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WORKING WITH VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN OSLO

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First of all I must thank Ambassador Madina Jarbussynova for the invitation to this conference.

According to the main issue of the conference I will give you a short glimpse of how the work in Oslo with victims of trafficking in human beings has developed.

I work in the Social services in Oslo, in a country with an advanced welfare system, and where the Social Benefits Act also gives rights to victims of trafficking who are granted a reflection period. While NGOs have an important role in assisting victims, let us not forget the strong value that lies in using the established structures of the welfare system in providing help.

Norway has 422 municipalities of which Oslo is the largest with 673 000 inhabitants. And Oslo is divided into 15 separate administrative districts. In Norway local self-government is strongly developed. Therefore, many of the public services are delegated to the municipalities. Of these services the most important to us are work/unemployment, social security, social benefits, non-specialized health care, schools, nursery schools/kindergarten and child protection/child welfare.

In every municipality in Norway there is a “Labour and Welfare Office”. In Norwegian it is called NAV – directly translated to English this means HUB – the effective centre of social welfare activities. The Labour and Welfare Office has the responsibility for all the services linked to work, sick leave, unemployment, social securities, disabilities and social benefits – as well as a lot of coordination of these within themselves and with health care, child welfare et cetera.

These offices really are HUBs in the public services in the municipalities. I work in one of the fifteen HUBs in Oslo, but my office is responsible for working with all the adult victims of trafficking in human beings in all of Oslo. We have seen a need for a certain degree of specialisation in this field.

The core of the work with victims of human trafficking in Norway is this: It's the HUBs responsibility. In other words – it is a part of the general public service. And it is *the* part of the public service with a lot of competence in coordination.

In Norway, there is no single government agency or designated non-state actor with primary responsibility for the identification of victims of trafficking. In principle, all agencies, organisations or individuals can find themselves with grounds for concern that a person may be subject to human trafficking . This includes social workers, police officers, medical staff, labour inspectors, child welfare officials, staff of asylum reception centres, NGOs, et cetera. They have the statutory duty to identify the person concerned as a possible victim and refer him/her to the relevant authorities and assistance programmes.

The person concerned will regularly be advised to apply to the Directorate of Immigration for a reflection period of six months, which is granted to possible victims.

The responsibility for follow-up is then assigned to the municipality where the person is staying. Since Norway is such an advanced welfare state, municipalities have broad experience in assisting people of many different national and cultural backgrounds with a multitude of challenges and needs.

I can add that our system for assisting normal asylum seekers that have been granted a stay in Norway, is such that the person will be sent to a specific municipality where housing and other needs are provided by the municipality. It is not possible to choose for yourself where you want to live, as this would result in the establishment of ethnic communities that will hinder integration in society.

Of course, many municipalities are small, and will see advantages in using specialised services provided by NGOs or central authorities. Assistance given by municipalities will therefore sometimes be limited to giving a regular sum of money to the victim. In larger municipalities, social workers have the capacity and skills to help victims directly.

Most victims used to be women exploited in prostitution, who could benefit from staying in shelters for victims of domestic violence. With an expected increase of male victims exploited in all forms of labour, social workers in municipalities should be able to handle their needs, given some specialised training and guidance.

Being granted a reflection period has the effect that the municipality where the victim is staying has the responsibility to assist the victim. This can be a major challenge for social services, especially the first time a victim is present in the municipality. When a reflection period is granted, we don't have a specific "package" of measures or special services according to the nature of trafficking for the person considered as a victim, but the local HUB has the responsibility to consider how assistance can be granted. In Oslo that means my office.

It is important to notice that it's the resident permit that gives a person access to the public services, not *why* the residence permit is granted. And if the person is a citizen of a country within the European Economic Cooperation all the rules about not being a burden for the welfare system in the resident country are put aside during the residency.

So, in Norway it is a local governmental responsibility to provide assistance to victims.

I wish to underline that my presentation deals only with assistance for adult victims. Child victims of trafficking are a matter for the Child Protection Act. This applies to all children staying in Norway, residence permit or not.

Oslo has the most cases of human trafficking in Norway. Each year the Oslo HUB Office works with between 50 and 70 cases.

Some years ago most of the focus of the work with trafficking in human beings was on prostitution. The system then was that one of the outreach services, organized as a project and a NGO, should give services to the persons considered as possible victims until a reflection period was granted. And this works just fine, as long as the victims are in one of the NGOs target groups. When new groups of victims appears, cleaners, au pairs, people in forced labour, et cetera, problems and conflicts arise. And this will be the case when the main responsibility is given to a NGO. The bias will be on the NGOs target groups.

The really big issue in this situation was housing and protection. Who had the responsibility? Well – not the HUB Office – we *had* to wait for the residence permit – according to the restrictions set.

My HUB-office in Oslo had to make a choice: We could either put further pressure on central government agencies to build a special service for the transition period, or become more flexible ourselves. Today it gives me great pleasure to say that we chose the latter. Even if the rules set had the restriction that a resident permit *must* be granted before access to the services is given.

It is of the utmost importance here to consider that the law in question, the Social Benefits Act, leaves nearly all of the decisions to discretion. In addition my office has a long tradition of adapting a flexible and practical approach. We previously saw a challenge in the fact that victims had to wait for quite some time for the decision on residence in a reflection period. In the meantime, the victim was left without the right to assistance.

So – my local HUB-office in Oslo decided to give access to services from the day that the person has *applied* for a reflection period. This meant that the whole waiting period was reduced to one or two days.

The service given from the HUB is first and foremost housing and money for life sustenance. We can provide small apartments where victims live on their own. And then the responsibility for coordination of measures and services starts. Home visits are important to us. We want to meet the persons on their “home turf”, not always in an office – which is *our* “home turf”. We follow them to health services, police, lawyers et cetera, if necessary. We do not want them to be idle in their everyday life. Therefore we urge them to work, and try to organize work training, qualification programmes and education. And we find that most of them have some kind of activity. Which of course give them possibilities of building new and different networks than those they have escaped. In all of this we co-operate with relevant NGOs.

The local governance by the HUB-office is the key. Public responsibility for the important measures and for the coordination is of the utmost importance. The specialized outreach services and NGOs are a very important part of the work. But as long as the main responsibility is governmental and unified, the entirety will be un-biased.

In Oslo we enjoy a quiet and stable situation where the roles are more clearly defined than before between municipal responsibilities and NGOs. The many participants in this work – are working together. All due to a simple decision by a public office to have a more flexible approach – and – by bending the rules a bit.

Thank you very much for your attention!