

‘The Smile of the Child’ position,
International (Expert) Roundtable on “Improving local level’s coordination
and cooperation in preventing & combating human trafficking and child exploitation”

Vienna, 24/09/2017

A major role in shaping and implementing policies of prevention, protection, prosecution and building partnerships obviously lies with central authorities. Yet, a lot can and must, actually, also be done at the sub national level, be it locally or regionally. Authorities and civil society are crucially together in this.

As a general point, we do believe that there needs to be a decentralization of means, capacities and, as a consequence, also competencies, in order to effectively involve the crucial local level in the combat of THB.

Based on 22 years of holistic work in child care and child protection, and most recently having faced the dual crisis circumstances of socioeconomic depression and migration/refugee flows in Greece, TSOC herewith contributes its findings, experience and views, as food for thought in the debate. A schematic overview follows.

1. Training.

* staff of entities which are bound to be confronted with THB cases must be trained for identification/recognition of THB symptoms and for advised response attitudes and procedures. This training should be made an integral part of the in-house curriculum of HR development.

* on the official level, the focus should be for instance on educators, police, hospital staff, staff in municipal administrative and social service centers, reception centers for migrants and refugees, homeless shelters, centers for treatment and shelter of people with addiction problems, etc.

* at civil society level, training needs are not just limited to organizations explicitly dealing with THB and related issues, but e.g. also aim at sports associations, cultural organizations, and any other entities where cases of THB may be detected. Obviously, there needs to be proportionality between the intensity of the training effort and the risk.

2. Streamlining.

* Effective and seamless communication among actors, observing entities and the broader civil society is crucial for effective prevention and response, and can be enhanced by the existence of a central reporting point, probably best as a unit within the local police force.

* Such may already exist in a number of municipalities, but concrete use is often deficient to non-existent. Setting up such a structure aiming at streamlined communication should be generalized.

3. Motivation.

* Providing training and establishing efficient communication structures alone offers no guarantee that effective action will be taken to prevent and to respond: people expected to take action must also be motivated.

Motivation and sensitization are also required with respect to the general public, whose cooperation is very much needed.



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* With certain people, motivation is bound to be sharpened by making them conscious that in approximately 80-85% of the cases of THB in Europe the victim is European. The frequent perception that THB is connected to flows of migrants and refugees is not only ethically unacceptable, it is also erroneous.

* In some European countries penalization of non-reporting has been proven to be effective. Such measures are based on national legislation, of course. But local authorities, many entities under their control (e.g. municipal schools) and CSOs have room to act at their level in this spirit as well, by imposing upon their staff and volunteers a code of conduct or a contract clause relevant to the issue, and by linking non-respect to a sanction, in terms of promotion denial, fines, ending collaboration, etc.

* Mandatory reporting must go hand-in-hand with arrangements that guarantee the protection of those who do report and act. They must feel safe from reprisals and protected against exposure to lengthy, burdensome and possibly costly legal procedures. Reporting procedures must thus be designed for discretion and maximally leave space for anonymity, within the boundaries of what is judicially possible.

* Campaigns focusing on staff and volunteers in the above sense and campaigns to sensitize the general public at the local level can be very effective to create sensitivity to the THB phenomenon.

* Campaigns and other sensitization efforts can, at all levels, be it staff, volunteers or the general public, gain impact when taking into account specifically local conditions and focusing on specific neighborhoods exposed to increased risk with respect to the THB phenomenon.

4. The link to disappearance of persons.

* Most children going missing are cases of runaways, which does not exclude of course cases of abduction, parental or not. Even for migrant and refugee children the impressive Europol figures of disappearances are largely explained by runaway cases, triggered by dire conditions in camps and reception centers and the strong desire of refugees and migrants to reach their set final destination at all cost.

* Runaway minors are at high risk of falling victim to THB. That a child or adolescent has run off from a (somehow) protective environment is not a license for society to remain inactive when that child eventually seems to have ended up in THB.

* The factual responsibility at the local level to respond adequately to a person going missing, child or other, is of primary importance. As we know from experience, the first 24 hours of a disappearance do crucially determine the chances of recovery. This implies that fast deployment of capacities in dissemination of information, mobilizing society and launching search and rescue action are essential. Hence the role of local actors, as fast reaction can hardly be organized centrally, from considerable geographical distance.

* Local authorities, along with CSOs, can substantially contribute to raising awareness of dangers of disappearance and THB by setting up systematic information campaigns to new parents, parent associations in schools, etc. Attention should also be given, among others, in this context to the existence of the European hotlines 116000 (missing children), 116111 (child assistance) and other lines for other vulnerable groups.

5. Partnership



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* The importance of local involvement in the THB combat requires a joint commitment of authorities and civil society. This means mutual recognition and trust between authorities and civil society/civil society organizations. With CSOs often operating more closely to street reality, authorities serve their own interest well by supporting those CSOs which act correctly and effectively. This does not necessarily always mean financial support, it can also be logistically, putting office space at disposal, screening CSOs and extending their credentials to the successful ones, etc.

* Partnership among municipalities to exchange good practices and experiences with implemented policies may prove to be very fruitful at all operational levels, from municipal police to administrative departments and social workers.

6. Holistic approach.

* Many municipalities are administratively, operationally and/or financially involved in orphanages, shelters, youth delinquency detention and support centers, etc. Whether this involvement is partial or full, municipalities, along with civil society, can take action for those institutions to establish a holistic approach, in which - beyond the elementary needs - also needs of wellbeing and societal integration are seriously being responded to and dealt with.

* This includes both a preventive dimension and a therapeutic one for traumatized victims of THB.

* That the issue is not exclusively related to migrants, refugees and UAMs may well be illustrated by the situation of young adults who for one reason or another have been allocated to juvenile detention centers, orphanages or other institutions, and at the age of 18 suddenly enter open and free society, totally unprepared. Dramas, at times with lethal conclusion, are legion. Exploitation and THB are legion too. At the local level, a variety of preventive and supporting initiatives can be taken, again in partnership with civil society, such as peer mentoring programs, monitoring and assistance, etc.

* The above issue is of course also relevant in the migrant and refugee context, as age is often the motive for adolescents to flee camps and reception centers, for fear of losing their protected status when they will turn 18 too soon. It is also relevant in light of current policies (e.g. in Greece) to dismantle camps and distribute migrant and refugee families and groups over apartments spread out over town, with hardly any support mechanism at their disposal.



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