



Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Identifying, Referring and Responding

In 2011 UNICEF and the EU entered a new partnership for the purposes of running the *Protecting Children from Violence in South East Europe* project. Initially four countries fell under the project's remit: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkey. Due to the success of the programme, the scope of the project has recently (August 2016) been considerably expanded to include Kosovo, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In this 2013 report, UNICEF examines the ways in which child protection systems may be strengthened in the four countries involved in the initial phase of the project. This report concludes that the processes of identification, referral and response need to be seamlessly connected if the best interests of child victims of violence are to be guaranteed.

The four countries assessed in this report are committed to the agenda of protecting all children from all forms of violence. Although legislative frameworks already exist to protect children, these countries are still working on the creation of more comprehensive systems. At the moment there are two dominant models available: (1) child protection systems; (2) child/ family support systems. Whereas the former has a remedial focus, the latter has a preventative focus. As such, this report recommends that the four countries involved orientate themselves towards the development of child/ family support systems. Indeed, "models that emphasize family support offer an opportunity to protect children...from violence before it happens" (p. 10).

Almost 600 different stakeholders were involved in this research. This allowed for a broad range of perspectives on the question of how accountability could be enhanced in child protection. While obtaining official statistical data presented considerable challenges to the research, this fact alone provides important insights: violence against children remains a taboo subject in South East Europe. All four countries assessed require substantial investment into data collection systems and the infrastructure behind monitoring child protection systems must be enhanced. Certain forms of violence towards children (notably physical violence in the guise of discipline) are culturally ingrained. This report highlights that many children have ceased to think of violence used as a form of corrective action as violence. Regrettably, even those entrusted with child protection revealed that they were less likely to report cases of physical violence towards children perpetrated in schools or at home. This demonstrates that "public perceptions of what constitutes abuse appear to influence actions around identification and reporting" (p. 37).

Across the different sectors, defects were found in the referral process which limit the amount of support child victims of violence have been able to access until now. The most significant of these have been the lack of collaboration within and across the different sectors. In general, the regulations pertaining to information sharing are insufficiently clear. Failure to share information vital to the safeguarding of a child victim may lead to fatal consequences and, similarly, the sharing of less relevant information negatively impacts the efficiency of child protection services. As such, this report recommends that compliance with the child's best interests should be the guiding principle in the reformation of information sharing policies. This report also found large discrepancies between urban and rural settings with respect to service access and/ or availability. It also transpired that service providers were not always clear about whether or not relevant services existed to which children who had experienced violence could be referred. This indicates that oftentimes the "provider's awareness of existing services is as important as the availability of services needed" (p. 38).

Keeping children safe from violence represents a significant challenge in South East Europe where societal attitudes can contribute to the perpetuation of violence and where inequality in the distribution of services remains a reality. However, while there is undoubtedly a need for the creation of more services, this report stresses that working towards comprehensive child protection should be the priority. This would result in increased accountability and would facilitate better practices throughout the process of identification, referral and response. The benefits of standardizing responses to cases of violence against children include the demystification of an otherwise obscure system. Recovering from abuse is challenging but can be aided by the provision of reliable services and personnel.

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