



“Safeguarding child-friendly services for abandoned children, children in vulnerable situations and persons with disabilities”

Mr Apolonio Ruiz Ligerio

*Vice Governor for the Social Development Strategy,
Council of Europe Development Bank*

Moderator,
Fellow-panellists,
Distinguished guests,

I am delighted to have been invited to be part of this roundtable discussion on the children's right to child-friendly services. The topic of this session is important not only to the international financial institution I represent, the Council of Europe Development Bank, but also to me personally.

Fellow-speakers have already stressed the importance of protecting the inalienable right of all children to adequate access to health, education and social services. Children are by definition vulnerable persons. Far too often they lack the opportunity or the platform to make themselves heard and voice their opinions and concerns. This is all the more true for abandoned children and children with disabilities, whose circumstances and disability render them doubly vulnerable.

That is precisely why it is important for us all to step in and play an active part in protecting and promoting children's fundamental rights. And guaranteeing access to child-friendly services should be top of our priority list in that respect.

Access to child-friendly services

What do we mean by “child-friendly” in this context? At a Council of Europe meeting in Strasbourg in September 2009, experts on children's rights and social services provided us with a clear definition: services that are appropriate, adequate, ethical; that take into account important factors such as age, gender, religious and cultural background; services designed with the active participation of children in the research process; and, above all, services that are readily accessible to all children without restrictions or obstacles of any kind.

Social and health services do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of public administrations. Therefore, making public administrations **genuinely** child-friendly is absolutely key to creating an environment in which the rights of the child can be fully upheld and respected.

Lack of resources: the main obstacle to providing child-friendly services

As we all know, the global economic downturn of the past few years and subsequent Government efforts for fiscal consolidation in many countries have led to cuts in public expenditure. The shortage of financial and human resources, which is due to the lack of investment in public administration, is one of the most serious obstacles to enhancing the “child-friendliness” of social services. This was also highlighted by experts at the 2009 Strasbourg meeting.

The CEB’s solution to the problem: financing projects in favour of children

The Council of Europe Development Bank, which is the Social Development Bank in Europe since 1956, has been working to remedy this problem while fulfilling its social mandate. After all, strengthening social integration and supporting public infrastructure with a social vocation are two of our main sectoral lines of action. It is upon these lines of action that our project and loan activity is based.

The Bank, which is based on a Partial Agreement between Member States and the Council of Europe, operates within the framework of the Council of Europe and actively supports its values and priorities. The CEB provides long-term loans at favourable rates for the financing of projects with high social added value. On a more limited basis, it also provides grants. Over the past 10 years, one-tenth of all projects approved by the CEB have been in favour of children. From Iceland to Cyprus and from Portugal to Poland, the CEB has financed a variety of projects across its Member States, totalling 2 billion euros. Another 1.4 million euros worth of grants have been given for the same purpose. Projects have been approved both in target group countries (22 of our 41 Member States in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe) and non-target group countries.

Special attention has been paid to programmes in favour of particularly vulnerable groups of children. For example, in **Romania** the CEB financed a project for the integration of street children in society in 2004 (amount approved: 3.3 million euros), and a project for the creation / refurbishment of kindergartens and the provision of staff training and support equipment in 2006 (amount approved: 67 million euros).

In **Hungary**, we provided funds for the construction of a nursery school for 100 children in the municipality of Biatorbagy in 2005 (amount approved: 0.6 million euros). A programme for the construction of a home for disabled children in **Germany** received CEB financing in the amount of 0.8 million in 2007. And a further 25 million euros were approved in 2009 for a governmental programme for the construction, renovation and expansion of kindergartens and elementary schools in **Latvia**.

These and many other similar projects have contributed to the improvement of existing public administration structures and have brought lasting solutions to some of Europe’s most disadvantaged populations.

Improving education facilities: key to safeguarding child-friendly services

The education sector has been the main focus of many of the projects the CEB has been financing, and with good reason. Investing in the construction and improvement of schools and other education facilities is an important investment.

Ishmael Beah, author of the best-selling *A Long Way Gone, Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, and an active figure in the promotion and protection of children's rights internationally, is right to point out that: "the lack of education is a root cause of many of the injustices children suffer, and more must be done to provide them with access to quality schools".

There is no doubt whatsoever that information provided through education is crucial when it comes to making children, and those around them, fully aware of their rights. Education can play a crucial role in terms of safeguarding child-friendly services, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Building on recent progress and moving forward

Much has been done in recent decades in that regard: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the continuing work carried out by the UN Expert Committee for the Rights of the Child, and the Council of Europe 2012-2015 Strategy for the Rights of the Child have all helped to form an appropriate framework for relevant action. Initiatives such as the 2009 Strasbourg meeting of experts on children's rights and the present conference have an important role to play when it comes to debating outstanding issues and agreeing on ways to move forward.

Much more remains to be done. Words need to be accompanied by decisive actions. Safeguarding child-friendly services requires not only concerted action on the part of those who promote human rights, but also ongoing engagement and investment on the part of central and local authorities.

Only that way can we be sure that the most vulnerable groups of children are not left behind in the realisation of their rights, including the right to child-friendly services.

Thank you for your attention.