

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN TACKLING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Good Practice in Europe: a Save the Children Italy experience.

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In relation to the Conference's theme, my intervention will focus on online child sexual abuse.

Members from the Save the Children European group have been raising awareness and combating child sexual abuse and exploitation via the Internet and other new technologies since the mid' 90s.

And I would like to focus now on our efforts in this direction. I will briefly describe a project started three years ago and that we are continuing to carry out with the National Centre for Combating Child Pornography on the Internet - C.N.C.P.O established within the Postal and Communication Police, the Department of Equal Opportunities and the Italian Coordination of Public and Private Services Against Child Abuse and Maltreatment – CISMAI, in our country.

This project would not have been possible without collaboration that each partner had established at an international level over the past few years, and this, in itself, could serve as a good example for inter-agency cooperation in a country. This is even more essential due to the specific nature of the subject under consideration, online child sexual abuse.

Before I begin to talk about some of the specifics, I need to outline some of the characteristics leading to this phenomenon.

In our work we take into consideration the Lanzarote Convention definition of child sexual abuse. While also encompassing other aspects of online child sexual abuse including the production, distribution, downloading and viewing of child abuse material (both still and video images); the online solicitation of children and young people to produce self-generated child abuse material, to engage them in sexual chat or other online sexual activity, or to arrange an offline meeting for the purposes of sexual activity, also known as grooming or luring; and the facilitation of any of the above¹.

This phenomenon is complex in nature and it is very difficult to precisely and reliably quantify its incidence, number of cases, etc., on a global level. Nonetheless I would like to present some figures provided by INHOPE, the International Association of Internet Hotlines² which, in itself, is a very good example of international cooperation in the fight against the distribution of child sexual abuse material online.

¹ The ROBERT - Risktaking Online Behaviour Empowerment through Research and Training, project.
www.childcentre.info/ROBERT

² The role of a Hotline is to provide a mechanism for the public to report content or use of the internet that they suspect to be illegal in a confidential manner.

INHOPE is made up by 41 members operating in 36 countries throughout the world (Save the Children has been a member since 2002).

The results published in its 2011 Annual Report show a number of interesting developments³:

- over 29,908 reports of web-based Child Sexual Abuse Material, representing a 24% increase on the previous year, were processed by INHOPE Hotlines during 2011;
- as for the victims age groups concerned, a worrying, developing trend was seen in the increasing incidence of very young children including babies. In the 2011 breakdown 71% of the victims were pre-pubescent, 23% were pubescent, and 6% were infant;
- in terms of the victims gender: 70% of the involved females, 20% involved males, and 10% involved both;
- finally 82% of the web sites reported, were non-commercial and 18% were commercially based, requiring some form of payment.

As I mentioned before, the phenomenon of online child sexual abuse is a complex problem. However, it presents itself always in a dual form, in the sense that we can talk about it as a local problem by emphasising the fact that the abuse and children and young people who are victims, are real and living within our own communities. At the same time, we can see it as a global problem, since the images/videos and the children present there, once uploaded on the Internet can potentially be viewed, downloaded, modified, etc. by anyone in the world, given its global nature. The effects of the abuse may, therefore, be amplified by the use of technology, which, in turn, can also amplify the risks to be abused (for example, in the case of grooming).

To tackle the problem effectively we need to put strategies in place that take into account both these dimensions.

On a global level, one of the major difficulties in combating child sexual abuse and the commercial sexual exploitation of children via the Internet is the international, multi-jurisdictional nature of the crime. Such criminal activities often cut across so many borders, for example, images and videos may be produced in one country, hosted in a second, but accessed and downloaded worldwide. It is therefore vital that there be a common legal framework through which crimes relating to online child abuse can be tackled. Differences between national laws regarding the legality and penalties can create loopholes, which can be exploited by perpetrators, producers, distributors and collectors of child abuse images.

Many countries still do not have laws in place that adequately prosecute these crimes. A 2010 study by the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) on existing legislation, analysed 196 countries and showed, among other, that only 45 have legislation sufficient to combat online child sexual abuse, and 89 have no legislation at all that specifically addresses this crime.

³ www.inhope.org

Law enforcement agencies need to be provided with a common legal framework, resources and technical tools to improve cross-border collaboration. During the last few years measures have been taken in this direction and networking between police forces has been promoted and reinforced to facilitate the exchange of information and expertise, and to conduct investigations jointly (for example, the Virtual Global Task Force⁴ and the Victim Identification group within Interpol⁵).

The C.N.C.P.O – a member of the above-mentioned project - is a special unit, within the Italian Postal and Communication Police, established in 2006 to deal with crimes related to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. It has been fully involved in the development and growth of international cooperation, including participation in the relevant international networks created for this purpose. Throughout this process it has both gained a great deal of knowledge as well as contributed to the creation of a common understanding and approach. The Department of Equal Opportunities, through its experts - also contributed to this process, by being involved, in a number of different contexts in working towards an harmonisation of the legal framework at an international level. Its involvement in the promotion of this Conference is evidence of its commitment.

Returning to the other dimension that needs to be focused on, it is necessary to address the problem of this reality within our communities - victims need not only to be rescued but also provided with proper support. As online sexual abuse is a relatively recent phenomenon it is vital that we understand how it differs from sexual abuse in the absence of new technology, in the way it affects victims and in the kinds of longer-term effects it might have on them. For example, the effects of knowing that videos and/or photographs of the abuse are continuing to circulate and are being viewed need to be addressed by specialised professionals. This is another area where collaboration among professionals is necessary. Through the exchange of experiences, approaches and lessons learnt, professionals from different countries can improve their capabilities and effectiveness. The speed at which this process is advancing varies from country to country depending also on how widespread Internet use is and therefore how extensive related sexual abuse might be.

Our other partner in this project, CISMAI which is a network of agencies and professionals working with victims of maltreatment and abuse, have been involved in the above mentioned international discussions with the aim of bringing national approaches to this issues up to date.

I have tried to highlight, very briefly, some of the key aspects of online child sexual abuse and why international cooperation is essential to those working in this field. However, they must also be able to actively transmit the expertise they have acquired in their daily work national contexts and, most importantly, they will need to understand how this can best be done.

This is exactly what those involved in the project have attempted to achieve; and the first important understanding was that they should have done it together.

⁴ Virtual Global Taskforce – VGT The Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT) is an international alliance of law enforcement agencies and private sector partners working together to combat online child sexual exploitation anywhere, anytime. For more information visit www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com

⁵ <http://www.interpol.int/Crime-areas/Crimes-against-children/Victim-identification>

In so doing, they all accepted and agreed on the fact that *the best interests of the child* must be the primary aim of all actions involving child victims, whether undertaken by police, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, public or private social welfare institutions, and that this needs to be reconciled with investigative and judicial needs.

The latter can only be achieved through the application of multidisciplinary approaches and inter-agency cooperation.

In our country, the legal framework is up to date; we have just ratified the Lanzarote Convention updating national legislation, and we are also working on fulfilling the provision required by the new European Directive on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, which came into force in December last year. What we still need to work on is influencing much of the prevailing culture, which is not accustomed to working in this way.

Through this co-funded European project⁶ the partners have tried to promote a child rights' based methodology, focused on the issue of online child sexual abuse, that encourages inter-agency collaboration and the use of standardised procedures at a national level, targeting operators working in Law Enforcement Agencies, the legal sector and social services.

Seminars held by project partners have been conducted across the country, over a two-year period providing insights related to different aspects of the phenomenon, including the relationship between young people and new media, characteristics and implications involved in online sexual abuse, as well as the needs of and the roles played by all actors involved in dealing with such cases. All of this is aimed at ensuring that all those involved share the same knowledge and language when dealing with online child sexual abuse, something that must form the foundation of any successful collaboration between different agencies.

During this work we encountered a number of difficulties, ranging from a very low level of knowledge about the issue in some cases, that can jeopardised any further action towards promoting effective measures for dealing with online victimisation – and this is all the more striking when compared to the high number of users who, always more precociously and for longer time periods, surf the Net - to others in which actors lacked flexibility with regard to changes in the way they work.

Although there are a variety of obstacles, often linked to the lack of resources, in the way of our promoting the child rights based methodology, the principal obstacle as already noted above, has been a culture-based reluctance to embrace all of the concepts involved, even if the basic rationale and the importance of the subject was agreed upon.

However, the fact that these different project partners, coming from national centralised bodies, are so motivated and committed to making their project work – we are entering in the second phase of the project that will cover the next two years -, has helped and continue to help them to draw others to work towards adopting the proposed methodology that originated in, and drew its strength from, an international collaborative context.

⁶ Development of a child-rights methodology to identify and support children who have been sexually abused for the production of child abuse images. Co-funded by European Commission under the Prevention and fight against crimes programme.