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Keynote Address

– from principles to practice: how the EU can lead the way to promote coordination and cooperation in integrated child protection systems

Dr. Susan L. Bissell
Associate Director, Programme Division
Chief, Child Protection
UNICEF

Excellencies, Honorable Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,
dear Friends,

On behalf of UNICEF I am very honoured to be invited to this 9th European Forum on the Rights of the Child. I would like to thank our European Union partners for giving me an opportunity to be here to listen and to continue a conversation on how we can better protect and end violence against children, in Europe and beyond.

Not an easy task, but urgent and important to us all, and for all children.

Looking back, much has been achieved in the last 18 months since the last EU Forum. With the help of the Fundamental Rights Agency child protection systems in EU Member States have been mapped; new data on violence against children, women and girls has become available, and the EU has been at the forefront supporting global efforts to end harmful practices such as child marriage or FGM/C, affecting millions of girls and women.

Last month, the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights included a commitment to support partner countries' efforts to strengthen child protection systems globally.

Ladies and gentlemen, protecting children from violence and exploitation has been proposed as an aspiration critical to the post-2015 development agenda. From nowhere in the MDGs...to squarely and firmly in the SDGs. On one hand this reflects a harsh and blunt reality - violence against children continues to happen in all settings, rich and poor, online and offline, North and South. On the other hand, we as an international community seem truly prepared to tackle this, together and in our home countries, states and provinces.

Your Forum is therefore incredibly timely.

The presentation of the Ten Guiding Principles on integrated child protection systems here today marks another important milestone. As shown in the past, collective and coordinated action by the European Union can make a real difference in children's lives. This is especially true in contexts where there is a transnational or cross border dimension to protecting a child. EU-wide coordinated action is the most effective way to prevent violence, and protect vulnerable children from falling between 'administrative cracks'.

With these 'Guiding Principles on Child Protection Systems', the EU not only reaffirms its own commitments to protect children. Indeed they are also an important – and very welcome - tool to support Member States to establish comprehensive and integrated child protection systems at national level.

Protecting children - and ending violence - do not 'just happen'. They are deliberate; the result of political will, public investment and having the right policies in place.

In our child protection work in countries and territories the world over for the last more than two decades, we and our partners have learned many lessons. Among them, one lesson stands out as especially profound: addressing child protection challenges issue-by issue is inefficient, ineffective, and unsustainable.

Allow me an illustration - a year ago, the New York Times¹ featured a photo of Alejandro, aged 8, who had been smuggled across the border from Mexico, by 'Santiago the smuggler'. In his hand he held his birth certificate. He was alone. Let us just try to imagine what little Alejandro might have gone through on his journey, travelling on foot, or perhaps part of the way by bus or train, alone or at times with people he did not know very well. He may have left home because he faced violence there, or perhaps because it was felt that he would be safer in the US, or another country. Just think back to when *you* were 8 – what were *you* doing? In other regions of the world children are migrating, too, sometimes alone, or with their families, but often unsafely.

Abdullah, Amina, Ranjit...other children here in Europe...they face other dangers and challenges, before they set out to find a better life, during, and many times after. Most certainly, fragmented approaches based on single-issue policies and strategies fail to protect children effectively. In isolation – not being part of a broader systems approach - the most comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy, the best equipped missing children hotline and the most elaborate safeguards to keep children safe online, simply do not work.

To continue with the poignant migration example, as larger numbers of children are 'on the move' – with or without their families – child protection authorities have to communicate and work across borders. This enables the provision of care and support these children need, wherever they may be. Such coordinated efforts must also lead to long-term and rights-based solutions for migrant and refugee children. The

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/26/us/snakes-and-thorny-brush-and-children-at-the-border-alone.html>

recent events and tragic deaths in the Mediterranean have underscored the importance of strengthening child protection systems in countries of origin, transit and destination. **Every migrant child is first and foremost a child.**

In essence, what we need and what we mean by a 'child protection system' is the connection of legislation and policies, staff and services, funding and monitoring. These interact with each other to protect all children, whoever they are, whatever their needs are and wherever they live. Interaction and integration are together the glue that hold a child protection system together, as children pass – not always seamlessly - from one sector to another, getting the right support at the right time.

Social services workers are the unsung heroes of child protection. Their engagement with health, education and sometimes justice, is a key determinant of good outcomes for children. These social workers merit out respect...and better pay in most countries I hasten to add.

Ladies and gentlemen, UNICEF has been working on the systems approach to child protection for a number of years. Last year alone more than 30 UNICEF Country Offices worked specifically to strengthen cross-sectoral linkages among all sectors working with children. Some 137 offices helped to strengthen child protection systems in one way or another.

I would like to share with you just one example – from around the corner - to illustrate what can be achieved through integrated approaches and in partnerships.

- In Bulgaria, since 2010, a network of Family Centres has been established in partnership with three municipalities in Shumen region. By facilitating access to public services such as health, education, housing, legal support, social benefits and employment for the most vulnerable families, the Family Centres contributed to the prevention of family separation, child abandonment and

neglect. They also addressed child marriage, early pregnancy, nutrition and care for children by raising awareness and supporting informal networks. In the last three years, the Family Centres provided support to more than 3,000 families with children and prevented 160 cases of family separation.

These are the kind of results we are all striving for.

Looking ahead and beyond 2015: Child Protection Partnership

Let me also take this opportunity to share with you some exciting news.

As I set at the outset, this year we have a historic opportunity: for the first time child protection is recognized in the universal Sustainable Development Goal under Target 16.2. It would seem, therefore, that protecting children from violence and exploitation will be prioritized in the new and universal agenda.

Thus UNICEF and a range of partners are recommending the establishment of a new **global partnership to end violence against children, together with the creation of a trust fund**. I hope you will agree with me that the time has come for this kind innovation and creativity.

Violence against children is preventable, not inevitable.

No child should live in fear of being violated or exploited.

Specifically the partnership and fund will be a means of implementation and financing for what is now target 16.2 to:

1. Further the development and implementation of country-level action plans that prevent and respond to violence against children through technical support and catalytic funding.

2. Seed social mobilization and community action initiatives to support implementation of the country level action plans, create demand for services to prevent and respond to violence against children, and to change underlying attitudes and social norms that perpetuate violence against children.
3. Establish and reinforce standards of care and protection of children and measures of quality of related services for children (social welfare, police, justice, health), including the development of common indicators.

The partnership will include governments, international and national civil society organizations, academics and researchers, the private sector, foundations, leaders from the faith-based community, children and youth, and members of the United Nations (UN) family. We are currently seeking “pathfinder” countries. These will be leaders, from the global north and the global south, who can already demonstrate capacity to protect children from violence.

Ideally, the partnership will also serve as a global forum to set norms and standards for quality of services and support mechanisms to protect children from violence. In that forum there will be a sharing of experience, exchange of information and data. And we will have a platform to discuss innovation, particularly in communication technology, as well as ways of scaling up what works to protect children.

On behalf of UNICEF and – if I may, on behalf of the global child protection community - we would be delighted if the European Union and EU Member States were to join this partnership to help us create a global movement to strengthen child protection systems, and really prevent violence against children.

To conclude, I would like to share my vision for the 10th EU Forum on the Rights of the Child:

The 10 Guiding Principles provide an important milestone for developing integrated, European Child Protection Systems that are ‘joined up’ and able to effectively support all children in need of protection. With the right policies in place, with sufficient resources, and with strong partnerships, we can end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children.

The challenge and the opportunity at hand today is to ensure that the 10 Guiding EU Principles become actionable, measurable and sustainable.

To become actionable, UNICEF would welcome if the Guiding Principles were to become EU policy – *EU acquis*- that is not only inspiring but also binding. To become measurable – investing in disaggregated and available data on all forms of violence will remain critical. To be sustainable - the child protection systems approach outlined in the Reflection Paper would need to be an integral part of the EU’s broader child rights agenda – in other words, they must be firmly integrated in a future EU Child Rights Strategy.

I am convinced, with the support of the European Commission (as demonstrated here today), the political vision of the European Parliament, in particular the European Parliament Intergroup on the Rights of the Child (as we had the opportunity to hear from Ms. Corazza Bildt) – and with the sustained commitment and political will in Member States – we can end violence against children in Europe and in the world.

If not now, when?

I thank you for your attention.