



The Stockholm Conclusions

PROMOTING GOOD PRACTICES IN PROTECTING MIGRANT AND ASYLUM SEEKING CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN, AND FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES, SOCIETIES AND STATES

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Representatives from 26 European countries gathered in Stockholm during 8 and 9 December 2016 and shared lessons learned about safeguards and services for migrant and asylum seeking children, adolescents and young people, especially those who are unaccompanied. The participants represented national governments, UN Agencies, international and local organisations as well as children and young people. They discussed good practices and challenges in a complex reality where many European countries are both countries of origin, transit and/or destination.

The situation of children during the migration process is an important concern for the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Central European Initiative (CEI). By organizing this conference, the CBSS and the CEI aspired to enhance the protection of children departing, transiting and arriving in their Member States and to safeguard their human rights. The discussions at the meeting form the background for these conclusions and have been summarised in a more detailed report. They will guide the continued work of the two regional organisations and their partners in support of children on the move.

This effort is in line with the strong interest at the global, regional and national levels to protect children on the move. The United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe are developing and refining actions and standards to ensure the respect of human rights in this area as well as the safety and wellbeing of migrant and asylum seeking children and of children left behind by migrating parents.

Throughout Europe and beyond, the Nordic **Barnahus** (Children's House) model has gained recognition as an outstanding good practice in enabling access to justice for child victims of violence. The model offers comprehensive multi-disciplinary and interagency services under one roof and is increasingly used for child victims of trafficking and unaccompanied children. In a child-friendly environment, the professionals at the Barnahus collect evidence through forensic interviews and medical examinations, and offer case assessment and treatment. All processes are documented to secure evidence that informs the asylum procedure or other relevant proceedings, is admissible at court and holds a high probative value. This integrated approach helps to prevent repeated interviews, to reduce stress and anxiety for the child and creates a trusted atmosphere that enables the child to tell his or her story and to disclose experiences of violence.

The presentations and first hand country analyses inspired the discussions at the meeting and revealed many good examples of how it is possible to transform challenges into opportunities for social inclusion and cohesion. Investments in the wellbeing and development of migrant and asylum seeking children can support their participation and integration and activate their potentials to contribute to peaceful, stable and prosperous societies in countries of destination and origin.

Conclusions:

The Stockholm conference agreed on the importance of sharing experience and knowledge in the reception, care and protection of migrant and asylum seeking children, adolescents and young people, especially unaccompanied girls and boys.

The participants emphasised the need to engage in longer-term regional cooperation and networking with renewed and increased commitment to:

1. Promoting **quality standards, referral mechanisms and standardised procedures** in the reception and care of migrant and asylum seeking children and adolescents, including with regard to the individual best interests' determination, assistance and support for victims of violence, child-sensitive hearings and interviews.
2. Ensuring **age assessment procedures are dignified, multi-disciplinary** and apply the principle of benefit of doubt according to the scientific reliability of the methods used.
3. Promoting **effective guardianship services** for unaccompanied boys and girls oriented at the best interests of the child and quality standards as well as training, supervision and monitoring of guardianship services.
4. Enabling migrant and asylum seeking boys and girls to **effectively access services** in line with international and European standards, including quality care and protection, child welfare, health and education as well as vocational training and the labour market for youth where applicable.
5. Promoting the **social integration and inclusion** of migrant and asylum seeking children, including through sports and leisure time activities, social support networks and their engagement or representation in relevant national associations and organisations.
6. **Training officials and professionals** working with and for migrant and asylum seeking children, including multi-disciplinary training, on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and fundamental principles such as the prevention of discrimination, best interests' determinations, guaranteeing the right to life and development and the right to be heard by strengthening skills to interview and communicate with children in an effective and meaningful way. Training should prepare professionals and officials to better help and support children by understanding sources of risk and resilience, signs of exploitation and trafficking, and social determinants of health.
7. Strengthening **cross-border cooperation on transnational child protection cases** with the objective to identify and implement a durable solution in the best interests of the boy or girl concerned, including continuity of care and longer-term follow-up in the case of return.
8. Strengthening the **public and political dialogue between countries of origin and destination** in order to translate challenges into opportunities for children and activate their resources and potentials to reflect their views and experiences along the migration routes.
9. **Engaging communities, municipalities and mayors as champions for children** to strengthen political commitment for positive change, promote social entrepreneurship and innovative solutions in the reception, care and protection of migrant and asylum seeking children at the local level.
10. **Engaging Parliamentarians** on the situation of migrant and asylum seeking children and adolescents in view of **activating their legislative and oversight function** in the

implementation of international standards in legislation and by promoting the compliance of policy and practice, at the national level and in the Parliamentary dimension of regional international organizations.

These conclusions of the Stockholm conference reiterate the **importance of sharing lessons learned across different countries, agencies and service providers**. They are based on the input and reflections of participants from 26 Member States of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Central European Initiative, i.e. from Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden and Ukraine.

Annex – Recommendations

The following detailed recommendations were developed by the participants of the Stockholm conference. They emphasise the need of including due consideration for the human rights and the best interests of children and adolescents, in particular unaccompanied girls and boys, in the procedures for seeking international protection and in migration governance. The overall objective is to enhance the quality of social wellbeing and the human and social development for the benefit of the children, families, states and local communities concerned.

1. Promote quality standards and standardised procedures

- Promote **standardised formal procedures for the individual best interests’ determination** for each girl and boy and operational guidance on the elements to be considered in a best interests’ determination, including hearing and taking into account the child’s views.
- Develop **Standard Operating Procedures and Routines** for the identification, referral and assistance of girls and boys who are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking or at risk, as well as for cases of children and adolescents who go missing from care and reception centres.
- Support national authorities and private service providers to **implement the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse in practice, including by taking specific measures to protect migrant and asylum seeking boys and girls from sexual violence** and identify priority areas for bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation in this area.
- Advocate for the **ratification of the third Optional Protocol** to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure for children and support children and adolescents in accessing the procedure for claiming their rights where it is already in force.
- Encourage the establishment of **child-friendly spaces** for young children for play and learning in transit centres and mass accommodation while ensuring the prompt referral of children and families from mass to specialised child-friendly accommodation.
- Ensure that **age assessment procedures are dignified, safe and reliable** and conducted only in cases where there are serious doubts about the age of a person, through a multi-disciplinary assessment, including by social workers and paediatricians with inter-cultural

competence. Medical examinations should be performed with full respect of the person's dignity and informed consent, using the least invasive methods and excluding the examination of genitalia. Age assessments have to respect procedural safeguards and the results should always be considered with due regard to the principle of the benefit of doubt and in light of the scientific reliability of the methods used.

- Ensure that migrant and asylum seeking children and adolescents are guaranteed relevant **procedural safeguards in judicial and administrative proceedings** concerning them, such as procedures for age assessment, best interests' determinations, civil or criminal investigations and proceedings and the asylum procedure, where applicable. Procedural safeguards include child-friendly information in a language and at a level that the child understands, effective guardianship and legal representation, the right of the child to express their views, to be heard and have their views taken into account, quality interpretation, free of charge legal assistance and effective mechanisms to appeal or revise decisions and legal remedies.
- **Strengthen the capacity of border guards, immigration and asylum officers to interview asylum seeking girls and boys in a child-sensitive way** and to identify and take into due consideration child-specific country of origin information and child-specific grounds of asylum.
- **Harmonise and speed up procedures for family reunification** in countries of destination for unaccompanied children who have been granted international protection without undue delays; enable family reunification in a safe country for child victims of exploitation and trafficking who are forced into exploitative situations due to threats against family members in the country of origin.
- **Cease the detention of children and adolescents** for immigration related matters, including for purposes of determining migration status or due to their parents' immigration status.
- **Engage national Ombudspersons for children or comparable institutions in the monitoring of the situation and the human rights of migrant and asylum seeking children and adolescents**, including independent monitoring, with a view to promote and support the implementation of international standards in this area.

2. Ensure access to services and social integration, in particular through effective guardianship

- Make sure that **a qualified guardian is appointed promptly** for each unaccompanied girl or boy and takes up his or her functions swiftly.
- Define minimum quality standards for guardianship services for unaccompanied children and ensure a guardianship institution is in place that is oriented at the best interests of the child and provides **effective support, supervision and monitoring of guardians** with special care for cases where guardianship is given to an unaccompanied child's adult sibling.
- **Integrate guardianship services into national systems for childcare, social welfare and protection** and support guardians to promote the human rights and the best interests of each unaccompanied girl and boy in relation to all agencies, procedures and services

whom the child is in contact with, including immigration, asylum, law enforcement and the judiciary.

- Ensure that **each child and adolescent on the move benefits from the services available within the national systems for childcare, protection and welfare**, in line with entitlements stipulated under international and European standards and regardless of whether the child is accompanied or not, and ensure mentoring and quality care, including in foster care where applicable.
- Promote **multi-disciplinary and interagency cooperation with the child at the centre** to ensure the close follow-up of the individual child through comprehensive services that are targeted at the situation and needs of the person and his or her individual story, views and aspirations.
- Provide **longer-term continuity of care** before and after the decision on the child's asylum application or immigration status and a durable solution has been taken, including appropriate services for after care to support girls and boys in their transition into adulthood and independent life, in the country of destination, after return to the country of origin or resettlement to a third country.
- Ensure **effective and reliable access to health care** for migrant and asylum seeking children, including treatment for chronic diseases and disabilities, dental care, mental health care and psychosocial counselling and treatment, including with due regard to the prevention of suicide, and the prevention of substance abuse (alcohol, narcotics, drugs and tobacco).
- Ensure **access to basic, advanced and academic education and skills training** for migrant, and asylum seeking children, adolescents and young people. Develop effective language and preparatory courses to enable children and adolescents to promptly access and integrate into the mainstream education system and make special support and expert assistance available to teachers and school administrations welcoming migrant and asylum seeking children. Ensure that levels of education are assessed correctly and that girls and boys are handed out school and training certificates.
- Enable **access to work and income generating opportunities** that are safe and appropriate for youth, including apprenticeships, internships and vocational training to promote the young persons' development and integration into the labour market as well as professional qualifications appropriate for making a living in the country of origin after return, where applicable.
- Involve children, adolescents and young people in **social and cultural life, leisure time and sports to promote social inclusion** giving children a chance to discover and promote their skills and talents.
- Enable the **meaningful participation of migrant and asylum seeking boys and girls**, for instance by creating an environment where they feel comfortable to express themselves, to **provide feedback on services**, and make **child-sensitive reporting and complaints mechanisms** accessible for them, including independent mechanisms.
- Ensure **access to child-sensitive justice and services for the recovery and rehabilitation of child victims** of violence, abuse, exploitation or trafficking, including by promoting the use of the Barnahus (Children's House) or comparable models for migrant and asylum seeking children.

- Encourage the associated **representation of unaccompanied children, adolescents and young people in host societies and in the contact with their countries and communities of origin**, including through the establishment of associations of children and young people, organisations, platforms or proceedings for children to express their views and to communicate their recommendations to relevant interlocutors of the public and the private sectors.
- Engage young people and adults from host communities in the support of unaccompanied children, to **create social support networks** that help children to feel safe, gain confidence and build resilience, engage children in play and help with language learning, homework and cultural orientation.
- Expand existing **social outreach and youth crime prevention programmes** to target unaccompanied children, adolescents and young people who are in trouble with the law or at risk, to motivate them to remain in education and stay off the streets and to leave criminal networks, where applicable.

3. Enhance the cooperation across regions and between countries of origin and destination

- Engage the private sector in a dialogue for **promoting cross-border trainee programmes for youth**, in partnership between countries of origin and destination and international companies, with a development perspective for children, communities and states.
- Cooperate across countries to **find solutions to prevent children and adolescents from going missing from care or reception centres**, including clear responsibilities and routines for the follow-up of missing children.
- Develop **local, national and cross-national programmes to support parents working abroad and their children left behind**, including with regard to contact, positive parenting, childcare and family relations from a distance and visiting programmes, support for the primary caregivers or guardians of the children left behind and community support programmes involving teachers, trainers and other key support persons for girls and boys.
- Strengthen the **cooperation between countries of destination in matters concerning the preparation, follow-up and monitoring of the return of children**, wherever this is in the best interests of the child.
- Ensure that **the return of a boy or girl** to the country of origin, wherever a best interests' determination procedure concludes that return is in the best interest of the child, **is dignified and safe, duly prepared and followed-up**, including through longer-term monitoring and safeguards for ensuring continuity of care.
- Provide support for **integration programmes in countries of origin** for children and young adults who return, including support to local civil society organisations to work with children, families and parents to strengthen social networks to protect and support young returnees.
- Increase funding opportunities for countries of origin to improve their capacities to provide better and more coordinated services, including **structural funding and funding for human rights advocacy, in addition to emergency funds**.

- Advocate with actors in external action, development cooperation and peacebuilding to specifically **address the reasons of flight and displacement** such as fragility, armed conflict, widespread generalised and sexual violence, including by engaging children and young people as well as victims of violence in peacebuilding and statebuilding efforts and promoting the sustainable development goals specific to children and young people.
- Develop **communication and advocacy strategies** at the national and regional levels at origin and destination that focus on the children's stories and perspectives and their human rights and that aim to provide a realistic and child-focused narrative of children on the move.

4. Capacity building, knowledge and resources

- Invest in **training, including multi-disciplinary and cross-country activities, for officials and professionals working with and for migrant and asylum seeking children and adolescents** for raising awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and support them in fulfilling their demanding tasks through technical advice, supervision and mentoring. Training should cover a broad selection of themes to sensitise professionals and officials to the risk and resilience of migrant and asylum seeking children, indications of exploitation and trafficking, and social determinants of health, in order to prepare them to better help and support boys and girls.
- Develop mechanisms and indicators for gathering **quantitative and qualitative data** on children on the move at all steps in the migration cycle, including data disaggregated by age, gender, nationality and residence status. Cooperation between European states is required to **enhance the reliability and comparability of data** and support data analysis, communication and exchange on trends.
- Public and private actors need to support **quality research and analysis** into the situation of children and adolescents on the move, with a particular view on participatory research involving girls and boys as well as the professionals and officials working with and for them. These analyses should inform the public and political debate, policy making and practice at all levels.
- **Strengthen systems for the identification and registration of child migrants and asylum seekers** to ensure they are fully functional and practicable; ensure these systems are used as an instrument to safeguard the human rights and best interests of children and adolescents and enable cross-border communication on specific cases with a view to track children who move within Europe, including those who go missing, and to ensure due follow-up in line with data protection regulations.