

# Conference on Children's Rights in the Migration Crisis and in the Digital Environment

4 November 2016 in Tallinn

## Summary

### Introduction

The conference aimed at sharing good practices among international and national experts in the context of discussions of two issues currently in the spotlight in Estonia as well as at European and global level, namely children's rights in the context of migration, and within the digital environment.

The event gathered 200 participants from over 15 countries and 40 organisations. At the conference, children participated alongside leaders in the field, and presented their own messages and thoughts on the issues under discussion. The conference was organised by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in co-operation with the Estonian Institute of Human Rights and the Council of Europe, and was part of the Estonian Chairmanship in the Council of Europe.

### Key Note Speakers

**Nils Muiznieks** (Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights) addressed the challenges of migration and digital environment. It is always important to ensure child's best interests. He underlined that detention of children is never justified and constitutes a violation of human rights. Integration policy should be based on family unification and inclusive education. States have the duty to protect children's rights both offline and online, including responding to the threats on the Internet and making sure that children have good digital literacy skills.

**Sven Jürgenson** (Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Estonia to the United Nations in New York and the President of the UNICEF Executive Board) talked about the role UN and UNICEF and also gave examples how digital technologies can benefit migrant children. Regardless of their status children are children first and it is important to protect them from violence, keep families together and invest in their future by giving them the opportunity to go to school and receive quality education.

**David Mcloughlin** (Deputy Regional Director of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States in UNICEF) illustrated in his speech what the two topics discussed at the conference have in common. For a migrant child smart phone is the single most important thing (only after that come food and water) – modern technology comes with positive and negative side, but undoubtedly it has a large role to play in the world today where so many people are constantly on a move and often separated from their families and communities.

**Andres Aru** (Head of the Children's and Youth Rights Department by the Chancellor of Justice) focused in his speech on children's identity, the role of stereotypes and the ways others can influence one's view of self. He underlined that if people are not afraid to lose their own identity they are also more open to a dialogue with others different from them.

## Panel I: Refugee Children

First and foremost, it is the task of each country to protect the children and guarantee them a sustainable future that is free from violence. However, in times of crisis, international cooperation is inevitable and essential. What are the challenges for societies as whole, governments and international organisations in protecting children's rights, in keeping them safe in conflict zones and refugee camps, as well as in new homelands?

Moderator: Jaanus Kangur, Estonian trainer and anthropologist

David McLoughlin, Deputy Regional Director of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States in UNICEF

George Moschos, Deputy Ombudsman for Children's Rights in Greece

Fredrik Malmberg, Ombudsman for Children in Sweden

Stephanie Rap, Lecturer and Senior Researcher at the Child Law Department at Leiden University

Elin Wernquist Roberts, Head of the Children's Rights Bureau in Stockholm

Children from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare introduced the panel discussions, giving their perspectives on the refugee crisis and the situation of unaccompanied and migrant children. Their underlying message was that all persons should be treated equally.

During the panel discussion it was emphasized that access to quality **education** is critical in order to guarantee children a prospect for a fulfilling and sustainable future. Speakers questioned the impact of policies that favour granting temporary residence permits to children as in terms of desired outcomes, which is the facilitation of integration and with respect to successful integration in the education system and in the longer term in the host society. The issue of children whose applications were rejected while returns could not be ensured and their existence in a legal vacuum was also highlighted. Panellists indicated the importance to listen to children themselves, give them a chance, and offer normal surroundings and a creative, inspiring space filled with positive relations. In order to achieve best possible results when addressing issues related to refugee children, it is important to **include different stakeholders** and have good cooperation with civil society.

One of the challenges is that no asylum case is similar to another, so it is complicated to have a unified approach and therefore reaching the right decision might be a challenging and lengthy process. However, it is important to ensure the child's best interests, their access to social services, legal guardian, information, education, health care, as well as effective judicial review procedures. Panellists expressed the need for a unified approach and common Europe-wide minimum **standards** to be developed and hoped that the challenges experienced by European countries would trigger the strengthening of child protection mechanisms for all children living in these countries.

## Panel II: Child's Right to Own Identity

Migrants come to Europe with their own customs and traditions - their cultural heritage. What are the challenges and best practices in integrating children and their families into new societies, while being mindful about their background? What roles do different stakeholders have in the process, from (local) governments, to schools and civil society? Have national action plans and strategies worked? What are the lessons to be learned, and what could be improved in the future?

Moderator: Margit Sutrop, Professor at the University of Tartu  
Abdirahim Hussein Mohamed, Somalian-born Finnish politician and consultant  
Kadri Soova, Advocacy Officer on EU Migration Policies in PICUM  
Solve Bjørn Randal, Programme Director for Child Protection for Unaccompanied Minor refugee children in Bergen city, Norway  
Koen Leurs, Assistant Professor in Gender and Postcolonial Studies at Utrecht University

The panel began with an introductory performance video by children from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, to illustrate how difficult it is for a child that differs from the masses to be included or bring about a change.

It was concluded that it is important to be mindful about one's identity as it is a complex matter that cannot be reduced only to, for example, culture or religion. Children's **identities are formed by the complex experiences** they have in life, including while present in the host society, and everyone's story is unique. It is important for refugee children and their sense of self to be **included in their new society**; to be integrated and have a good network, whilst at the same time keeping connection to their roots – e.g. through education in their native **language**. However, it was pointed out that learning the language of the host community is a key to successful integration. It is also important to **raise awareness** of the child's right to their own identity in society, to stop the prevalence of stereotypical attitudes and avoid the labelling of migrant children. Integration is a **two way street**.

As in the previous panel, the speakers once again underlined the importance of **education**. Refugee and migrant children should be supported as **change agents**, assets in society to be educated and integrated: this would also help to support a well-adapted workforce of tomorrow.

In order to learn about migrant children's identity, it is also useful to understand their usage of the Internet and **social media** – what are the key messages important to them, what do they like and dislike. Children on the move and/or away from their home countries are often active users of new technologies, which often form a part of their identity. The importance of smartphones for refugees in navigating their way through challenges and for connecting with the host country support systems cannot be ignored.

### Panel III: The Possibilities of the Digital World

New technologies and digital solutions are an inseparable part of modern life. The digital environment provides numerous possibilities for learning. ICTs and digital media have added a new dimension to the right to education for children. What is the role of schools and education? Educators and leaders are tasked with preparing the next generation for the digital future, providing them with the necessary skills and digital intelligence. How to best use modern means? What is the role of parents, when their children are often better at handling modern devices than themselves? Does all the information available online really make us more knowledgeable, and how can one be an intelligent Internet-user? Finally, what are the future digital developments, and how should these be anticipated by digital education and parents?

Moderator: Henrik Roonemaa, Estonian technology journalist

Birgy Lorenz, ICT development manager and a teacher in Pelgulinna Gymnasium

Mart Laanpere, Senior Research Fellow in Tallinn University and a training manager in Samsung's DigiTurn project

Elizabeth Milovidov, Independent expert, Digital Parenting, Council of Europe

The panel began with a short introductory video by children from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, where they had interviewed their peers about the possibilities and future of the Internet.

It was concluded that the digital world offers several possibilities for students and that the ICT related skills they learn have a wider use. Learning **programming** advances rational thinking and equips children with good **analytical and problem solving skills** which they can use in their future lives, regardless of their chosen career path. Therefore it is positive that in more countries and schools, teaching programming takes place at primary school level.

Whilst the spread of ICTs brings many positive changes to schools and children, it is important at the same time to **focus** on their **parents** who did not grow up in the digital world, and might have more fears and questions related to new technologies. Parents have differing parenting styles, but all are faced with the challenge of finding ways to balance the benefits and opportunities that technology, internet and social media have to offer with the risks inherent in the use of ICTs. Therefore parents also need education and support in order to keep up with the developments of the digital age and the advances made by their children while using ICTs.

For a successful and safe digital world, it is important to include all age groups and make sure that there is ongoing **communication** between parents and their children. An important observation was that we do not have evidence-based longitudinal research on the impacts of ICTs on children and until we have observed a fully digitalized generation from birth to adulthood, we will not know the full impact of this new digital world.

## Panel IV: The Challenges of the Digital Environment

There are darker corners within the wide web, with many risks and dangers hidden at first-sight. Emphasis should be on supporting, not controlling, children - only through education and empowerment can children gain the necessary skills to defend themselves against risks online, and be put on the path to becoming true, digital citizens. What are the potential risks that we need to be preparing children against? What can be done at governmental level to protect, and how can we keep pace with the rapid changes in the digital environment? How to recognize and report abuse and bullying? Is there a difference between virtual and real life? How to recognise online addiction and what are its impacts upon mental health? Are there sufficient resources in and knowledge of places to get help? What are the responsibilities of private stake-holders, and how can perpetrators better be held accountable, in a cross-border, virtual environment?

Moderator: Kristel Siitam-Nyiri, Deputy Secretary General of Criminal Policy Department of the Estonian Ministry of Justice

Anne Kleinberg, Head of the Psychiatry Clinic of Tallinn Children's Hospital

Maarja Punak, Estonian police officer and a web-constable

Jutta Croll, Managing Director of the German Centre for Child Protection on the Internet

Anne Larilahti, Vice President, Head of Group Sustainability Strategy in Telia Company, Finland

Boris Veler, Councillor of safe and creative use of web technologies in Logout, Slovenia

The panel began with a short introductory animation by children from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare illustrating the biggest challenges and threats they see in the digital environment.

It was discussed that new trends include younger and **younger children** using digital devices and the Internet **which cannot always be anticipated**, such as new applications that gain widespread popularity or developments with respect to the **Internet of things**.

It is important for parents and carers to be able to teach their children how to be responsible users of digital devices and digital media, although they themselves often lack this knowledge. At the same time, while children may be more knowledgeable, they can lack important skills that adults have. Hence, the parents and carers' role to "set the rules and check the rules" was emphasized. **Cooperation and communication** in this context are important. From a health point of view it is important that both children and parents do not spend extended periods of time with digital devices, recognize the signs of **potential addiction** and seek timely professional help.

People are spending more and more time online and different forms of violence have been adapted from reality to virtual reality, (e.g. cyber bullying) requiring police intervention. The Estonian **web-constable** spoke of the positive impact of their work in helping children online, and the importance of increased awareness on their side about where to turn to for help.

In order to effectively tackle the threats and challenges of the digital environment, it is important to **include all stakeholders** and co-operation processes need to be supported strategically by policy makers, though coordinated and active efforts. Private companies also have a role to play and while there is not much legislation in the field, it is a **moral and ethical choice** to be made. The example of a company which has taken upon itself to monitor

and control Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and block forbidden content on its servers was highlighted as a promising practice. However, due to the complexity of the Internet it is hard to tell where to draw the line so as to ensure the respect and reduce tensions with human rights norms and principles.