



Summary

The project aimed to renew child protection in the Pardubice region of Czechia refining their approaches to serving families and children.

The aim was to build trustworthy relationships, and identify effective strategies.

The project improved inter-office relationships by linking the three offices with the regional child protection authority. Ultimately, child protection workers spent more time with families, developed new skills and tools, confidence and inspired a follow-up project enhancing the managerial competencies of approximately 20 regional managers

Innovating Child Protection Services, Pardubice Region, Czechia

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

We are the Gov Lab, a Czech private policy lab founded in 2018 by former ministerial officials. Currently we are a team of 10 people.

Our mission is to support public organisations “from the bottom to the top” and “from the top to the bottom” by analytical, facilitative, and guidance-through-change services.

In this project we teamed up with the Pardubice region child protection regional team which is responsible for 15 local child protection teams in the local municipalities. Our project was 4 years long (2019-2023) and our role was a learning partner for the regional child protection system and specifically for the organisations and people that participated in the project. We created a team of approximately ten people, three Gov Lab guides (one of them also one of project leads), four team members from the Pardubice region, couple of child protection experts and evaluators from the Pardubice university.

We wanted to create an “innovation nest” from the 3 of the 15 local child protection teams, do prototypes focused on some different themes and areas of child protection services with each team, share the learning and then spread the learning through the whole region.



Around 120 team facilitation sessions took place, apart from it also a lot of different trainings for workers were organized, an international cooperation with two Dutch partner organisations was established, two trips to the Netherlands took place and many other events complemented the effort of the core activities.

The outcomes of the project are summarised in an evaluation report, some of the conclusions of the evaluation are presented below:

At (involved) workplaces of the OSPOD (Czech abbreviation for child protection team), there has been a change in working with the child and the family. The solution focused approach has been expanded, allowing a greater involvement of the family in finding a solution to their own situation, and this approach also received positive feedback from the families.

The mutual team collaboration of the OSPOD child protection teams significantly improved with the introduction of new regular consultations, this included a supervision of the more complex child cases among colleagues and case conferences if needed. The number of the case conferences tripled since the beginning of the project.

62% respondents (note: child protection workers) report a perceived improvement in their own professionalism and confidence because of attending the seminars and educational events. Overall, also a decrease in administrative tasks for OSPOD child protection staff was found, accompanied by an increase in the direct work with clients. However, they still dedicate some time to various non-expert bureaucratic activities related to the management of cases. This took, after reduction, 96 minutes per day for each of the workers (previously 111 minutes). For a six-member OSPOD child protection team, this amounts to 48 hours per week (previously 55 hours). Consequently, each participating municipal OSPOD child protection team gained at least 7 hours per week for working with the child and the family.

In summary, there was an 11% increase in the fieldwork with the families across all OSPOD child protection teams. The most significant change occurred in a town of Česká Třebová, where the family-oriented work nearly quadrupled compared to the office work.

At the end of the project, the overall inclusion of the child when communicating with the family increased by 22 %, and the overall number of conversations of the staff exclusively with the child also increased.

In each of the monitored OSPOD child protection teams, as well as in the aggregate data, there was a substantial increase in the interactions between the OSPOD child protection teams and cooperating institutions. The analysis of daily tasks demonstrated a doubling of overall interactions with institutions.

It can be concluded that the fundamental purpose and goals of the project have been achieved.

Do use the language if 'Human Learning Systems' to describe your approach? If not, what other language do you use?

We try to use the language of Human Learning Systems.

| HLS Approach

| Human



Describe what is ‘Human’ about how you work [with reference to the ‘[Human](#)’ chapter’ of “Human Learning systems: public service for the real world”]

We work with this dimension on different levels based on a “recursion” principle.

From the perspective of the clients of the child protection team, we strongly believe that:

- Every human is same in the basic needs of respect, autonomy, confidence to be able to change,
- For every human it means a little bit different thing.
- So, child protection services need to build trustful relationships with their clients, meaning the start of the service should be somehow slower than a formal bureaucratic process.

When working with the higher levels of administration (regional, national), same principles and values should guide their action so that they can influence the front office in the same manner as the front office working with their clients.

And the same holds true for us, as the guides through a change. We needed to act in the way we wanted the front office to act with their clients. Some of the principles we had been learning to adhere to throughout the process were:

- The change is as fast as our clients are ready, we support to do one step forward at a time,
- Who wants to support a change in others, needs to be prepared to change herself/himself,
- Be respected, be understood, be heard,
- The ones who are going through a change need to have their situation under their control.

| Learning

Describe how you have enacted Learning as a management strategy [with reference to the ‘[Learning](#)’ chapter’ of “Human Learning Systems: public service for the real world” or the [Practical Guide for the Curious](#)]

With the design of the project, we were inspired by the “Transition and strategic niche management approach” (Raven, R., van den Bosch, S. and Weterings, R. (2010)).

Our focus was to build learning spirals into the regional child protection system, so that when we as the Gov Lab guides are out from the region, the processes we co-created with the local workers and teams continue to live, serve, and even spread to the other twelve child protection teams in the region.

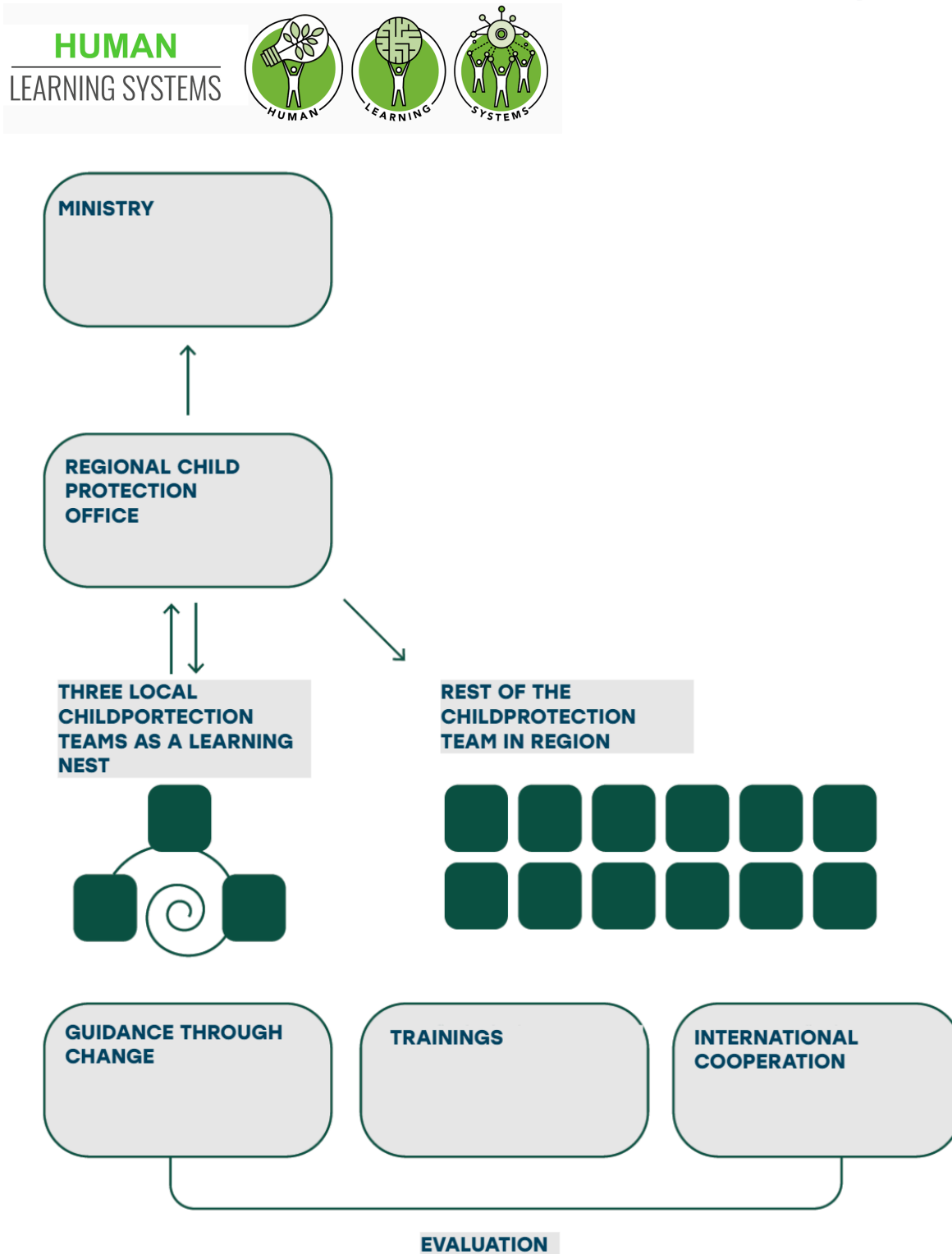
We partnered with the three local child protection teams and by a coincidence (or a destiny) those three teams formed a great learning nest from the geographical perspective and also from the perspective of the current capacity of the teams. By the capacity we mean that one team was already quite innovative and had a good track record of doing innovative projects, the second was somehow in the middle with its innovative capacity, and the third one was quite struggling with different aspects of their work.

The learning strategy changed during the project from the original idea. We thought that we would support sequentially each team for 6 months. But we found out very fast that this idea is a bad by design and if we want to support the creation of a great learning environment, we need to work with all the three local teams and the regional child protection team in parallel at the same time so that they can support each other during the learning process.



There were four layers of the support of the learning.

1. Each team was supported by a team guide who was visiting the team once in 3-4 weeks. Each team initially chose a different topic to work on and to learn about (the agenda of divorces, the assessment of the child safety and the safety planning, team dynamics and finally the methodical support). Each team was then supported to learn about the subject, we used service design techniques, facilitation techniques and prototyping techniques. The tested prototypes were then shared with the other teams in the nest to test their scalability. This was a regular teamwork supported by the guides through change.
0. Many learning activities for all the four supported teams together were organized by the core project team, so that they can exchange the learning they experienced, share prototypes, and build relationships. Those were reflective workshops.
0. As we went through the topics and themes, the training needs were collected and consequently the child protection workers were able to attend many different external trainings on different core competencies. This was a capacity building using external partners and courses.
0. We cooperated with two Dutch organisations (Hanzehogeschool Groningen and Jeugdbescherming Regio Amsterdam), visits were organized both to the Netherlands by our project participants and to the Czech Republic by their professionals. This was an international expertise exchange.



| Systems

What is the 'system' that you have worked with/brought together? (i.e. who are the people/organisations involved? What work have you done to help them learn together?) [with reference to the '[Systems](#)' chapter of "Human Learning Systems: public service for the real world"]

The whole design was to create opportunities for different teams from different levels of public administration to learn together. We were also able to invite the ministerial child protection team to some of the learning activities.



From the system perspective, the critical level for us was the regional child protection team. This team is responsible for methodical lead and the controlling function in the system. We were working with them so they can spread the learning from the nest to the rest of the child protection teams in the region and systematically support them after the end of our project.

So, the team was supported to evolve their methodical coordination activities as methodical meetings, regional managers' meetings etc.

At the same time as one of the main outputs of the project, the regional child protection team formed and designed their methodical portfolio. This portfolio was composed of the different prototypes tested in the local teams and from the already available methodical materials.

Also, we felt that the bottleneck for the change to really take off is in many ways the management competencies of all the different managers. Overall, this is a big topic in the Czech Republic public administration and a support of managers is often and, in many ways, lacking. Thus, this project was followed by a new one focused on a management support for all the 15 managers in the region and the learning journey continues by this project.

| Governance/Accountability

How is this work being governed? How have your governance or accountability processes changed to work in a Human Learning Systems way?

From the system perspective, the child protection system in the Czech Republic is very decentralised with no straight lines of accountability. The local child protection teams are employees of the local municipalities and all the controlling and methodical layers above are somehow indirect.

This creates in some ways quite high demands when dealing with a change. If a change should happen not only locally but also regionally or nationally, we must consider demands set by the complex communication, the coordination from the higher levels of the administration as well as the understanding of the matter and motivations of the local teams.

What has changed because of this project is that we supported the Pardubice region child protection team with competencies, ideas, tools, and other instruments so they are able to coordinate and communicate with the local municipal teams better. Mutual trust and strength of relationships in the nest grew a lot. The Pardubice region now continues to work with the values set in the project with the other teams in the region.

| Story of Change

How did you go about adopting an HLS approach? What was the spark for change? Where did you start? Who was involved?

It was quite coincidental. The social innovation team from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs connected us with the Pardubice region project manager who was preparing a new project. They wanted to teach the teams "home in 60 days" method. We showed them some of the Vanguard method principles and we discussed the "thinking" layer, consequently agreed that that's the key thing they need. We started to work



together on the design of the project to make it more open, so it's not focused on one method, but on the creation of the learning environment.

We visited different local teams and tried to get them on the board. We succeeded with three out of four visited. We creatively presented project on tailor made cards and baked cakes to create warm atmosphere.

The ministerial social innovation team supported the project with a budget around 1 million GBP. And the four-year journey commenced.

| Barriers and Tensions

What difficulties did you encounter? How did you respond to them?

The project was, to be honest, quite demanding mentally and required a lot of travel. We did around 150 learning trips to Pardubice region by a train or a car getting up in the 5 am in the morning.

It was quite difficult for a lot of actors to get to used to the idea that the journey is the goal. That we don't have specific SMART goals and indicators in the project. That we are not pushing any specific method but rather adapting to many different approaches. That we are working "slow".

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We were still quite young when the project started. It was our first project on a such a big scale. Prepared theoretically indeed but practically we needed to test our knowledge, learn, and adapt. It was complicated to get other project team members on board fast as we didn't have developed any ready-made strategies of how to guide through a change step by step. Hence there were often tension between team members about if we are heading the right direction, if everybody is comfortable in his/her role etc.

So overall we weren't as efficient as we would be now. We knew if we wanted the child protection teams to change, we must change. And it really happened. It was a life changing experience.

We also need to mention the fact, that big part of the project was realised during the Covid-19 global pandemic.



| Enablers

What were the factors/conditions which enabled you to adopt an HLS approach?

A very big enabler was the support of the regional social and child protection services director and the regional council member for social and child protection services. They already had an experience with transforming the institutional child protection care and they were very supportive. Also, in the middle of the project when we needed to have more focus on how to finish many opened topics and themes, they managed to guide us through it.

The second very big enabler was the funder – the ministerial Social innovation team. They enabled us to do what we thought we needed to do.

The third big enabler was the great project team. The first half of the project was a bit struggle with getting into the mutual harmony, we were around 10 people from 5 organisations from different cities etc., but in the end, we created large a capacity for change.

The fourth enabler were the local managers who wanted to invest their effort in the learning again and again even when their team members struggled with seeing a straightforward value for their day-to-day work sometimes.

| Top Tips

What are your ‘top tips’ that you think others might find interesting?

- Start parallel with all the teams right away.
- Start the work supporting the managers so they can have the learning experience in their hands and a confidence they can lead it.
- Create a rhythmical set of the learning rituals with each team, with the teams together, with the managers.
- Use a wide range of the facilitation and coaching skills to facilitate the learning.
- Don’t ever give up – use supervision in case of struggles.
- Focus on the “right things” that people you work with feel that are important. It will support the indicators anyway in the end – don’t let the work be dictated by the indicators set at the start - adapt.
- Trust your colleagues and understand well their story, their strengths, and their aspirations.

| Your artefacts

What ‘artefacts’ have you created that help you to work in this way?

We have created a publication about a guidance through change with a gallery of outputs. Because of google translation limitations we provide it split into two documents:

[OSPODy spreads-pages-1_en.pdf](#)

[OSPODy spreads-pages-2_en.pdf](#)

| What have you achieved?

What has adopting an HLS approach enabled you to do?



As stated in overview, this approach had many positive impacts on the front offices involved in the project and also on the regional child protection team.

At the same time, this wasn't "one shot" project, but we have seeded and watered learning environment that continues to evolve and hopefully won't stop soon.

We are also very honoured that we were able to spend so much time in the municipalities with the people living there. It was a life changing experience and we received quite a deep understanding and a deep feeling of how it is to work on the regional or the municipal level of the public administration

| What next?

What is the next challenge for this work?

Pardubice region is going on their own way now.

We are currently working on the ministerial level, and we are trying to create a learning environment from the ecosystem of 1600 employees with a management community project and at the same time we are supporting the ministerial section responsible for (but not only for) the child protection services by creating an agile learning culture there.

Sources

Raven, R., van den Bosch, S. and Weterings, R. (2010) 'Transitions and strategic niche management: towards a competence kit for practitioners', *Int. J. Technology Management*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp.57–74.

