



# **BUILDING A REGIONAL COOPERATION MECHANISM FOR CHILD PROTECTION**

## **A ChildPact Proposal**

**Draft! Feed-back is welcome!**

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ChildPact is the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area representing over 600 NGOs that serve over 500,000 children.

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### Background of the Proposal

In the early 1990s most countries in the ChildPact area (Western Balkans, South-East Europe, South Caucasus) were sharing a similar post-soviet legacy in child protection systems. These systems were all of them overly and inefficiently centralized, with responsibilities fragmented between 5-6 different ministries (Health, Education, Social Protection, Internal Affairs, Justice); heavily relying on depersonalized institutional care; and not able for this reason to respond holistically to the complex individual needs of the children. In the past 20 years, all governments in the region have worked to reform their child welfare and protection systems. Supported by international donors and civil society organisations, governments introduced new legal frameworks, built institutional capacity and tested new community based services. However, reforms have been incomplete in all countries. Recent reports and empirical evidence show that in the ChildPact area the number of vulnerable children is increasing while the number of children in the general population has decreased sharply in the past 20 years.

In recent years, the amount of expertise developed *collectively* by the region is impressive, but at local level, where it is most needed, expertise is too often a very rare commodity. This paradox is easy to explain: expertise is not circulated and there are scarce opportunities to learn from successful practices elsewhere. ChildPact is arguing that countries experiencing similar social legacies can learn from one another and adapt successful strategies, instead of having to develop policy from scratch. Instead of relying on traditional West-East cooperation that proposes the transfer of expertise from the ‘developed’ countries of the West to the ‘developing’ countries of the ‘East’, **an intra-regional cooperation mechanism is proposed to inspire the transfer of relevant and regional specific knowledge, skills and resources.**

In 2012 PABSEC – the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Black Sea Economic Cooperation – has issued Recommendation 127/2012 which calls on the Member States to strengthen regional cooperation in child protection and build a regional trust fund for children. ChildPact’s proposal is anchored in this Recommendation subsequently discussed at the 2012 Black Sea NGO Forum where 4 PABSEC members and BSEC Deputy Secretary General participated at a special event organized by ChildPact<sup>1</sup>.

### Similar Cooperation Mechanisms

Successful cooperation examples from other regions prove that such an intra-regional cooperation mechanism is not only needed, but also possible. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has established a regional ‘Arrangement’ for the promotion of child welfare to

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<sup>1</sup> More information about this event, including a video, is available [here](#). A detailed report from the event is available [here](#).

assist the Member States in facilitating, fulfilling and protecting children's rights<sup>2</sup>. In the same region, the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC<sup>3</sup>), an apex body of SAARC aimed to end all forms of violence against children in South Asia, brings together government representatives, children, INGOs, UN Agencies and civil society organizations. SAIEVAC ensures that commitments made by the different SAARC mechanisms are translated into appropriate actions.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has established a Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC)<sup>4</sup>. Closer to our region and therefore more relevant is the Working Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk (WGCC), set up and functioning since 2002 by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), bringing together 11 member states (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia and Sweden) and the European Commission. Sexual exploitation of children in all its forms, unaccompanied and trafficked children, children living in the street, children in institutions, young offenders and self-destructive behavior have been among the main cooperation priorities identified and addressed by the WGCC.

### **A Regional Cooperation Mechanism for Child Protection (RCM)**

ChildPact's argument to create a regional cooperation mechanism, is based on: **1.** The common challenges faced by the countries in the region in reforming their child protection systems and the relevance of their recent experiences in this field; **2.** The similar cultural and socio-economic background of the countries in the region; **3.** The obvious benefit from pooling expertise and resources, including the ability to create joint strategies to respond to region-wide child protection needs.

A Regional Cooperation Mechanism could have at least the following **objectives**:

- 1. Reduce the number of children exploited through various forms of child labor** (including illicit activities such as begging, scavenging, drug dealing, etc.), because child labor robs children of educational opportunities, creating generations of illiterate, unskilled adults. This perpetuates the vicious circle of exploitation and inter-generational poverty. Physical and emotional abuse and severe health problems are often associated to child labor due to violent, toxic and exploitative environments.
- 2. Decrease the number of children who live in residential care institutions** (orphanages), because separating children from their families is extremely painful for them. Nothing can replace a loving family and this is why institutionalization should be prevented by offering counseling and support to parents in need and alternative family care services (foster care, kinship care, guardianship, etc) when separation cannot be avoided. Placements in institutions of very young children (0-3) should be stopped as small children suffer the most. Children who leave the institutions should be supported to become productive members of society, because children who grew up in institutions face serious difficulties to integrate socially and most of them are likely to become consumers of social services and law offenders (begging, stealing, drug abuse/dealing, prostitution, trafficking, crime).

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<sup>2</sup> SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangement for the Promotion of Child Welfare, available at <http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/conv-children.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> More information available here: <http://www.saievac.org>.

<sup>4</sup> More information about the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children is available <http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-socio-cultural-community/category/acwc>.

3. **Reduce the negative effects of migration on children “left behind”** by parents who move abroad in search of better opportunities, because children who are left behind are victims of neglect (emotional, physical, educational, etc) and they become vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking, with short and long term negative consequences, often requiring the complex intervention and support of specialized services.
4. **Increase the number of disabled children who go to school** (mainstream education) and end their discrimination in any educational and social setting. In our region many disabled children are considered a disgrace and a shame for their families. This mentality needs to change so that children can live a normal life.

The regional cooperation mechanism would aim at improving the child protection **systems, structures and legislation** needed for improving children’s lives, by facilitating: **1.** Exchange of experience (ex. study visits, joint seminars and training programs, capacity building activities, etc.); **2.** Implementation of programs and projects for innovative approaches, scale-up and advocacy; **3.** Joint research on regional child protection issues; **4.** Monitoring and peer-reviewing of child protection system reforms of the countries in the region; **5.** Bi- and multi-lateral cooperation on child protection.

Regional cooperation will contribute to: better understanding child protection issues that countries in the region are confronted with, learning from successes and failures, identifying gaps in policy reforms and implementation and providing the foundation to advocating for changes, based on models that proved to be successful in other countries in the region. Following examples from other regions, while taking into consideration the specificities of our own region, the following dimensions could be envisaged for establishing a regional cooperation mechanism for child protection: **1.** An inter-governmental dimension; **2.** A civil society dimension; **3.** An academic dimension; **4.** A inter-parliamentary dimension.

#### **1. The inter-governmental dimension**

Representatives of child protection authorities in the region should have a venue for regular exchange of views. A Child Protection Working Group could be established to bring together representatives of ministries with responsibilities in this field. Such Working Group could be hosted by the only treaty-based inter-governmental organization that includes all ChildPact countries – BSEC. A child protection working group does not exist within BSEC as of current date, but BSEC working groups for other social fields do exist (ex. health, education). Alternatively such a Working Group could be established within the Council of Europe by (for instance) developing a sub-committee on child protection within the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. Other arrangements (including an independent option) may be considered, as long as governmental representatives, directly appointed and connected to the lead ministries with child protection responsibilities in their countries, agree to meet regularly and effectively.

Working Group members should have a clear representation mandate and sufficient decision-making power to be able to identify priorities, set the regional cooperation agenda, define and implement programs to facilitate and support the cooperation agenda. Activities and programs should be carried out together with national authorities, agencies and organizations, in cooperation with regional and international organizations.

Due to the complex nature of child protection such a working group needs to consider allowing the participation of national experts of associated sectors like education, health, social protection, internal affairs and justice in order to ensure the cross-sector, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional dialogue and collaboration. For this purpose, the working group members may also play the role of

National Coordinators for a network of national (independent or affiliated) experts representing each child protection sector. These experts might need to be appointed by each interested Ministry, Authority or Organisation. Thematic groups might need to be established.

## **2. The civil society dimension**

Civil society organisations and in particular NGOs have been and continue to be true engines of child protection system reform processes in the region. By pilot-testing alternative and innovative child care approaches, by developing sustainable community-based prevention and support services, by contributing to development of quality standards for services and monitoring mechanisms, and by advocating for observance of children rights, NGOs proved to be essential partners for national and local governments in the reform process. The work of child-focused NGOs is funded by both national governments and international donors: it is in the best interest of national governments and international donors to leverage their investments by supporting regional learning. Building a civil society dimension to a regional cooperation mechanism in this field is therefore crucial.

In each country the majority of the most important child-focused NGOs understood the importance of creating a network, alliance or coalition so as to better represent children's voices in policy debates at national and international levels. ChildPact is a regional coalition of national child protection NGO networks, representing the voice of over 600 organisations which work with more than 500.000 children. ChildPact believes that Children in the Wider Black Sea Region should have their rights guaranteed and live in a society that not only protects them, but actively supports their development to the highest levels of their potential, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender or social background. Given its membership and the fact that ChildPact is a strong supporter of regional cooperation, ChildPact is ideally positioned to act as an important component of RCM's civil society dimension, along with other interested stake-holders. ChildPact's role can be defined in terms of identifying the relevant expertise existing within the NGO sector, contributing to identifying the needs and priorities for regional cooperation, coordinating its members' input to the RCM, disseminating information down to the last member and up to all partners and stake-holders.

## **3. The academic dimension**

An academic dimension of the RCM is an essential element to the RCM as academic reflection is crucial to: understand the root causes and innovative solutions in child protection; identify and evaluate promising practices for response and prevention; provide the other RCM actors (policymakers and practitioners) with the evidence needed when designing programs and policies. Think-tanks, universities and research institutes from our region or from elsewhere but with a focus on the region could come together to: conduct joint research; provide skill development; and develop professional knowledge exchange and sharing learning. The ICBSS (International Center for Black Sea Studies), as a BSEC-related body could have a role in developing this academic dimension of the RCM (particularly if the proposed inter-governmental dimension will work in connection with the BSEC). The Black Sea University Foundation with its strong focus on the region and well established academic and political connections, may also be considered as a potentially strong partner for developing the academic dimension of the RCM.

## **4. The inter-parliamentary dimension**

National parliaments play a crucial role in helping alleviate child grief: they can adopt and enforce strong child protection legislation, oversee government activity, allocate financial resources, and contribute to raising awareness of dysfunctional child protection systems<sup>5</sup>. Establishing contacts

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<sup>5</sup> Child Protection. A Handbook for Parliamentarians no. 7, Inter-Parliamentary Union – UNICEF, 2004, available [here](#).

with parliamentarians from other countries to discuss child protection issues is very important, as this enables members of parliaments to share experiences on success stories and lessons learned in their own country, as well as discuss possibilities of bilateral or multilateral cooperation. To facilitate the work of an inter-parliamentary dimension of the RCM, PABSEC could facilitate a cross-committee working group to meet in the margins of every General Assembly and contribute to the work of the regional cooperation mechanism. Bilaterally, the country-specific friendship groups from each national parliament can be encouraged to include child protection on their agendas.

### **A Regional Fund for Children**

A regional cooperation mechanism calls for a dedicated funding instrument to support the related structure, functions and activities. The need to build a Regional Fund for Children (RFC) is clearly expressed by the 127/2012 PABSEC Recommendation on ‘Child Protection in the BSEC Member States’.

To build such a funding instrument governments in the region and the international donors should consider providing voluntary contributions. The regional fund could be hosted by an independent implementation body (as it is the case of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation or the European Endowment for Democracy), by BSEC (as the only treaty-based inter-governmental organisation in the region), or by other actors as agreed by its contributors. While direct services will remain the responsibility of each national government, the RFC will promote regional efforts, in particular regional learning and cooperation at large.

International donors and stake-holders should strongly support the governments in the region to establish the RFC and reach the RCM goals and do that in a way that encourages the region’s ownership. To give a strong signal of support, international donors could help by agreeing for a donors’ conference to be organized to discuss the Regional Fund for Children.

**Draft! Feed-back is welcome!**

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