NOW

5TH INTERNATIONAL MAYORS' CONFERENCE NOW

Shaping the Future - Social Cohesion in our Cities

29 – 30 January 2018, Vienna, Austria

„Social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means." - A new strategy for Social Cohesion, Council of Europe, 2004

This year's International Mayors' Conference NOW aims to abrogate the primarily migration-focused discourse hegemony by suggesting that social inequalities, rather than specific problems with the integration of refugees and immigrants, are at the core of our polarized communities. In breaking up the „us versus them" discourse, Act.Now wants to show that the recent „refugee crisis" is neither the reason nor the trigger for the challenges our societies are facing. It just brought up to the surface challenges that have existed for a long time. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states: „Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace."[1] This year's conference will therefore address issues of social cohesion with special emphasis on children and young people, following a human and child rights based approach.

Whether social cohesion results in enhanced child/youth protection – or vice versa – and to what extent both issues are correlated and associated with broader social circumstances such as general societal stability, still needs to be analysed further.[2] There are no reliable data from the field yet. A number of significant risks as well as protective factors affecting social cohesion and child protection have nevertheless been ascertained. They include poverty reduction, social welfare, family relations and social support, schooling, education, prevention of unwanted pregnancies as well as protection of children's rights in general. For those cases there is evidence from the field in post-conflict circumstances showing the importance of the role of children in reconfiguring social order.

Ultimately, social cohesion derives from respect for human and labour rights of all members of society as well as from equitable access to the benefits of economic progress for the whole population. This includes the rights of children. The persistent unemployment, poverty and social exclusion faced by migrants – and a significant number of „local" children – demonstrate the need for greater efforts to address the economic and social aspects of integration and inclusion as well as issues of cultural and religious diversity and citizenship.

First and foremost children are exposed to processes of „social disqualification" characterized by falling living standards of e.g. single parents, immigrant families or as unaccompanied minors, as well as by a weakening of social ties of the receiving communities. Hence they are at greater risk of social marginalization and poverty. At the same time, the discourse about children is often marked by discussions about risks and vulnerabilities while ignoring children's agency and their constant contribution to their environments and societies at large. A new paradigm of sociological childhood studies stipulates that children are social actors and rights holders much rather than „adults in the making".[3]

There are at least three powerful arguments as to why we should invest more in children and youth: the rights argument is based on standards enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989),[4] the most widely ratified human rights treaty worldwide. The signatories have pledged to ensure that priority in their actions be given to the best interests of the child, to prevent any form of discrimination, to protect children from violence and exploitation and to ensure that children's voices are heard and taken into account in decision-making processes. The economic

1   UNESCO: Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001, Article 2.

2   Michael Wessells: „What are we learning about community-based child protection mechanisms? An inter-agency review of the evidence from humanitarian and development settings", 2009. Online: www.unicef.org/protection/files/What_We_Are_Learning_About_Protecting_Children_in_the_Community_Full_Report.pdf, last time accessed 7th Nov. 2017.

3   Allison James et al.: „Introduction", in: „Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues on the Sociological Study of Childhood.", London, Falmer Press, 1997.

4   States that have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) have taken on obligations to implement these rights, to the maximum extent of their available resources' and, where necessary, to seek international cooperation to support the fulfilment of these rights (Article 4).

argument relates to the need to invest in the country's human capital. Capacities developed in childhood contribute significantly to adult outcomes. Therefore, investing during childhood yields higher returns through a better equipped „citoyen", but also workforce, and thus higher social returns through reduced social welfare costs generated by illness or unemployment.[5] The political and social argument also shows clearly how insufficient social investment, high levels of inequality and poverty can undermine social cohesion and lead to ghettoization, conflict and, in the worst case, to civil disorders and violent manifestations of discontent in urban areas with a high concentration of immigrated residents in countries across Europe.

Regional and national legislations in many countries provide a solid framework for the protection of children and their rights in migration based on international standards, such as the UNCRC (Art. 19 on comprehensive child protection systems and Art. 22 on refugee children in particular) and a comprehensive EU legislation.[6] However, these laws and policies have not yet systematically shown a positive impact on the wellbeing of refugee, migrant and native children. Instead, children as well as governmental and non-governmental actors often find themselves confronted with complex, confusing and costly bureaucratic procedures. They neither adequately take into account the best interests of children in general nor of refugee children when unaccompanied or separated from their families.

In suggesting so, we will be looking at two themes:

1. Social cohesion and new political narratives on a community level

2. How an inter-agency approach to children's rights and protection systems can contribute to a broader social cohesion for all

The **first day of the conference** is dedicated to discussing and promoting new political visions, public discourses and more impactful policies for social cohesion from a human rights perspective. It will focus on promising and inspiring local, regional and international programs, networks and initiatives working on various aspects of social cohesion in municipalities. It will provide a platform for various community-based stakeholders for exchange on lived realities, existing challenges, promising and successful approaches on a municipal level with dedicated spaces to co-create, share and network.

The **second conference day** will address rights of children and youth and an integrated protection systems approach. It will focus on social cohesion in our societies at large, including the context of flight and migration. The UNCRC recognizes children as independent and competent actors, as subjects and bearers of rights, with corresponding responsibilities for the duty bearers to protect, respect and fulfil them. Regarding policies and legislation on children's rights and protection, adequate systems are in place on international, regional and national levels. Major challenges remain in the field of their implementation, in particular concerning inter-agency cooperation in the best interests of children. Nevertheless, the conference will present proven examples such as „child-friendly cities" and local-level initiatives. They show how cooperation can work in practice in areas ranging from adequate care for migrant children, psychosocial rehabilitation and protection from violence to education, child participatory initiatives and social inclusion of children and families across populations and generations.

Conference Design

- All attendees invited actively take part in panels and working sessions, including media representatives, the conference is not open to the general public

- Participating stakeholders: Mayors, NGO-Representatives, Members of the European Parliament, Experts and activists working on the issues of the conference, individuals concerned (locals and refugees)

- Everyone attending is equal and his/her voices are equally important

- Working language will be English, simultaneous interpreting to and from Arabic, Greek, Turkish, German will be provided

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5 www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/Investment-in-children-FINAL-REPORT.pdf

6 All member states have ratified the UN Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Geneva Convention). The provisions of other core international human rights treaties, including the ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CAT, CRPD, also provide protection without discrimination to children on the territory of states parties. These treaties have largely been ratified by member states.