes in social welfare across Bosnia and Herzegovina since the early 1990s and their relationship with the social, economic and political factors that caused them. We aim to offer a brief overview of the manner social work in this country of barely 4 million people was organised prior to the 1990s, key changes and their stakeholders during the war and immediately after. The complexities of these interactions, particularly in the war and post-war context, are finally examined in light of pointers for what the future holds for social work as a profession. We highlight existing literature and research on the theme, but also draw heavily on our own diverse experiences. One of us (Rea) studied social work during the war in Croatia, and later worked and studied social work both abroad (in UK) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (from 1999 onwards) for a variety of international organisations. The other (Jasmina) has just retired after over 40 years of experience of being a social worker in health care, industry and, finally, within an international non-governmental organisation (INGOs). The shared experience that brought us together in 1999 was that we were two of very few social workers working on health and

social welfare reform as INGO employees at the time. One of us (Rea) has been persuading the other (Jasmina) to publish more of the wealth of the experiences she had to date. Even with all of our combined experience, it is difficult to reflect on limited, scarce and frequently uni-dimensional evidence of the changes within our profession and highlight how it is to meaningfully engage with future needs. The complexity of governance, roles and competencies of different stakeholders (particularly INGOs, but also local decision makers) and needs among the general public in the context of ever decreasing resources makes for an uncertain future. We aim to highlight some of the key themes while explaining the legacy from which it developed and which it takes, substantially altered due to the war and post-war experiences, into the future.

BiH social welfare system before the war

While its origins can be traced to the nineteenth century (Chytil et al., 2009) the largest development of social work and social policy across former Yugoslavia occurred after the Second World War (Zavirsek, 2007). The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – a Federation of six Republics, of which Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was one – had a well developed and specific social policy and social work, combining elements of Yugoslav self-management, Bismarckianism and socialism (Stubbs, 2001).

Development for social work as a post-WWII profession in former Yugoslavia was intrinsically linked to the emerging post-war needs, including large numbers of children without parental care, war disabled and families of Partisan (anti-Nazi) fighters who were killed in the war and poverty. Similar needs emerged following the 1992-1996 war in BiH, but the subsequent responses to those needs were very different. From the 1960s onwards, the profession also included responses to mitigating the social impacts of massive urbanisation and industrialisation and emerging “juvenile delinquency” (as youth in conflict with the law were referred to) in larger cities (Sukur, 2003).

Social welfare was state-funded through insurance contributions and special funds for each of the Federal Republics, including BiH. The core of the public welfare provision was organised through decentralised, local community-based Centres for Social Work (CSWs) and institutional care for children without parental care and people with disabilities. Each CSW had a caption area of cca 10,000 population (but, at times, even up to 50,000 people) and employed a multidisciplinary team, comprising mainly of social workers, sociologists and psychologists. Internally, they were either organised through generic teams that focused on particular geographic areas or based on specialisms (e.g. people with disabilities, children and adolescents, marital issues) (Kljajic, 1998). CSWs performed – and still do - a wide range of social welfare duties, including prevention, monitoring and study of social welfare problems, direct material welfare support, family and child protection duties, protection of civil war victims, educational measures and protective guardianship for minors, screening for substance misuse, family and marriage counselling (including assessment regarding parents and children’s rights during divorce proceedings) (Hadzibegic, 1999). The organisation and delivery of services in the current context is further complicated by the fact that it is the municipalities that have been made ‘the founders’ and, therefore, organisers of the staffing and organisational modalities within the

CSWs, whilst the legislative framework for it stems from higher governance levels – but funding sources now streamlined and drawn from municipal and regional, and only in one part of the country (entity Republika Srpska) higher governance structures.

Prior to the war, the largest number of 1500 social workers in BiH were employed in industrial and business organisations (37%), with only a quarter working in the CSWs (Dervisbegovic, 1999). This statistic is linked, in part, to the socialist impetus for full employment. It meant that legislation included ratios for employment of people with disabilities, for example, within each state-owned industrial organisation (which all of them were) and that a number of welfare, health and safety and other, ‘human resource’ needs were addressed through employers and Unions (who also had their own welfare and solidarity funds) rather than statutory social welfare – for this and a variety of other reasons related to full employment (e.g. high prevalence of alcohol misuse among the general public). Further 7.8% of social workers were employed in health care - a prominent employer at the time, but currently to a much lesser extent.

Other elements of professional development were in place, too. In 1998, the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo celebrated 40 years of social work education in BiH. Dervisbegovic (1999) charted its 40-year development. It was first established in 1958 as a 2-year college programme. In 1968-70, a research study was conducted in 45 industrial and social organisations that employed social workers, in 10 municipalities and among 20 experts that social workers worked with. This led to a change in curriculum based on practitioners’ needs and experiences. In 1974, the Joint Educational Health and Social Care Council was created, which highlighted that a four year programme should be implemented with a focus on generic training. This happened in 1985, when the programme was also integrated with the Faculty of Political Sciences. In 1994, the postgraduate (MA and PhD) studies were initiated. In the early years of the social work degree, social work students in Sarajevo were mainly mature (average age was 35) and male (64%), while now the average age of University students is early twenties and most of them are female (over 85%) (ibid.). The Department had strong links with the employers, including Centres for Social Work, industrial institutions, health and education (Basic and Mikovic, 2012), which also impacted the above noted changes in the curricula (Mikovic, 2007).

It was only after the war in the 1990s that further social work programmes were developed. In 2000, a Regional Network of Schools of Social Work was initiated by the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University and the Swedish Psychiatric, Social and Rehabilitation Project for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SweBiH) (Hessle, 2001). It consisted of social work programmes in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Sarajevo (BiH), Belgrade (Serbia) and Skopje (Macedonia). Its members supported and co-ordinated the development of the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Banja Luka (Northern BiH, capitol of the Republika Srpska entity), the second social work programme in the country, in 2000, with the enrolment of sixty-nine students within its first generation (ibid.). Further Departments were founded in 2005/06, in Tuzla, North-East BiH (Mikovic, 2007) and in Mostar, Southern BiH. The latter is mainly staffed by visiting lecturers from Zagreb and local practitioners and government officials who are also doing their postgraduate studies (to become future academic staff for the programme). In 2006,

the above noted Regional Network also enabled the development of postgraduate programmes in Sarajevo, Banja Luka and Tuzla, in partnership with the University of Goteborg- specialist MAs in Supervision and Management in Social Work (Mikovic, 2007).

Prior to the 1990s, there was also an active Association of Social Workers and on-going thematic training, conferences, and other opportunities for continuing professional development, initiated also through regular collaboration with the staff at the Department of Social Work, University of Sarajevo.

Changes in the provision and needs began to occur even prior to the start of the war in 1992. In 1989, the last Prime-Minister of former Yugoslavia, Mr. Ante Markovic, initiated wide-ranging economic reforms to make the country-wide economy more competitive and efficient. These also meant that the impetus for full employment was abandoned, with then employees being offered either early retirement options or being given options for voluntary redundancy as 'economic and technological workforce surplus'. The latter included a redundancy package comprised of 24 net wages. A number of employees of then industrial complexes, particularly those who lived in rural areas, seized this opportunity, some with plans to focus on agriculture within their rural communities as opposed to urban employment, some with plans to open own small business ventures. One of us worked as a social worker within the industry prior to the war (Jasmina) and remembers taking regular bus-loads of employees to Sarajevo from Tuzla, where she lived, as the assessment for these procedures was being completed within the BiH capital city. This process continued even during the war, but within a context that was utterly changed.

Key war and post-war changes

Beyond human and structural impacts of the war, which was pervasive and enduring in its relevance, the key change during and after the war was the manner in which Bosnia and Herzegovina is governed. Its' governance structure which emerged in the 1996 Dayton Peace Accords/General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) for this country of 3.8 million people (one of the smallest in the region), embedded the division of the country into two entities, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). FBiH is further split into 10 Cantons, each with legislative powers in their own right. In parallel, there is also one District, Brcko, organised according to the US local governance model. The GFAP relatively disregarded the official social policy, as it doesn't outline any operational powers to the state, while giving strengthened and significant role to supranational organisations and within-country, decentralised, governance structures (Stubbs, 2001). Article III/3 of the Constitution (which is part of the Peace Accords) states that 'all governmental functions and responsibilities that are not explicitly afforded to the BiH institutions are considered to be the functions and the responsibilities of the entity-level governments'. Put simply, while there isn't a law that regulates social welfare on country level, each of the remaining 13 levels of governance (two entities, 10 cantons and a District) can and do have their own relevant legislation. Any attempts at country-wide reform – within a country where those divisions embody still pervasive political and ethnic divisions and conflicts – would also have to ensure that level of commitment and support. The institutional context for social welfare as it existed prior to the 1990s stopped being applicable and existing with the enactment of the

1993 Law on Social Welfare for Republika Srpska, one of the two entities (Basic and Mikovic, 2012). In parallel, the Office of the High Representative, a representative of the international community, was able to overthrow and instate any governance decisions made on any of these levels, including BiH. While the needs of the key stakeholders began to change, the social workers themselves were exposed to the same traumatic experiences and loss (Coric, unpublished).

In terms of the key stakeholders, the biggest change which occurred was the role played by international non-governmental organisations - initially through humanitarian missions but, particularly from 1996 onwards, through reform projects. One of us offered more detailed critical analyses of their role elsewhere (see Maglajlic and Rasidagic, 2007; Stubbs and Maglajlic, 2012; also for a more detailed review of all donors and projects related to social welfare), but it is worthwhile to summarise some of the key aspects of their involvement. By and large, particularly prior to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, international and local NGOs did not aim to implement any projects through active collaboration with the statutory/state actors or through employment of local practitioners. BiH social workers by and large didn't speak English and NGO employment was mainly secured by younger people who did -but did not necessarily have the relevant knowledge of social policy. One of the authors (Jasmina) was the only experienced local social worker who was employed to lead on a reform project – namely, Save the Children UK project aimed at supporting development of foster care services for children without parental care, first solely within Tuzla Canton (North-East Bosnia) and subsequently aiming to roll out the project throughout BiH through involvement with the policy stakeholders. This lack of representation and leadership of the profession within NGOs also had an impact on education. As there were no social workers – and due to the poor organisation and brevity of social work practice experiences on the undergraduate courses – practice learning within the non-governmental sector was not possible (Basic and Mikovic, 2012).

Projects weren't based on sector-wide initiatives – partially because of the complexity of the system, but also because of their very, projectised, nature. It was characterised by thematic, donor-driven priorities, and short-term (1-2 years) project funding cycles (for full details, see Maglajlic and Hodzic, 2005; Maglajlic and Rasidagic, 2007). Save the Children UK project noted above was also the only one that actively engaged local practitioners, managers and decision makers (and, later on, foster carers, too) as well as other local stakeholders throughout the initiative, including the definition of its priorities. Despite many project cycles it experienced internally, it ran from 1996 until Save the Children UK decided to abruptly close their BiH activities in 2010.

On the other hand, there were a number of issues to be queried and mistrusted among the state actors. Political, rather than professional, appointments didn't prevail solely among the decision makers across the governance structure. They also included the appointments of Directors of Centres for Social Work, for example. The politicisation was also embedded in the differential recognition of the needs that emerged during and after the war. Ethnic-based politics ensured higher than sustainable benefits for the war veterans, war disabled and their families. The Associations of Civil War Victims and non-war disabled frequently refer to the fact that, for the government, a

limb lost by a soldier is worth different amount to limbs lost by others or other forms of disability.

From mid-2000s onwards, the reforms were mainly framed by yet another externally imposed policy – creation of World Bank modelled Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSPs). In February 2004, the BiH Council of Ministers, together with the entity-level governments adopted a Mid-term Development Strategy for BiH. The so-called 'social sector' was one of twelve priority sectors identified within the Strategy (BiH Council of Ministers, 2004, p. 145)¹. The strategy timing and content was similar to those initiated around the same time across the region (Stubbs and Maglajlic, 2012). It aimed to implement the market principles in social welfare and to promote the development of alternative forms of social care (BiH Council of Ministers, 2004). The document didn't include a clear elaboration of what is actually meant by these declarative concepts, although they indicated a significant transformation of the funding, organisation, provision and auditing in comparison to the social welfare context in BiH to date. Brief elaboration included a readiness to promote co-operation with the non-governmental sector, promotion of voluntary work, initiation of a legal framework that will enable governmental and non-governmental organisations to become equal partners in the social welfare system, as well as the initiation of tax benefits to promote corporate social responsibility. The necessity to transform the framework for health care, education and the fiscal system was also noted (ibid.).

Towards the end of this five-year period, the language of the relevant strategies shifted towards the 'social inclusion', in line with EU accession efforts for the whole country. A strategy for social inclusion for BiH was drafted in June 2010 and remains available to public in its draft form.² Interest emerged among the only remaining large international organisations – UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNDP – to further work on the social welfare.

For UNICEF, this consisted of work on child welfare reform with an emphasis on engagement with policy stakeholders and with the additional emphasis on child participation¹ - an iteration of UNICEF own regional imperatives on community-based services and child participation and of prior Finnish Government, DFID, Save the Children Norway and Save the Children UK projects on child protection and social welfare reform. For UNDP, this would comprise a new sphere of work in BiH, unlike other UNDP offices in the region. The funding for it was and, in part, still is provided by the EC through IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession) funding. Initially, the funding difficulties emerged as the EC is only willing to support funding proposals through country-level Ministries, namely Ministry of Civil Affairs which has statutory responsibilities regarding social welfare for such matters. However, in the game of Chinese whispers between entity-level Ministries responsible for social welfare and the stake UN agencies wanted to play in the implementation of such activities, the

¹Including education, health, agriculture, forestry, water industry, ecology, infrastructure, energetics, industry, anti-mine activities and IT.

² See

http://www.dep.gov.ba/razvojni_dokumenti/socijalne_ukljucenosti/Archive.aspx?langTag=bs-BA&pageIndex=1 for the BiH versions of the draft (last accessed: 14 December 2013).

relevant documents weren't prepared and social inclusion funding has only been secured for one project, 4.1 million EUR UNICEF and entity-level Ministries proposal for 'strengthening of the social welfare system'. The project, however, only focuses on child welfare and child protection for children with intellectual disabilities, children without parental care and children at risk of being separated from their families. Equivalent, country-wide efforts regarding for adults do not exist.

In October 2013, the EU announced its plan to suspend the IPA funding for BiH, as representatives of seven BiH political parties failed to reach an agreement regarding the implementation of the ECHR judgement from 2009 regarding representation of 'others' (citizens that do not identify as Croats, Bosniaks or Serbs, the three main national groups; a requirement for holding, for example, Presidency role in the country, with three-partite rotation system currently in place for the three national groups) in the 'Sejdic-Finci vs. BiH' case. If an agreement is not reached, IPA funds for BiH are to be reduced by 54% (47 million Euros).

Hence, the reforms are compounded by a lack of state-level funding and four-year government cycles between elections, politicisation of the welfare-related decisions and even management of statutory services, as well as externally defined reform imperatives and commitments – on the one hand, to comply with the relevant human rights commitments such as those enshrined in the UN CRC or UN CRPD and the manner in which these are conditioned and envisaged by the remaining international stakeholders such as the World Bank or UN agencies.

The reforms did result in legislative changes on entity level in 1999, 2004 and 2006, adding further tasks to be implemented by the CSWs. As of 2011, there are 117 Centres for Social Work across BiH (72 in FBiH and 45 in RS, while the Brcko District has a Social Welfare Department within the District Health Centre). In parallel, there are also 10 social welfare offices within 10 municipalities in the RS (BHAS, 2012b). These institutions handled a total of 639.346 'cases' and offered 645.194 'interventions' in 2011 – an increase of nearly 100.000 per each statistical category compared to 2006 (ibid). These include a range of cases and interventions across the lifespan, from equally material assistance to referrals for institutional and family placements. The funding and the policy context for this work, while analysed on the state level, actually stems from Cantonal and municipal level in FBiH and from the entity and municipal level in the RS. Only several bigger towns (relatively speaking in a country of 3.8 million people and with 44.4% level of unemployment) are able to afford it – for example, Sarajevo and Podrinje Canton which actually have Cantonal, rather than municipal CSWs. The analysis of the available statistics on social welfare is not available but, together with the politically complex policy sphere, is indicative of future reform issues.

Instead of a conclusion - issues for consideration regarding further social welfare developments in a complex political environment

The majority of data and research on social welfare to date (beyond state-level statistics) has been conducted for the purposes of different NGO projects and hence set in a top-down terminology and framework, without a specific emphasis on social work and social welfare. Relevant findings within the profession can only be found

within postgraduate thesis work. For example, a study on burnout among social workers and their managers was conducted in 2009 in Tuzla Canton (Lucic, unpublished). The study found that 95% of the study participants are exposed to professional stress. The key cause of stress is excessive workloads, due to increasing legislative responsibilities, lack of resources and increasing number of needs among the increasingly impoverished population. The social workers noted that they feel they are stigmatised and marginalised, just like people who use their services. They don't receive regular salaries and even had to initiate legal procedures to ensure these are paid to them. They also stressed that they don't have sufficient competencies, support or training for the complex and ever-increasing jobs they are asked to undertake. Social workers also noted they lack funding to implement a number of rights which service users still aim and do claim for. Without funds to enable these payments, social workers reported that they frequently experience service users' verbal aggression. The Directors of Centres of Social Work (CSWs) who took part in the study also noted that these issues all further exacerbate the existing stress experienced by the social workers.

Social workers and the Centre Directors noted that their stress would be reduced if they would receive regular salaries, work within better legislative frameworks that would be more in line with needs and available resources for their implementation, regular opportunities for training and supervision, and if they had support from their (non-existent) Unions. Similar were the findings from a study on stress factors from an organisational perspective, conducted in Sarajevo Canton (Coric, unpublished), with, for example, 90.4% of the social workers who took part in this study saying that they are regularly exposed to verbal abuse by service users, due to the social workers inability to fulfil the entitlements based on the legislative changes that are actually unsustainable.

These findings are symptomatic of the breaking points within social welfare in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decisions for changes in legislation, policy imperatives and manner in which these are to be implemented don't stem or start from the actual needs and taking into accounts the resources, financial and otherwise, available for their actual implementation. Neither the people who use social welfare services nor the grassroots statutory practitioners have any opportunities to be actively engaged in these processes. Similar can be said of many countries across Europe, however. In a country with an unsustainable political and governance structure, and where political leadership in one entity (Republika Srpska) actively seeks to dismantle it further based on national interests, these are even further exacerbated. The role of international organisations who have little or no understanding of the legacies of the former socialist welfare system, and are driven mainly by own imperatives - doesn't help them become rights-based and rights-promoting watchdogs, through focus on the rights of children or rights of disabled people, to name but a two examples.

Furthermore, the links between education and practice have to be improved, from planning to employment prospects of future social workers. Higher education in general, and not just for social workers, is currently used to cloud the actual numbers on youth unemployment while providing them with basic (free) health care and insurance. For social work undergraduate studies alone, the numbers of students enrolled and graduating increased sixfold over the past 15 years - - from 146 enrolled

students and 12 graduates in 1995/96 to 498 enrolled and 119 graduates in 2009/10 from Department of Social Work at the University of Sarajevo alone (Basic and Mikovic, 2012).

Poverty, together with high unemployment levels, remains one of the biggest problems from the war onwards, with almost one fifth of the population (17.9%) living in relative poverty (BHAS, 2012b). Beyond the current World Bank project on improved targeting of material assistance, there is also a true scarcity of interest among local political stakeholders to initiate reforms with and for the citizens in the country. For the current workforce to become proactive agents for such reforms, both people who use services and grassroots practitioners need support, financial and otherwise, to be able to engage meaningfully with the issues that affect their livelihoods. Creation of a different climate for the reform is required, which requires a view and focus wider than social welfare reform alone.

June 2013 marked somewhat of a turning point for the role citizens play in the initiation of such reforms. Lack of political agreement over ID numbers for BiH citizens resulted in a number of newborns in the country not being able to obtain ID documents and, therefore, legal and citizenship-based identity. In case of one of the newborns, Belmina Ibrisevic, who urgently required a bone marrow transplant, this affected her chances to be able to travel abroad to receive the necessary healthcare treatment, unavailable across BiH, nevermind North-East Bosnia where Belmina was born. The case was the turning point for the citizens frustrated by the lack of political will. In mid-June, a leaderless coalition of citizens initiated the demonstrations in front of the BiH Parliament that was to hold a session on ID numbers, asking them to stay in the Parliament and reach a decision. Instead of asking the government to change, the demonstrators actually pressured them – to simply do their jobs. Politicians tried to spin this into a conflict along the national lines (as something targeted against the political representatives of the BiH Serbs), but solidarity and similar uprisings among citizens across entity borders highlighted this was not the case. Furthermore, politicians who expressed their fears over the ‘angry protestors’ and were even taped escaping through the Parliament windows, were seen yet again as emperors without clothes through images of ‘scary mums with prams’ at the frontline of each demonstration. The uprising, nick-named ‘the babylution’, ensured at least a temporary agreement by the government to issue ID numbers, thanks to which Belmina was able to travel to Germany to receive the bone marrow transplant. Unfortunately, Belmina subsequently died on the 15th of October 2013. While the events didn’t spark a movement, it gave temporary hope and insight that such might be possible.³

It is still not clear what role, if any, or what position social workers will take in any such endeavours. Yet politics with both small and capital ‘p’ in which social work education and practice exist are difficult to ignore. While the curriculum has changed from the solely generic one to include subjects that focus on domestic violence, disability and social work with older people, there is still a lack of focus on other

³As this article slowly travels into print, leaderless anti-government protests started in Tuzla, NE Bosnia, on the 6th of February 2014 and spread across the country on the 7th of February 2014. Almost all of the demands reflected the growing need for social, labour and health care rights to be adhered to and for it to be done equitably across the country – up to and including employment of social workers in elementary and high schools.

issues that impact current social welfare, such as ethnicity. The public reasons for it remain unclear, but Basic and Mikovic (2012) rightly assert that, in the current political and cultural climate, a possible focus on ethnicity and its impact on welfare is possibly perceived as exacerbating the problem, rather than an opportunity to explore its discriminatory and stigmatizing effect on social welfare. Basic (2010/11, p. 326, authors' translation) notes - 'It is undeniable that social workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina remained silent in the face of threatening policies and practices. It can be viewed as silence caused by their wrongful assumption that social work is apolitical'. This is exacerbated by the permanent insecurity of a wider political and economic crisis; despite ambitions for the so-called 'euroatlantic integrations', any integrative efforts are near impossible due to a lack of '(ethno)political consensus' on how to achieve them' (Basic, 2008/09, p. 534). It also begs a question which Basic (ibid., authors translation) rightfully phrases as 'how is it possible to continue to more or less successfully balance the profession between the function of providing support or help and advocating for the rights of marginalized individuals and groups and, at the same time, be part of the social, economic and political context which contributed to their marginalization?'

It will certainly require a more pronounced focus on the professional identity and a more pronounced and policy-engaged formal organisation of the profession through relevant associations (Mikovic, 2007). Knowledge of structural social work (Mulally, 2008) and pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1972) will be relevant for future reforms, together with wider engagement and partnership work from grassroots up. It is hoped that such efforts would result in an emancipatory and collaborative practice between social work practitioners and people who use social work services, united in a concern and aim to secure social justice and fight poverty.

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ⁱ For details see <http://www.unicef.org/bih/overview.html>