



Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021

High-Level Launching Conference

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Statements

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Portugal**

Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by saying that I am very happy to participate in the Conference that marks the Launch of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021. I thank the Council of Europe and the Government of Bulgaria for the invitation addressed to Portugal and for the opportunity to share our recent experience.

In this regard, I would like to express once more the high consideration Portugal has for the work of the Council of Europe in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child.

Portugal is a State strongly committed to the promotion and protection of the rights of the child and to the implementation of the respective United Nations Convention, of which we have been part since 1990, as well as its optional protocols, to which we adhered in 2003 and the last one in April 2014.

Our country fully endorses the guidelines proposed in the new strategy for children's rights and places the principle of the best interests of the child at the heart of its public policies. It was a very enriching experience for Portugal to participate in the construction of this strategy, which I am sure will be a key tool for improving the quality of life of children in our countries.



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Let me share with you that recently we approved a new law on child protection. This law establishes the creation of a new National Commission for the Promotion of Rights and Protection of Children and strengthens the protection of children's rights. One of the assignments of this new Commission is to elaborate a national strategy for protection of children's rights, which will naturally reflect and incorporate the guidelines from the Strategy of the Council of Europe.

In this regard, Portuguese legislation has a widely integrated system of promotion and protection of the rights of the child aligned with the values, principles, mission and vision advocated by international human rights instruments.

My key topic concerns the way children were affected by the crisis. Although this is a multidimensional issue, given the short time available, I will focus on the economic perspective. Portugal has recently been through a period of crisis and austerity that had a great impact on Portuguese society. Families suffered salary cuts and the tragedy of unemployment. And children were affected by this reality.

During the crisis and austerity years, social expenditure was reduced due to the demanding bailout programme Portugal had to follow. Although most of the cuts were directed to working age individuals and middle to high income pensioners, children were also affected both directly and indirectly. For instance, constraining eligibility conditions in minimum income schemes meant that over the last 4 years around 65 thousand children were affected by the loss of that State support. Poverty indicators also shown us that children were severely affected by the crisis. Naturally, a set of safeguard strategies for families and children were adopted in order to minimize the impact of cuts imposed. These measures were focused on social services and therefore their impact is not well captured by poverty indicators.

Very briefly, since 1992 Portugal implemented a comprehensive cooperation model between the State and the third sector for the provision of social services. The State funds, regulates and provides technical support, and Private Institutions of Social Solidarity or their equivalent (NGO's, associations, foundations) ensures the provision of social services. In this important dimension of social protection, the annual expenditure during the austerity years was never decreased; by the contrary, more resources were allocated for funding social services.

Other measures were adopted to preserve or increase the investment in social services and facilities for families, such as:

- the creation of the National System of Early Child Intervention;
- the increase of the number of Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People;
- the regulation of Centres for Family Support and Parental Guidance, that provides specialized support to children and families in vulnerable condition;
- the increase in childcare provision by 13 thousand new places for children from 0 to 3 years old;

- a higher financial allocation to centres for children at risk such as Childhood and Youth Homes and Temporary Centres.

In sum, over the past few decades Portugal made significant efforts to increase the support and social transfers aiming at fulfilling all economic, social and cultural rights of children. Investing in children is a political priority and the Portuguese Government is aware that it is necessary to act, and act quickly, so that the future of children is not put at stake. This year essential social benefits such as child allowance, minimum income benefits, and benefits for children with disabilities were already increased. In addition, we are working hard to implement a very ambitious policy within the next years: a new tax credit to ensure all working families with children will be protected against the risk of poverty.

Nowadays Portugal is strongly committed to carry out reforms and to adopt measures within the social policies to reduce child poverty and breaking the cycle of poverty, and easing the social impact that austerity measures have had on our society.

We are all aware that the full realization of all human rights for all is very challenging to achieve and requires the permanent commitment of all of us. The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child is a remarkable milestone and an essential step in the right direction. Let us bring it to life and make it meaningful for the everyday life of our children.

Thank you very much.