

Written Contribution

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First of all, allow me to thank the initiators of this Round Table in Vienna in the name of my Organization for the opportunity we were offered to contribute in writing to discussions studying the link between migration and human trafficking. ‘The Smile of the Child’ is the largest Greek-based NGO and is active in the area of child care and child protection. It exists since 22 years and has helped over 100.000 children in 2016 through a wide spectrum of actions. As such, ‘The Smile of the Child’ faces the humanitarian effects of the prolonged economic crisis, as well as the refugee crisis, noting that approximately 40% of refugees in Greece are children.

Consequently, trafficking is part of our direct concerns, and this constitutes the basis for the present remarks I wish to share with you, stressing the need for a specific focus on children in the combat against human trafficking.

I will highlight a number of elements that we would like to see reflected in future policies, setting benchmarks for governments and establishing principles and priorities related to children in the discussion about trafficking of human beings. My remarks are obviously not exhaustive, but as in the UN context, in which ‘The Smile of the Child’ contributes to similar debates on the basis of its ECOSOC consultative status, we herewith declare our full availability contribute also to the process that will hopefully be generated by the present Vienna meeting.

As a general point, there is an issue of definition. There do exist conventions and international instruments according to which recruitment, transportation, transfer and receipt of persons under the age of eighteen for reasons of exploitation are to be considered as acts of trafficking of human beings. National legislations should reflect this criterion universally and governments should develop policies of creating awareness among actors and of enforcement. This is particularly critical to combat trafficking of older teenagers, who may be mature enough to work away from home, but are nevertheless to be considered as children.

Society has the responsibility to combat trafficking of human beings in four dimensions, the so-called four Ps: prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership. Allow me to add some crucial operational remarks to these four dimensions, seen from the angle of an organization that works in the field, for the care and protection of children.



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Prevention is probably the most challenging dimension of the combat against trafficking of human beings, and children in particular, because of the ever growing complexity of the issue and because of the multitude of intangible aspects that need to be dealt with.

From the perspective of 'The Smile of the Child', which is, among other things, the national operator of the hotlines for child assistance and for missing children in Greece, there are several elements that come to mind. There exists an obvious link between child disappearances and all forms of child exploitation. It is therefore essential that the powerful instrument of the hotlines be more systematically and more intrinsically instrumentalized in the combat against child trafficking. Awareness of the existence and the potential of this instrument must be actively created among the children at risk and their families, but also among police, coast guard, teaching and hospital staff, cabin personnel of airlines and any other actor who is bound to be in touch with children at risk and potential victims. Unfortunately, however, we still notice that hotlines are underused to prevent or resolve cases of disappearance and exploitation, in spite of their proven record of success.

In a specific response to the refugee crisis in Greece, 'The Smile of the Child' has therefore also developed flyers in five languages (Greek, English, French, Arabic and Farsi), distributed among refugees, creating awareness of the risks and highlighting the existence and potential of hotlines as a means to identify and report on cases of child disappearance and exploitation. We have also invested in making our hotlines and call centers accessible for Arabic and Farsi speakers, reducing the threshold of contact.

Along with awareness raising among all actors who are bound to be in touch with children at risk and potential victims, training is key to the combat: how to identify cases of trafficking, how to respond, where and how to report, etc. This aspect of training should be institutionally imposed by authorities as part of the curriculum that relevant staff has to follow through in view of standard qualification. We are for instance thinking of police and border police, airline cabin and ground personnel, educators and teaching staff.

Relevant to both prevention and protection, an important issue relates to the quality of the environment in which society harbors children at risk of falling victim to human trafficking. This is obviously of major significance for refugee children, and more particularly for unaccompanied minors. However, it is also relevant in the case of children that have been alienated from their biological families because of family violence, sexual abuse or any other form of abuse. Physically and mentally inadequate conditions of shelter inevitably lead to runaway situations and an eagerness of the child to engage into alternative adventures, conducive to trafficking and exploitation of any sort.



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Key to address this issue is the recognition that providing protection is more than just providing a roof against the sun and the rain, three meals a day and flimsy information about the way ahead, legally and practically. There is a much deeper need for care, rather than just elementary protection, and this deeper need involves affection, reconnection to education, social reintegration, attention for mental health besides physical health, wellbeing rather than just welfare.

Which leads to a couple of basic conclusions that should, in our belief, find their way into policy recommendations and policy making, and into a set of benchmarks to be adopted by governments. As an overwhelming matter of principle, detention can never be the right solution to provide protection of children. No child belongs behind barbed wire, which - regardless of the declared intentions – locks up and imprisons, and does not protect; children do not need a guard, they need persons who genuinely care. 'The Smile of the Child' has been running 10 homes for children at risk over its 21 years of existence, without guards and without barbed wire, but following a holistic approach which encompasses the entire spectrum of a child's needs. Of the nearly 800 children we have raised in total, we have had no cases of runaways. None has thus fallen victim to trafficking.



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We are currently also in the process of applying this holistic approach of ours in two new homes blending Greek children at risk, victims of abuse and violence, with unaccompanied refugee children of the same age group. The first home has opened, with assistance and hence approval from IOM and ECHO, a second one is being readied for operation in the near future. Our underlying belief is that, in a genuine protective environment that pays proper attention to long term and sustained support, children who are given a chance to turn the page on their unimaginable trauma and look forward to a future of social integration and inclusiveness, education and wellbeing, are unlikely to fall into the traps and become victims of human trafficking. This does indeed mean smaller homes rather than massive shelter units, it does indeed mean a more intensive commitment of protection, both in terms of effort and finance. But, in the end, we all have to make up our minds whether we want our society to invest in the combat, and we will all have to put our money where our mouth is.

I am coming to the third "P", prosecution. In order to effectively enhance prosecution of perpetrators of child trafficking, the existence of a child friendly justice is crucial. Children have to be able to testify in a physically child friendly environment, limiting the number of times they have to repeat and mentally relive their story to absolute necessity. For children, the contact with the justice system is even more intimidating than for adults, and prosecution of child traffickers based on the testimony of child victims can only be effective if the barrier of intimidation and reluctance for them to testify, is maximally dismantled. In Greece, 'The Smile of the Child' has set up such an environment modeled on the US Child Advocacy Center, which however has remained rather unused so far by judicial authorities for various institutional reasons.

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A benchmark for governments should be the existence or creation of national legislation and infrastructure that allows for child friendly judicial testimony of child victims and child witnesses.

Partnership, the fourth “P”, is indeed a crucial element as well in combating human trafficking, especially when it comes to children. In fact, the need for partnerships between public authorities and civil society is horizontally spread over all areas of endeavor, be it in prevention, protection and care or even prosecution. Partnership means cooperation and mutual trust between public authorities and civil society. It means that civil society enhances the effectiveness of public authorities, constructively critical and above all acting as a reliable, stable and structured actor. On the side of public authorities it means that civil society must be properly accepted, trusted and recognized as a partner, in an open dialogue.

For partnership to function in this spirit, however, there needs to be clarity and transparency. It is therefore of utmost importance that national legislations foresee accreditation procedures, based on external audits and reporting requirements, by which reliable, structured and genuine actors of civil society be distinguished from surge organizations and less genuine ad hoc structures. The multitude of NGOs of all sorts that were created and chaotically flocked together in response to the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, teaches us that partnership can only develop, with proper allocation of means and capacities, into an effective combat against phenomena such as disappearance and subsequent trafficking of refugee children, if that partnership is adequately coordinated within a legal and organizational framework. The creation or existence of such a framework as the cornerstone for the fourth “P” is squarely the responsibility of national authorities and should therefore constitute a benchmark for governments.

To conclude, I wish to thank again the initiators of today’s dialogue in Vienna. ‘The Smile of the Child’ is grateful for this opportunity to contribute, even it was impossible to be physically present. We remain gladly and entirely at your disposal for additional input.

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