

18 September 2018

THE SMILE OF THE CHILD _ GREECE

HDIM SEP 2018, WARSAW

Marc Van den Reeck, Honorary Ambassador
Head of International Cooperation

MIGRANT RIGHTS

Thank you, Mr Moderator,

Dear representatives,

Ladies and gentlemen.

With 500 staff, nearly 3000 active volunteers and more than 100.000 interventions per annum, 'The Smile of the Child' is the largest NGO in Greece working in the field of child care and child protection, combating violence, poverty, health problems and disappearance. As such, we are also actively involved in the care for and protection of migrant and refugee children in Greece. We do so on exactly the same basis as we work for other children in need in Greece: one does not ask for a child's passport before helping it. All children, regardless of nationality, religion, race or whatever criterion, are entitled to a normal life. Also migrant and refugee children.

As we speak, there are still more than 3500 unaccompanied children in Greece, while only about one third of them are in shelters and apartments. In the meantime, the influx of migrants and refugees from Turkey continues in impressing numbers, recently more than 4000 a month. Children have more than their share in this never ending flow. In other words, the problem remains acute, even if the matter is no longer a hot item in the media or on the political scene. As a Greek NGO, worried about those children, we want to draw the attention of States to the continued existence of this situation. Because, handling it is not merely a responsibility of the country that happens to be on the first line of reception, but of our entire community, gathered here under the umbrella of the human values for which OSCE and ODIHR vocally stand.

Let me briefly dwell on a few principles and lessons learnt from recent experience, for us all to be remembered in order to take properly care of refugee and migrant children and their rights in the future.

1. Detention of children is unacceptable. I do not think I need to expand on this. Detention can never offer a solution; it is the responsibility of all, governments, civil society and multilateral organisations alike, to bring forward humanely acceptable alternative answers. They exist. They may cost money and societal investment, but they exist.

2. There are no quick fixes. Even more than adults, migrant and refugee children need to be taken care of in a holistic way, which effectively opens the way to the integration and to the proper development of those children into adolescence and adulthood as integral part of society, not on the margin of it. Let us, by the way, also be aware of the fact that this is fully in the interest of society itself, as much as it is a fundamental right of the migrant or refugee child. For, if we do not cover its needs in a holistic way - which is more than a daily plate of food and a roof over its head -, chances are that the child will develop into an 'angry young person' who may eventually lash out to our society, posing problems of security, criminality and whatever other evil.

3. Well established local organisations of civil society have an important role to play and should as such be recognized by governments and particularly also by multilateral and international organisations which provide financial support to cope with the influx and absorption of migrants and refugees in countries of first entry. This has more recently been happening, but a bit too little too late. All too often have we seen that non governmental internationally renowned help organisations and small but clever surge organisations, quickly set up to take action, have been crowding out the well established local NGOs, in spite of the fact that the latter ones are there to stay and continue work, also when the international funding eventually dries up. Moreover, they dispose of set capabilities in terms of operational networks, equipment, experienced staff and volunteers who are also acquainted with local conditions. In other words, work more intensely with well established, pre-existing local NGOs: sustainability of effort is more secured and cost effectiveness and impact of intervention can only gain, to the benefit of migrant and migrant children's rights.

4. Civil society organisations must most certainly be and remain critical of the approach of authorities, national and multinational, particularly when lines are crossed of what is ethically and in principle acceptable. But, civil society must also try to improve and enhance what is already there to protect the rights of migrant and refugee children, and migrants and refugees as a whole. 'The Smile of the Child' does not receive any governmental subsidy whatsoever - being financed nearly entirely through corporate and private donations -, but we work closely with the Greek authorities to give a home to children in small collective units of holistic care, we have concluded an MoU with UNHCR to provide health care to migrant and refugee children, we have been working as a framework partner with ECHO of the European Union, etc.

All this from a perspective that migrant and refugee children need to be looked after in a holistic way. It is their fundamental right. True, this requires more effort, more commitment and more money. But, this is the price we have to be willing to pay if we are serious in putting migrant and migrant children rights on the agenda of this gathering and on the list of values we must cherish in each of our countries.

Thank you.