



Child Poverty and Drug Addiction in Central and Eastern Europe Practitioners from NGOs call upon the EU and national governments to take urgent action and better co-ordinated health strategies

Representatives of child rights NGOs, governmental representatives and politicians as well as experts and practitioners from EFSC member organisations, researchers from Universities throughout Europe, called upon the European Union for a common and inclusive health policy as well as for combating a social exclusion in order to prevent drug abuse among street children and vulnerable children. On 10-11 December 2009 participants of the conference: *"Child Poverty and Drug Addiction: Challenges and Lessons in Central and Eastern Europe to improve the dialogue with the EU institutions on a Child inclusive Health Policy"* held in Warsaw discussed the interdependence between child poverty and drug addiction in Central and Eastern Europe with its focus on marginalized and street children. A joint declaration was adopted in which the strong need to address the issue of drug abuse amongst young people in the framework of the EU Strategy "Together for health" was stressed as well as the need for a more and better co-ordinated action from Member States in term of drug prevention was expressed.

The European Federation for Street Children (EFSC) addressed these concerns together with high level speakers from the European Commission, European Economic and Social Committee, Polish Government representatives and politicians. They included them in the discussion, along with the practitioners from EFSC member organisations and other child rights NGOs in order to discuss the fervent issue of poverty and its influence on the most vulnerable groups as street children. The conference was organized by EFSC together with its partner organization from Poland, The Society of the Friends of Children (TPD) with the support of the European Commission PROGRESS programme. **Reinhold Müller, EFSC Director** highlighted in his welcoming speech that *"in all EU Member States, vulnerability to the diseases linked to drug abuse is disproportionately affecting street children, in particular those with a migration background"* and taking this into consideration only a holistic and targeted policy implementing the EU principle of "Health in all policies", particularly those which directly target the active social inclusion of children can bring concrete results. On the other hand, drug abuse and deviant behaviour should be addressed through concrete and direct intervention methods bringing together multidisciplinary networks of local actors, ranging from the health sector to social services, the justice system and the educational sector- from both field based NGOs and public authorities.

Mr. Krzysztof Stanowski, Vice Minister in the Ministry of National Education in Poland in his welcoming speech marked that together with the happiness of the 20 Anniversary of freedom, since the fall of communism in 1989, challenges have arisen as well as problems that need to be addressed. In spite of the benefits in terms of freedom and democracy, he admitted that children are often the victims of the social breakdown following the transition in Central and Eastern European countries, leading to increased inequalities and in some cases to poverty and marginalization. **Mrs. Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka deputy in the Polish Parliament** also stressed the issue of the impact of the transition for the most marginalised children in Poland and particularly denounced the lack of sexual education, health care prevention and the fight against violence in schools in order to improve the health situation of children and battle drug addiction. She also denounced the existence of malnutrition amongst children and the challenges faced by the school system: feeding children at school implies that this food will be shared with the whole family. According to her, most of the progress made in the protection of children and prevention against drugs were due to the efforts of the NGOs.

A balanced and integrated approach to policy making as a way to child protection was marked by **Mr. Andrzej Kośnikowski, Policy Officer in Anti-drugs Policy Coordination Unit Directorate-General for Justice, Freedom and Security in the European Commission**. He highlighted that not only

children from dysfunctional families are at risk for drug abuse, but, also those from families on welfare without care from their parents. He introduced The European Action on Drugs – EAD as a major European Commission action in this context. The Action Plan 2009-2012 aims to encourage the European civil society to play an active and responsible role in relation to the drug problem can be used as well as a platform for communication, exchanging best practices, and for partnerships aiming at prevention and demand reduction. He reminded that the Commission only has, by Treaty, a complementary role of brokering action within Member States, which the Action seems to fulfil as already some evidence of projects inspired by the Action itself. He underlined the need to put into reality principles such as early detection and intervention in the area of drug prevention as well as the partnership of citizens and institutions. As an example of national action, **Mr. Elmet Puhm Advisor in the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs** presented the overall situation in Estonia in term of drug addictions, marking the importance of informational actions in his country. “*Cannabis smokes you*” as a raising awareness campaign aims at providing simple information to young people regarding addictions and its results. The need to educate parents jointly with the children on drug abuse risks was particularly stressed by him and other speakers. Presenting Poland as a case study, **Mr. Dawid Chojecki, expert in the National Bureau for Drug Prevention** expressed that a significant trend is emerging of drug use among relatively well-off children who take mainly recreational drugs and, increasingly, legal “smart drugs”. Among the reasons why children take drugs, “curiosity” is increasing with respect to any other reason. In order to tackle drug addiction among vulnerable children, he highlighted the importance of preventative actions also at the European level at the example of the Poland campaign: “*Fred goes net*” (informational website) and “*Party workers*” with aim to provide information during parties, concerts and mass events for young people. Keywords are: Early intervention, risk reduction and outreach, as well as street intervention and working programmes. Following this rich scope of innovative methods, **Professor Tadeusz Pilch** from the University of Warsaw stressed the role of the media in mobilising “social imagination” towards combating “the universal disability” of child poverty and exclusion stressing also the worldwide dimension of children’s marginalisation: 100.000 child soldiers worldwide, 140.000.000 children without access to school, 50.000.000 illiterate children as most shocking key figures amongst others. Prof. Pilch showed, on the basis of historical data on Poland, the relationship between the occurrence of economic crises and the poverty of families as well as the increased risk of drug addiction for young people. Currently 33% of the poor are children in Poland and the need for a better social protection system is rising, and in particular the need for foster homes for children. **Mrs. Agnes Cser** Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and President of the **Democratic Trade Union of Health and Social Workers in Hungary** marked that children, due to their vulnerability and special needs, require special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection. The size and scale of the differences in health of people especially children living in different regions of the EU and between socially advantaged and disadvantaged EU citizens represents a challenge to the EU’s commitment to solidarity and equality of opportunity. She underlined the need for appropriate healthcare without discrimination and the application of the principle on ‘health in all policies’ both on the EU and national levels concluding that the EU action can be an important driving force and complementary element for national actions. Considering that health policies are always labour policies new concepts of economic policies should be developed to respond better to the disastrous effects of the crisis.

Country overviews on Slovakia and Kosovo gave a very interesting inside view on the state of drug addiction for children in these countries. **Denisa Pochová, Advisor of the RAMAD for the Health of Roma Children**, who presented the negative influence living conditions on the overall health status of Roma children in Eastern Slovakia underlined high infant mortality rate (three times higher than the majority population corresponding to the level 30 to 40 years ago) and malnutrition amongst Roma children (In Slovakia and 84% of Roma children are hospitalized during the first year; 30 % of all hospitalized children are Roma children). She also stressed the importance of prevention and a coordinated system of co-operation as most effective ways to avoid diseases and drug addiction, and the need to make the invisible traumatic reality of Roma children visible. **Edona Berisha Kida from the Center for Protection of Victims and Prevent Trafficking with Human Beings-PVPT at University of Pristine in Kosovo** presented the situation in Kosovo where many positive strategies are prepared but with insufficient implementation. The reasons for drug abuse are comparable with those in other regions in Europe: dysfunctional families, increasing poverty after the economic crisis, unemployment

and stress. She highlighted that many more street children are in reality on the streets compared to statistics as many of those living on the street, but sleeping in (broken) homes. Unfortunately they are not taken into consideration for the data collection even though they are vulnerable to all kinds of addictions and violence.

As final conclusions of the panel discussion, early prevention and intervention were mentioned together with the holistic approach as the main principles for an effective battle against the phenomenon of drug addiction of children and youth as well as to avoid diseases of children in general. Street children as the most vulnerable group in term of drug abuse and poverty in Central and Eastern Europe should be particularly protected and this burning issue should be addressed in a more concrete and field relevant way in the health and social inclusion EU strategies. On the operational level, the need for a better training in order to mainstream child protection in all institutional contexts where children are involved was discussed. The accession to the European Union has opened to the new Member States new opportunities for accessing funding, networking and exchange; on the other hand, the limited duration of funded projects is seriously hampering the sustainability and long-term impacts of the interventions. A new intercultural dialogue in Europe was called for in order to improve the co-operation with Western Europe, to develop common European values and to better reach the children of ethnic minorities, in particular the Roma, in the health sector. Last, but not least the eminent role of social NGOs action and thus of volunteers for a better co-ordinated and more efficient proactive battle against the phenomena of child and youth drug addiction was underlined.

As a result of the conference, a joint declaration on the link between drug abuse and child poverty and social exclusion was adopted by the participants. The declaration calls on Member States and the European Commission to support the increase of specific prevention and rehabilitation projects and shelters for street children, and to create multidisciplinary networks among the different institutional actors, towards a holistic approach to rehabilitation, which does not only tackle drug abuse but also the self esteem and needs that are connected to drug abuse. The signatories call on the European Union to strengthen the open Method of Co-ordination in order to better address the needs of the most vulnerable children, and Member States to fully endorse the "Health in all Policies" principle, including by considering the social determinants of health. Another pledge was that to an easier access for NGOs to the support programme and funding.

The joint declaration signed by the participants with the postulates will be distributed among EU Institutions, Member of the European Parliament, EESC, national authorities, governments and politicians.

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