

11th high-level Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons “Preventing Trafficking in Human Beings for Labour Exploitation: Decent Work and Social Justice”

20-21 June 2011, Vienna

Statement by Ms. Kirsi Madi, Deputy Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for CEE/CIS

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to bring to the discussion the question of child trafficking and how to respond to it. I represent here today the UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

In our assessment every country in our region is either a country of origin, transit or destination of child victims of trafficking. We estimate that several thousands of children may be victims of trafficking in our region every year. Many more are victims of exploitation. The victims are to be found in various sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and horticulture, construction, garments and textiles, mining, and transportation. In our region, there continues to be considerable movement of people for labour both within and from countries of the CEE/CIS region. In the globalized world we live in today, this is a situation which will not change; it will only increase in scale and so will the risk for exploitation of children in this context.

Increasing economic disparities between and within countries coupled with immature migration regimes and inadequate legal frameworks at national level have created conditions for trafficking and exploitation. The ideological vacuum that followed the fall of communism seems to have created in some countries space for development of social values which are almost completely driven by the potential for market gains. People and children have become commodities which can be bought and sold like any other goods. There is a rich supply of such vulnerable children from the thousands of residential care institutions for children without parental care. You may be surprised to know that more than 600,000 children grow up in residential care institutions without parental care in the region today.

As many of you may know, UNICEF has long been advocating for better protection of child victims of trafficking. Our Guidelines on this topic have been disseminated and used in many countries of the region and beyond. Several of the standards have been integrated into European Law – the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. We advocate that all States that have not yet done so, should ratify this Convention, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

But like many other actors operating in this field, UNICEF has for several years now also been focusing its attention on prevention.

Since June 2010, there is a new initiative at global level led by UNICEF, Save the Children and the Global Compact to develop Codes of Conducts in the Private Sector promoting child rights, including combatting child trafficking for the purposes of forced labour and sexual exploitation. The codes of conduct call on business everywhere to respect and support child rights and avoid complicity in child rights abuses. They are based on the belief that the private sector has a crucial role to play in preventing the demand for cheap labour. They can ensure that wherever they operate, their commercial activities comply with national laws and international human rights instruments.

Effective prevention strategies need to go far beyond information campaigns and strategies to address the demand side of trafficking. Since many years UNICEF is supporting the reform of child protection systems in the region. Our aim is to develop more efficient social protection for the most vulnerable, excluded and marginalized population groups. This includes accountability of professionals and social services in the prevention of trafficking and exploitation of children. Justice for children is also an area of work where we are increasing our attention due to the particular vulnerability of children in conflict with the law.

Why do we find this so important? Evidence from many years of field work in the area of child protection has revealed to us that the inability of weak social protection and child protection systems to identify and intervene when children are in vulnerable situations, is contributing to the vulnerability of children for trafficking and exploitation. Over the years, based on encounters with child victims of trafficking who have told their stories, we have built up our knowledge about their situations prior to the trafficking experience. Many of them are children from abusive homes, have experienced violence, children who grew up in institutions without parental care, who were socially excluded and marginalized, or impoverished because of the death, severe illness or disability of a parent.

The stories of child victims of trafficking point to many missed opportunities to intervene prior to the trafficking experience. Most striking is that many child victims of trafficking have already been in contact with social services or law enforcement agents prior to the trafficking experience. It seems that the indifference and inability of these professionals to recognize the child's situation and their failure to act, are often directly contributing to the reasons why children get involved in more risk-taking behavior in their efforts to solve their problems on their own.

I could go on and on about the systemic failures which ultimately contribute to why children end up being trafficked or exploited. But I will end by saying that UNICEF believes that it is of utmost importance to reform current child protection and social protection systems, and to create more opportunities and better mechanisms for justice for children. Reforms need to favor development of effectively functioning multidisciplinary co-operation, both at national and at international levels. This would significantly help to prevent trafficking and exploitation of children, but also to protect the rights of child victims in cases of trafficking and exploitation.

Madam Chair, UNICEF welcomes the partnerships which the Alliance Against Trafficking in Persons offers. I would like to associate UNICEF with the Joint Statement of the Alliance on child protection, especially among migrant, undocumented, unaccompanied, separated and asylum seeking children to enhance prevention of child trafficking which was presented last October to the OSCE Review Conference. If there is anyone in this room who is not familiar with the Joint Statement, I would urge you to familiarize yourself with it and let it guide you.

I would also like to stress the importance of wider partnerships which we are working for with, for example, Ombudspersons and national civil society organizations, including Hotlines for children. These can help bring the voices and experiences of children out into the public debate. If we want to improve prevention, it will be a continuous work for improvement which needs to be informed by children's experiences.

In conclusion, I would like to pledge UNICEF commitment to continue and to further strengthen our collaboration and contribution to the Alliance under the able leadership of the Special Representative.

Thank you.