

ALLIANCE AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

“An Agenda for Prevention: Non-Discrimination and Empowerment” (11-12 October 2012)

Roundtable Discussion: Non-Discrimination and Empowerment as a Prevention Strategy

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Project presentation: Trafficking and Exploitation of Children in the Balkan Region

This document is a short presentation of the main work done during project's meetings. The final report will be available before the end of the year.

1/ Context

In order to get to know better the reality of child trafficking and exploitation in the region and to be able to propose actual actions in response, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the OSCE decided to organise three workshops with NGOs from the region that are in direct contact with minor victims or potential victims. These NGOs, privileged observers, are actors on the ground, act mainly at the local level and have knowledge for the diagnosis of rarely identified exploitation situations. Understanding this phenomenon will allow protection institutions to enlarge their scope, in partnership with NGOs, in order to prevent and combat the constantly growing traffic. Three workshops were organised in Macedonia by the regional office of OSCE Skopje. The workshops gathered NGOs from Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Greece, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro and the regional office of Terre des Hommes. Following the workshops, representatives of regional administrations and international organisations have been invited to follow this work, among which IOM, ICMPD and the OSCE representatives of neighbouring countries.

2/ Causes of and strategies highlighting child's vulnerability in the Balkan region

Exploitation and the family

Child's exploitation in the region very often takes the form of family exploitation where it is very difficult to draw the border between intentional maltreatment and survival strategies in poverty. From a minor's point of view, one of the main consequences is the impossibility for the child to consider himself/herself as a victim or oppose the family (loyalty conflict). This situation makes the protection systems founded only on open centres for the traffic victims inefficient. A very particular type of work in order to track and report from within vulnerable groups is necessary in order to detect the victims and decide on the necessary type of protection.

Migrant children

In the region, there are many exploitation and traffic situations involving mobile or migrant minors as they are relocated function of the different contexts: touristic seasons, exchange rates (Albania – Kosovo), differences in the living standards (Bulgaria – Greece). These relatively old migration strategies allow traffickers to minimise the risk of penal action and has as consequence a quasi-absence of protection from local authorities, which face identification problems needing data exchange protocols among the different countries. As for the NGOs, their mission to approach and connect with the victim is even more difficult as these children spend very little time in one place so there are not enough opportunities to start educational work and protection efforts which require the child's trust.

The invisible minors

Finally, all participants have shown concern because of the growing number of the so-called “invisible” children. Under this denomination, different causes hide. The first one concerns the minors residing in their country and who have never been registered with the authorities. The reasons for the absence of this civil status are multiple: birth after or during the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia, giving birth at home or because of parents’ strategies to avoid contact with the authorities. The process is similar for children born in a foreign country and not registered (this is the case for Albanian children born in Greece). A second group is made up of repatriated children within the Admission Agreements and for whom it is difficult to get hold of new official registration in their new country. The same applies to Roma people displaced from Kosovo in Serbia: they’re neither refugees nor Serbian citizens. Lastly, the most recent category is made up of migrant children coming from the Middle East or Asia, on the route to the Western Europe through the Balkans, and whose identity documents are voluntarily destroyed in order to avoid being sent back.

In the absence of official documents, these minors encounter difficulties in being educated or taken care of etc. The absence of a civil status and their precarious situation increase the risk of human exploitation. They are recruited through fake marriages, renting systems for begging or forced stealing or they are used for selling and transporting narcotics. They are even more vulnerable as their “administrative invisibility”, no matter what its cause, is an almost absolute guarantee for the traffickers to escape legal actions.

3/ Main recommendations

Strengthening the detection and the identification of vulnerable minors

The participants insisted that the identification work should be intensified through the set up of street workers teams. For the reasons described above, child’s exploitation is rarely noticed by the protection authorities (police, judiciary, children` protection system) especially when these forms of exploitation differ from sexual exploitation. Only regular work with the families coming from vulnerable groups allows detection and prevention of these situations. The “street worker” profession must be recognized as a profession in itself, with its own training syllabus including exploitation issues, work with the families, particular techniques for approaching and listening to children. The accreditation as a profession should ease the employment of these educators/workers by protection authorities as they can work on identification and prevention and could offer them legitimacy, so that their opinion on the victims is taken into account by the other institutions (judiciary, NGOs, child`s protection system) in the protection process.

Thinking protection in interdisciplinary terms

Among the good practices considered as relevant for the protection of minor victims, the example of the “task force” set up in Kosovo is particularly interesting. Actually, it means organizing once a month a meeting between the police, social workers, psychologists and magistrates in order to signpost traffic and exploitation cases and adopt together a protection strategy. Once the decision is made, each party, function of its attributions, contributes to the strategy`s implementation. Each month, the cases presented are reviewed in order to decide if the solution proposed had worked or there is need for adjustment. The particularity of this approach is that child`s protection pre-empts every decision and by consequence, the social worker having a mandate for child`s protection is the decision-maker on the measures to be adopted (in agreement with the juvenile judge, if that`s the case). Without inter-disciplinary cooperation, the protection attempts are in most cases compromised because of the diverging institutional interests and end up discouraging the actors in charge with fighting exploitation.

Protection must be thought of as a process and requires the presence of different professionals (psychologist, lawyer, educator) all through the victim`s re-integration process. In the first phase, the goal is for the victim not to be recovered by its exploiters and must be placed in a confidential

location, far away from where the exploitation occurred, following strict rules in order to avoid communication with outside persons or unaccompanied exit opportunities. The victim must be assisted by a psychologist in order to avoid decompensation mechanisms. The duration of such placement is to be determined case by case. In a second phase, the minor must be able to access and integrate the traditional child's protection systems in order to overcome its condition as a "victim" and mobilise for the future. Going through foster families acquainted with this type of situation has been highlighted as very important by many participants.

Localisation, prevention and understanding of the phenomenon by setting up an NGO network at regional and European levels

In order to create rapid reaction capacity opposing the groups acting on minors' exploitation in a neighbouring or Western country, the participants are willing to set up an operational network (among NGOs working on the ground) in order to spot traffic situations (places of origin and destination) and exchange information for deciphering recruitment techniques in order to propose an adapted response. This information sharing process (details remain to be determined) should be rapid as it must be flexible and must alert the totality of authorities concerned on the most difficult exploitation forms to detect such as the fake marriages and babies selling abroad...

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