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Statement at the Panel Discussion
"National integrated strategies on violence against children"

Organized by the Council of Europe in cooperation with the UN SRSG on violence against children and the Permanent Mission of Finland, Geneva, 9 March 2010.

On behalf of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and in particular its chair, Professor Yanghee Lee, I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to this event - a great event, as the launch of the "Policy Guidelines on Integrated National Strategies for the Protection of Children from Violence" of the Council of Europe is a significant and a most important step in our endeavours to eradicate all forms of violence against children.¹

The Committee has noticed with great appreciation that the Policy Guidelines of the Council of Europe are firmly based on the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. From the beginning of its monitoring activities the Committee paid particular attention to the omnipresent violence against children, which, as the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated, "cuts across boundaries of geography, race, class, religion and culture". He put the problem in perspective, when he added that violence against children is "a major threat to global development", because violence "places a risk on the ability to learn and grow into adults who can create sound families and communities" - a statement, which is corroborated by abundant results of research.²

Thus, we are not speaking about a marginal phenomenon. We are speaking about the core of human development. We all are convinced that violence is not the nature of human beings. Human beings have the capacity to control destructive emotions and to solve problems and conflicts in a way, which does not destroy community. We, the human beings, have the potential to develop and to internalize respectful, communication oriented and non-violent ways of solving conflicts, coordinating differing interests and coping with emotions, even when they are hurtful or destructive.

Protection on the one hand and prevention on the other hand are the objectives of the Policy Guidelines and always have been the objectives of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, when it addresses violence - violence in all its forms. We are glad to see that the Policy Guidelines of the Council of Europe take on the broad definition of violence, which was unanimously accepted when the UN adopted the Convention: Violence is not only "physical violence", but also and perhaps even more frequently "mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse" (Art. 19 of the Convention).

We are also glad to notice that the Policy Guidelines clearly ask for strict intolerance of violence, however mild. The Guidelines send an unambiguous signal, since there are still enough who try to justify so called reasonable chastisement or traditional practices.

All these forms of violence have to be eradicated. The issue of violence was already included in the debates of the first Days of General Discussion of the Committee in the 90ies. Two consecutive Discussion Days were explicitly dedicated to this issue: "State violence against children" in 2000, "Violence against children within the family and in school" in 2001. In this context the idea of a comprehensive study was born, which presented its results in the World

¹ Adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in November 2009

² In his preface to the UN Study on Violence (2009), page XI.

Report on Violence against Children in 2006. We all heard the core message of the report: "No violence against children is justifiable, all violence against children is preventable."

The study has helped to make the world aware of the unacceptable plight of millions upon millions of children. It strongly encouraged additional efforts for ending violence against children. These activities are highly appreciated, although too often they are fragmentary, not well coordinated, not well monitored and not enough supported by relevant authorities. For this reason, the Committee was profoundly relieved, when finally Marta Santos Pais was appointed as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children.

But the efforts to end violence need more support, need strong support like the support given by this initiative of the Council of Europe, which urges the forty-seven states, gathered in the Council of Europe, to establish a framework integrated into their national policies and bringing together all involved stakeholders in order to establish a strategy, which can effectively eradicate violence in all its forms. This is an initiative, which relates to about 200 million children and may have a signalling effect for many more children.

It is a weighty initiative, because it has a weighty background: the programme "Building a Europe for and with Children" launched in 2006 and updated in the Stockholm Programme 2009 - 2011. The Committee would like to see more initiatives of this kind in the world - initiatives, which transcend the activities in individual countries. As we have heard: Violence cuts across boundaries of geography, religion, culture. Also our efforts to end violence have to cut across boundaries to eradicate, to root out attitudes, which are shared across regions that children are a lower quality of human beings who may be used as objects of inhumane treatment disregarding their dignity.

The most recent General Comment no. 12 of the Committee on "The Right of the Child to be Heard" includes a sub-chapter on violence. The Committee urges State parties "to consult with children in the development and implementation of legislative, policy, educational and other measures to address all forms of violence" (para. 118). Particular attention needs to be paid to ensuring that marginalized and disadvantaged children, often the victims of violence, are fully included.

This sub-chapter on violence was not just included for the sake of completeness. Listening to the child is the opposite pole of behaviours to beating, degrading and disregarding the child. Therefore, the Committee agrees with the Council of Europe emphasizing that child participation has to be one of the principles of the Policy Guidelines. Including the child by participation is the opposite of exclusion performed by misuse, abuse and all kinds of maltreatment. We hope that all states, which now will implement the Policy Guideline, will understand this principle.

The Committee has to sincerely thank the Council of Europe for its seminal work. From now on, the Committee of the Rights of the Child will remind the Council of Europe states of these Guidelines in its dialogues with State parties and will encourage them to firmly establish the anti-violence strategies asked for in these Guidelines.