

Council of Europe Conference “*Growing with children’s rights*”

High level plenary session: “*Persisting and emerging challenges in protecting children’s rights in Europe*”

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends:

I would like to thank the Council of Europe for their invitation and the Croatian Government for hosting this very important event. Croatia has been a strong supporter of child rights for many years and is now taking its engagement for children beyond borders by sharing its knowledge and experience with other countries – as a new EU Member State, an active member of the Council of Europe and through its evolving partnership with UNICEF.

As the UN agency mandated to support governments in realising child rights globally, UNICEF considers the Council of Europe as a key partner. At the centre of our joint commitment to child rights is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The mid-term review of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CRC are opportunities to assess what has been achieved and where we need to focus our attention.

What does UNICEF bring to the partnership for keeping our promise to children and adolescents?

- First, we have a **global presence** in over 190 countries including in 42 member states of the Council of Europe;
- Second, we take a **comprehensive approach** - looking at all aspects of child rights and wellbeing throughout the life cycle;
- Third, we achieve **results for children** - By working with governments and other actors we turn norms and policies into action.

Significant progress has been made in realising child rights in Europe since the adoption of the CRC - many countries have met or exceeded targets for child survival and have strengthened child protection. Yet, far too many children are still left behind in the middle and high-income countries that are members of the Council of Europe. Improved national averages mask serious disparities – many children are uncounted, invisible in statistics and at risk of being forgotten. They include children with disabilities; children from ethnic or linguistic minorities, in particular the Roma; children affected by migration; children in residential institutions; children in detention; marginalised adolescents; children in poor rural or urban areas and still, in some cases girls and other cases boys.

The persisting **social exclusion** of children and adolescents and **emerging social inequities** are key challenges for child rights globally. They make up the **unfinished child rights agenda in Europe**.

*Turning now more specifically to the topics we will discuss over the next two days, I would like to highlight a few key issues:*

Lack of access to **health care** continues to be a challenge for disadvantaged children - many still die unnecessarily because they are not adequately immunized. In one country in South Eastern Europe, for example, only 4 per cent of Roma children have received all recommended vaccinations, compared with 68 percent of non-Roma children.

Child rights, dignity, participation and equity are at the core of the Council of Europe's *Child-Friendly Health Care Guidelines* developed with contributions from UNICEF. The Council's multi-disciplinary approach aims to strengthen linkages between health care and social protection and emphasises health promotion and prevention. We need now to translate these principles into action so that vulnerable children can access quality services. Many challenges remain: high out-of pocket expenditures, differences in quality of care and social exclusion and stigma. UNICEF has been working with partners including WHO to develop innovative models of integrated support to young children and families, improve quality of care and promote family-centred perinatal care. This is helping to translate the *Guidelines* into practice and we need to continue and expand this work.

Second key issue: Despite on-going reforms, most countries in Europe and Central Asia still place **children in institutional care** as a child protection response. Since 2 000 the number of children and adolescents separated from their parents has not been reduced despite a declining child population. At least 31,000 children below the age of three in our region are placed in institutional care – when only 2 to 5 per cent among them are orphans. Children with disabilities still face isolation and discrimination – in several countries they represent 60 per cent of all children in institutions. Children from ethnic minorities such as the Roma are also significantly over-represented in institutions.

These high numbers indicate that vulnerable families do not receive the support they need from **social protection systems** to cope with the impact of the current economic crisis. Yet, some governments have good practices to share.

In one country in the Caucasus, strengthening social work has been a key component of the child care system reform. Today, 2/3 of children who were living in large scale state institutions are living in families, more than 600 of them back in their own families, or in foster care. In one country in South Eastern Europe, a network of family support services was established in the most marginalised communities to prevent family separation, abandonment and neglect of young children. Inter-disciplinary, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic teams provide comprehensive support to the complex needs of the most marginalised families.

Little over a year ago, 20 governments committed themselves at a Ministerial Conference in Sofia co-sponsored by UNICEF and the Government of Bulgaria, to **end institutional care of children below three**. A preliminary assessment in 2013 shows that the number of children below three years in institutions has already decreased by almost 3,000 - a 10 per cent reduction. Through joint action we need to ensure that this trend continues- in particular by developing community-based services for the most vulnerable families.

Turning now to a third issue, **children in conflict with the law** have been a key concern for UNICEF. Our experience in juvenile justice system reforms around the world, shows that progress is possible. Legislation has been aligned with international and European standards; alternatives to detention have been introduced and the capacities of the police, judiciary and independent human rights monitoring bodies have been strengthened. The results are encouraging: In many countries of the region, the percentage of children in detention, both before and after trial, has decreased over the past 6 to 8 years – falling by 80% in some cases. These reforms, focussed on reintegration and prevention, must continue. But we must take the **next step**.

We need now to **look beyond juvenile justice** to address the situation of the many more children in contact with justice processes – as victims, witnesses, or seeking recourse. Daily, tens of thousands of children in Europe and Central Asia have their rights violated – including their right to health, to quality education and to be free from abuse, violence and exploitation. Many are victims of crimes, sometimes perpetrated by those closest to them. But only very few have access to a fair, effective and child-friendly justice system to seek redress, to challenge judicial decisions or to claim their rights in court.

**Access to justice** remains a tremendous challenge for children in the region, especially the most vulnerable. We call on governments, the EU and the Council of Europe to join hands and systematically include children into broader justice system reforms and rule of law agendas. I am happy to report that the UN Human Rights Council discussed access to justice for children at a meeting co-sponsored by the EU two weeks ago and the need for urgent action was highlighted.

Fourth issue: Increasing attention is required to develop **integrated child protection systems** focusing on all forms of violence, abuse and neglect with emphasis on early intervention, prevention and family support. Child protection systems need to serve all children and prevent those facing multiple child protection challenges from falling between the cracks. We need to take a holistic approach to the child and involve professionals with different expertise. Coordinated action between all concerned actors is a precondition for such an approach. The European Commission's commitment to develop EU guidelines on child protection systems in 2014 is an opportunity to build on effective approaches and expand these beyond the EU. To truly protect children we need to end the silence around violence. Making the invisible visible is the aim of UNICEF's global initiative to “#End Violence against Children.”

It builds on existing national and local efforts, using the global voice of UNICEF and other partners – including the EU and the Council of Europe - to highlight best practices and encourage action.

By way of conclusion, let me ask the following question: in the face of so many challenges, is realising child rights only an **impossible dream**?

The story of Jan, Fran and Filip, triplets from Croatia shows us that it is not just a dream. In 2005, Croatia, with UNICEF support, launched a national campaign *Every Child Needs a Family* to increase public awareness on the right of children to live in a protective family environment. The campaign reached out to social workers to raise awareness about the damaging effects of institutionalisation on young children. Melita Senjan, a social worker from Zagreb who had attended the training, committed herself to change the destiny of Jan, Fran and Filip. The triplets, then only a few weeks old, were about to be placed in an institution. Through Melita's resolve a committed foster family was found who later adopted the boys. In addition, following a strong advocacy campaign, the Croatian Government banned the placement of young children in institutions.

The story of Jan, Fran and Filip is an exceptional one, for thousands of children remain in institutions. But the story shows that there are strategic allies in all societies and contexts to realise child rights. Our common aim should now be to **turn such exceptional examples into the norm** for all children. Only then will all children grow up to their full potential, only then will Europe grow for and with children.

Thank you for your attention.