

BEYOND THE HORIZON: A NEW ERA FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

REPORT

**Ergife Palace Hotel &
Conference Center**
ROME, 7-8 APRIL 2022

**High-level Launching
Conference
for the new Strategy
for the Rights of the Child
(2022-2027)**

Co-organised by
the Council of Europe
and the Italian Presidency
of the Committee of Ministers



Presidency of Italy
Council of Europe
November 2021 - May 2022

Présidence de l'Italie
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Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child

Report on the High-level Launching Conference for the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)

Document prepared by the Secretariat

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INTRODUCTION

The Conference, in brief

The new Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) was launched in Rome, on 7-8 April 2022, at a very dynamic High-level Conference entitled “Beyond the horizon: a new era for the rights of the child”, co-organised and hosted by the Council of Europe and the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers and gathering over 300 participants – high-level representatives and experts of national governments and international organisations, civil society organisations, Ombudspersons and children.

The objectives of the Conference were (1) to generate awareness of and visibility for the new Strategy while stimulating a renewed commitment to the rights of the child from all stakeholders at a time when Europe could see that full protection of children and their rights is far from being achieved; (2) to present member States’ visions for strengthening the rights of the child over the next years and (3) to allow outstanding international experts in the field to exchange on topical children’s rights challenges, including with young delegates, and build strategic partnerships.

The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)

The Council of Europe’s Programme “Building a Europe for and with children” was launched 16 years ago to flag and create a framework to the Council of Europe’s commitment to children and their human rights. The programme’s work has subsequently been guided by several multiannual strategies. [The Council of Europe fourth Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#) for the first time formally prepared by the [Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child \(CDENF\)](#), was adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 23 February 2022.

The “Rome Strategy” is a European tool guiding the Council of Europe and its member States in delivering six strategic objectives for protecting and promoting the rights of the child:

1. Freedom from violence for all children
2. Equal opportunities and social inclusion for all children
3. Access to and safe use of technologies for all children
4. Child-friendly justice for all children
5. Giving a voice to every child
6. Children’s rights in crisis and emergency situations

Entitled “Children’s Rights in Action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation”, the new Strategy lists, on the one hand, a number of “implementing objectives” aimed at ensuring continuity of action and promotes, on the other hand, a number of “innovating objectives” aimed at responding to topical challenges, such as children’s environmental rights, or mental health challenges exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Counting on the contributions of various Council of Europe bodies in its fulfilment, the Strategy implementation will actually be initiated by the CDENF in July 2022.

Proceedings at the Conference

The Conference included **several plenary sessions** as well as **eight thematic sessions – or “deep dive conversations”** – on 4 different themes, where experts discussed recent developments and significant challenges impacting the rights of the child. The conclusions of the deep dive conversations and parallel events were summarised by the moderators and children themselves on the second day of the conference in a dedicated [reporting back session](#).



Besides addressing challenges identified under the new Strategy and seeking guidance for the implementation of strategic objectives, the Conference drew attention to the situation of **children in Ukraine** and reflected on some of the urgent responses needed, for example to protect children’s lives and well-being, to avoid their recruitment as child soldiers and to support both accompanied and unaccompanied migrants and refugees.

A group of 12 [young delegates](#) took an active part throughout the conference; it was composed of 10 children and young people (most of them aged 16-17) who had participated in the preparation of the Strategy in 2021, with the support of specialised consultants and facilitators from DCI Italy - Amber, Bárbara, Carlotta, Claudia, Ella, Eva, Francesco, Irene, Lana and Viktoryia. In addition, two more experienced young activists were invited as guest speakers in different thematic sessions or “deep dive conversations” – Alisha and Konstantinos. Next to the main Conference programme, the young delegates held parallel sessions presenting the six thematic priorities and held open dialogues with Ms Elena Bonetti, Italian Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities, Mr Robert Spano, President of the European Court of Human Rights, Ms Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou, Chairperson of the CDENF and Ms Rosario Farmhouse, Vice-Chair of the CDENF. The young delegates’ contributions and recommendations to the Conference will be reflected in more detail in the report by DCI Italy to the Council of Europe.



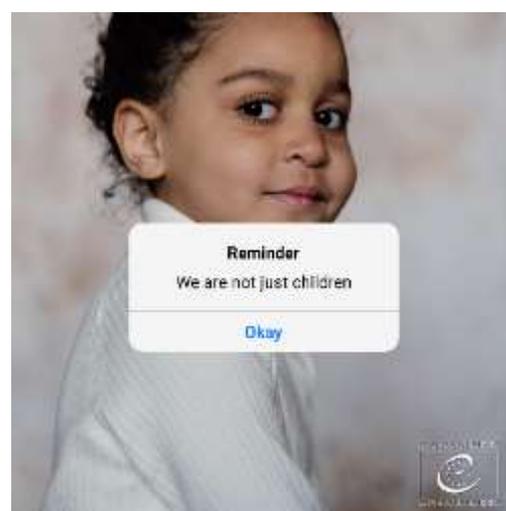
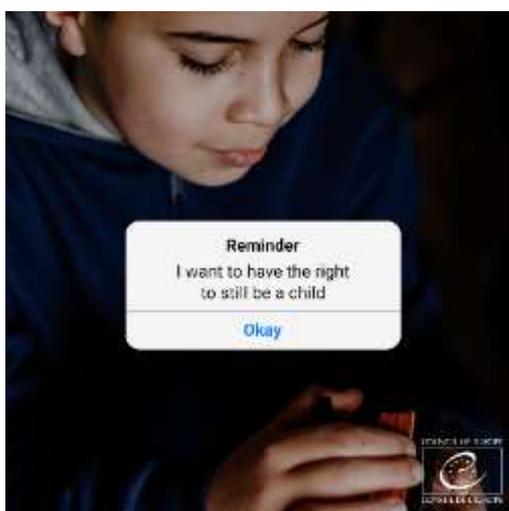
The full Conference Programme can be accessed [here](#), together with [speeches and presentations](#).

Participants and outreach

The Conference gathered over 300 participants, including the Italian Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe as hosts of the event. A total of 20 Ministers, Deputy Ministers or Secretaries of State, a great number of high-level representatives of international organisations and other officials from member States (notably delegates of the CDENF), 15 Ombudspersons, around 20 civil society representatives, and representatives of various Council of Europe bodies as well as further international experts, together with the 12 young delegates, were present at the event. A full list of speakers can be found on the [Conference webpage](#).

In order to ensure a meaningful, safe and positive experience for the children, all participants were requested to commit to the following [code of conduct](#) when registering for the Conference.

The Conference received extensive coverage through social media which gave a great boost to the @coe_children handle and the #CoE4Children hashtag.



Twitter analytics @coe_children – 4-11 April 2022

Impressions	Engagement	Profile visits	Link clicks	Likes	Retweets	Comments
70822	1489	216	101	385	206	31

OPENING CEREMONY AND HIGH-LEVEL SESSIONS



The Opening Ceremony introduced the new Strategy and initiated an exchange on its strategic objectives, highlighting the need to remain alert to and adapt governmental programmes to emerging challenges and new crisis situations, specifically the short and long-term consequences for children generated by the armed conflict in Ukraine. A written message by President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic, **Mr Mario Draghi**, was presented to the Conference, stressing Italy's firm commitment to the Strategy for the protection and promotion of children's rights and the need for all stakeholders to take responsibility for its implementation. The Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, **Mr Benedetto Della Vedova**, outlined that the protection of the rights of the child in the online and offline environments was a priority for the Italian agenda and emphasised the need for a strong response to end the armed conflict in Ukraine. **Ms Elena Bonetti**, Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family drew attention to the children's important role throughout the new Strategy's drafting process and to the need to guarantee children's participation in all matters concerning them, including in policy making and in response to crisis situations. She furthermore highlighted the States' responsibility to build a future for children's rights that lives up to their dreams and aspirations. Finally, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, **Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić**, focused on the achievements of the previous Strategy (Sofia Strategy) in each of the former five priority areas and underlined the future challenges and the need for collaboration with international organisations and other stakeholders, including through co-operation projects in the field, to better protect children.

In the first high-level plenary session, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), **Mr Tiny Kox**, the Commissioner for Human Rights, **Ms Dunja Mijatović**, the Chairperson of the CDENF, **Ms Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou**, the Vice-President for Democracy and Demography of the European Commission, **Ms Dubravka Šuica** and some young delegates discussed the role of international organisations in furthering the rights of the child. **Lana, Eva, Francesco, Victoria and Claudia** presented their views on what it means to be a child in 2022 - their expectations, hopes and fears. The aim of this presentation was to set the ground for a fruitful and meaningful exchange between adult and child participants.

Immediately following, the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Italian Republic, Mr Yaroslav Melnyk read a statement from the First Lady of Ukraine, **Ms Olena Zelenska**. In her statement, Ms Zelenska, enumerated the children's rights that had been violated during the Russian armed aggression of Ukraine and the story of a young 16-year-old girl from Mariupol was narrated.

During the second high-level plenary session, **19 high-Level representatives of Council of Europe member States** and **7 representatives from international organisations and INGOs** demonstrated and renewed their commitment to the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child. They also further committed to strategic partnerships and co-operation in Europe in order to have an inclusive and accountable implementation of the Strategy at all levels. All speakers expressed their commitment to guarantee children's rights in Europe and willingness to provide a coordinated and strong response to address the short and long-term consequences of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

The Opening Ceremony and the high-level sessions I and II were moderated by a well-known Italian television journalist, Ms Giovanna Pancheri.

Plenary session and dialogue:

A Strategy adapted to a new reality: children in crisis and emergency situations

This first session sought to identify the key risks and the main violations of the rights of the child in the context of armed conflict, both in war-torn Ukraine and in other territories where children are fleeing. It also intended to gather perspectives on the **priorities and main challenges in ensuring that children's human rights are protected**. The session also explored how the Council of Europe, within its mandate, can support its member States in maintaining a functioning and responsive child protection system, including protection from the specific risks arising from armed conflict.

Ms Barbara Socha, Polish Undersecretary of State and Government Plenipotentiary for Demographic Policy in the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, **Mr Aaron Greenberg**, Regional Child Protection Adviser of UNICEF Europe and Central Asia, **Artur Degteariov**, member of the Lanzarote Committee and **Elena Botezatu**, La Strada Moldova, introduced their countries and organisations' reactions to the armed conflict in Ukraine and the short and long-term risks and challenges for children.

Facts and figures

- In Ukraine as of 4 April, at least 123 children had been killed, 183 injured and basic services continued to be under attack.
- Over 2.5 million women and children (representing 90% of all refugees in this context) had travelled to Poland by the end of March 2022. 90% of Polish citizens have been engaged in helping Ukrainian refugees through various means.
- According to UNHCR, as of 1 April, more than 390.000 refugees had arrived in the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine, 35% of which were children.
- UNICEF, in close collaboration with the Government of Ukraine, is supporting Ukraine by reaching 50.000 households with emergency cash transfers and has delivered medical supplies to 615.000 people. They are also providing online psychological counselling and are supporting the national child helpline.
- Many cases of children going missing or being kidnapped or sexually abused have been reported during the first weeks of the conflict.

Key conclusions

- Children evacuated from Ukrainian childcare institutions and undocumented, unaccompanied, and separated children are in particularly vulnerable situations.
- Refugee children are particularly at risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, including in the digital environment. The importance of the recommendations of the Lanzarote Committee to have a coherent and integrated response to child sexual exploitation and abuse in all countries receiving refugee children was outlined.
- Children are in need of psychological support. Member States should guarantee free access to health services for all children.
- Each child and their accompanying adults arriving in European countries should be properly identified and registered. Situations of vulnerability must be screened and reflected in the registries. Children should be placed in national child protection systems and family-tracing and reunification must be conducted.
- Collective work is essential. A coordinated data collection system should be put in place to facilitate communication, reporting and co-operation among institutions and, internationally, among different member States through cross border case-management work and follow-up.
- Long-term investments in child protection systems are needed.
- Governments should raise awareness and have clear public messages that if a child refugee arrives in their country, they are required to call social services. In addition, awareness raising and training for those who assist refugees is critical.
- Co-operation between the Council of Europe and other stakeholders is essential. Collaboration with UNICEF is being explored around the legal review of member States guardianship and alternative care systems.
- NGOs should adapt their activities to the current context and adopt a comprehensive approach comprising awareness raising and training of professionals and volunteers.
- The Council of Europe could provide guidance and set a new framework for a comprehensive and coordinated response among its member States.



Theme I: Strengthening child protection systems in the face of crisis situations

Deep-dive conversation A: Ensuring children's access to quality mental health services

"There is no health without mental health."

According to UNICEF in 2021, one in seven children had a mental health disorder. This session explored why this percentage is so high, and possible solutions to reduce this alarming figure.

Panellists reminded the audience that there is a clear correlation between mental disorders and adverse life circumstances such as violence in childhood, including verbal and sexual abuse. But other, more pernicious explanations also have a significant impact on children's mental health. For example, throughout their lives, children's brains develop through their social environment - first through their parents, then their peers. The recent lockdowns and their isolation from their peers, have deprived them of this fundamental aspect of their lives. There has also always been an issue with a lack of investment in mental health, as opposed to physical health. With the economic crisis, and then with the covid-19 pandemic, national budgets for mental health have fallen further. According to a young UNICEF delegate one of the reasons her peers do not seek help is due to the stigma to mental disorders. This is partially due to the fact that mental health is not sufficiently discussed, especially by teachers. She also highlighted the risk of normalising stress, which could lead her peers to think that a state of stress is a normal mental state, and as a result, not to seek help.

To ensure that children do not develop mental disorders, it is therefore essential to invest in education and care for children, as well as in support for parents and carers. Different types of interventions need to be considered before medication, such as community or peer services, and school-based responses. In general, access to health care should be universal, with a focus on children. Participants also stressed the urgent need for funding to support research in the area of children's mental health. Children themselves must be involved in this research in order to have clear definitions, more evidence of successful interventions, and on the drivers of young people's interaction with a changing world.

A point of debate was the balance between parental protection, children's consent, and the desire of children to access mental health services. As such, it was argued that there is a need for voluntary and non-coercive measures to access mental health services. The example of children born intersex illustrates this need: surgery should be delayed until the child concerned is mature enough to decide for themselves.

Among the good practices identified in this area was the need to avoid institutionalisation, which is still widespread in Eastern Europe, in favour of investing in community-based care, as well as the possibility for children to evaluate services, which can be of great benefit to identify current gaps.

Key conclusions

- **A familiar enemy: Extremely low budget allocations for mental health which are mostly earmarked for treatment and not prevention and promotion of wellbeing.**
"There are rich states with no budget for mental health" - Mr David Anthony, Chief of Strategic Planning, Convening and Emerging Issues for the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti.
- **An old problem: excessive medicalisation during the assessment and management of mental health and not enough community support.**
"Child mental healthcare should move beyond the biomedical paradigm. Biomedical interventions are not a first line treatment in most cases. We should invest in community services and support". - Mr Dainius Pūras, Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health.
- **A significant misleading factor: Children are not sufficiently involved in mental health research and therefore interventions are not usually informed by concrete evidence.**
"The involvement of children in research might raise some ethical concerns but not involving them at all raises greater ethical concerns" - Mr Mark Bale, Member of the Bureau of the Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO).
- **An ongoing issue: Schools, as a direct point of contact with children, should be more interested in identifying and providing solutions for mental health.** *"School systems are too focused on academic achievements and less invested in our wellbeing" - one of the young delegates.*

Deep dive conversation B:

Recognising and enforcing children's environmental rights

“Climate change has an adverse effect over the enjoyment of rights by children both within as well as beyond the territory of the State party” (Philippe Jaffé)

“Children are confused by what is the most important thing to do to stop climate change. We are just watching our planet die and we do not do anything. What can we do to make our planet a better place?” (Young delegates)

Each year, air and water pollution and exposure to toxic substances, together with other types of environmental harm, , cause the death of 1.5 million children's under the age of 5 and contribute to disease, disability and early mortality. According to UNICEF, nearly one billion children world-wide live in areas exposed to high risk of impact from climate change, which could kill many of them or force them to leave their homes. A lack of effective action to tackle climate change therefore constitutes a violation of children's rights.

Both the fifth and the sixth strategic objectives of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) include a number of measures to protect and promote children's environmental rights. This “deep dive conversation” explored existing and future environmental standards, children's main concerns and some of the cases related to children rights and the right to a safe environment brought before international bodies.

The panelists, representing the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH), the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly and the Spanish NGO Plataforma de Infancia, introduced their work being conducted at international and national levels and the parallel consultations with children to recognise and effectively protect the fundamental human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, particularly for children. International standards were considered the lighthouses and a step in the right direction to settle an environmental agenda from a child-rights approach.

All panelists and participants recognized children and young activists as a group particularly affected by environmental harm but also key players in the action against climate change. They have proven to be deeply concerned (eco-anxiety) about the urgent need for effective action and want to be part of the solution. In order to tackle climate change and environmental degradation, it was overwhelmingly agreed that human and societal structures, behaviours and mind-sets must change, that environmental education is needed at schools and finally that children must have their voices heard without fear of reprisals.

Children participating in the discussions expressed their frustration and posed the following key questions: How much are we ready to give up (in standard of living and lifestyles) to save our planet? Are we ready to give up technology and resources we don't need? Is society ready for a change? They called for an urgent mindset change and for implementing small changes in our daily lives.

Key conclusions

Different stakeholders must take action.

Children are key players. They have the power to act, but should be further empowered:

- Children can trigger positive developments by changing their behaviour and influencing the behaviour of people surrounding them.
- Children should express their concerns and their anger and stand up for their rights.

Governments should:

- Enact national legal and policy frameworks which address climate change and environmental protection from a child-rights perspective.
- Create safe spaces for children to express themselves, protecting children and adult human rights defenders from reprisals.
- Ensure access to justice for children in climate cases.
- Ensure that environmental education happens at all levels, both for children and professionals (e.g. prescribing it through law).
- Raise awareness of children and adults to induce new behaviours and mind-sets (inter-generational justice).



**Theme II:
Empowering children and overcoming
obstacles to their right to participate**

Deep dive conversation A:

Promoting legal clinics as a means of strengthening children's access to justice

"There is no unique model of legal clinics."

Legal clinics aim to implement children's rights in law, policy and practice. They do this not only by providing children with legal assistance, such as the support of a lawyer or access to international fora, but also by providing young people with specific advocacy experience and research skills, providing global insight into the unknowns of children's lives, developing the legal skills of future lawyers in children's rights, obtaining remedies for violations of children's rights in national and international courts and tribunals - see, for example, *O'Keeffe v Ireland, 2014* - and advocating for reform.

To illustrate the form these clinics can take, participants gave the example of Socio-Legal Defence Centres (SLDCs), which provide children with effective access to justice and redress. They implement an evidence-based advocacy strategy at all levels, provide training for child rights professionals, monitor the implementation of the UNCRC, act as a referral channel, provide support and care, and listen to the child while providing comprehensive information. They follow a child-friendly approach, have a multi-disciplinary team and are inclusive: all children are rights holders, who must be heard and listened to. It involves the active participation of children, empowering them to be agents of change, and uses social advocacy: informing, educating, defending and monitoring children's rights in policy, law and practice.

Participants in this session highlighted many promising practices in this area, including peer support in the legal system, involvement of ombudspersons and civil society, awareness-raising campaigns, the creation of a network to promote legal clinics in Europe, and meaningful participation of children and young people. They also highlighted possible shortcomings inherent in the legal clinic model, such as the issue of parental consent in conflicts of interest that may arise between children and their parents. For example, in the Netherlands, children can write letters to judges who will read them in court and can be heard directly by judges from the age of 12, but parental consent is still required if they want to go to court. Other issues requiring development are the involvement of pro bono

lawyers, and the case of children reaching 18 years of age during court proceedings, raising questions about remedies, the jurisdictions involved, the procedure for changing lawyers, etc. A considerable problem that was raised was that of evidence. Many children still do not dare to talk about their experience, especially if it is a serious crime, which leads to unknown figures, called the 'black box'.

Key conclusions

Legal clinics

- Provide advice and support in individual cases.
- Provide strategic litigation leading to law reform and a more child-friendly justice system.
- Are an investment in the child rights competencies of future lawyers through a clinical methodology.
- Are multi-disciplinary and inclusive.

Recommendations

- To push for a more coordinated approach, for example by creating a network of legal clinics throughout COE member States.
- To promote co-operation between academics, legal practitioners, ombudspersons and INGOs.
- To explore how legal clinics can provide upward feedback to legal services, courts and policymakers.

Deep dive conversation B:

Understanding the challenges faced by children as defenders of human rights

Quotes: "If children voices are not heard we can't have progress on social equality and their rights" (Jana)

"Remember that today's human rights violations are the cause of tomorrow's conflicts. Let's work together to reach more parts of the world and make sure every child human rights defender enjoys their rights." (Alex, quote from our Children's Advisory Team child advisors)

"Having children in the room does not automatically mean child participation" (Theoni Koufonikolakou, ENOC)

"There is no right to participate without opportunities and without information" (Konstantinos)

The Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) includes a number of objectives to protect and empower children acting as defenders of human rights and to guarantee their equal opportunities, right to participation and access to justice. Building upon the experience of child activists and defenders of human rights, this "dive-in session" explored the main challenges children have had to face when defending human rights, the risks they have been exposed to and the measures that must be taken to protect their right to express themselves, build resilience, prevent and respond to harm. The conclusions of this discussion will be considered by the CDENF when drafting the report on children as defenders of human rights, which is foreseen in the CDENF Terms of Reference by the end of 2023.

Panellists agreed that the most significant obstacle child human rights defenders face stems from the widespread lack of recognition of their existence and of understanding their distinctive role, status and rights by adults and children themselves. Another challenge highlighted was the lack of equal opportunities for all children, which prevents children in vulnerable situations to act as human rights defenders.

It was recognised that, alongside the growing and important role of children acting to defend their and other human rights, there are risks. Participants affirmed that it is crucial to ensure that the participation of child human rights defenders is inclusive, empowering and sustained, that the spaces for this are safe and that access to justice for child victims of human rights violations is ensured.

Participants highlighted the need to create online and offline participatory mechanisms and spaces in institutions of organisations such as the Council of Europe to guarantee the inclusion of children's voices in debates and policy making processes. In order to ensure child participation, a protective environment should be established, putting mechanisms in place to monitor risks and threats, and be ready to respond to them. Additionally, children should be provided with adult support and sufficient information about the rules governing these mechanisms, the capacities they have to develop them and the risks they could be facing when speaking out.

Finally, children were encouraged to find a "matter of heart" that they would like to advocate for and to be confident when speaking up for their rights. Adult and child human rights defenders should look for solutions together as equals.

Key conclusions

- Recently, there has been an increasing mobilization of children acting as human rights defenders.
- Child human rights defenders should be legally recognised and protected. European and international institutions should identify practical measures for countries to put in place
- There is still a need to develop a true participatory culture.
- For children to access their rights and to manage expectations, transparent information is needed.
- Children need to be supported in fully embracing their right to freedom of speech, assembly and association, and be protected when speaking up for their rights.
- Education systems have a crucial role in encouraging children to live up to their right to participate; both to develop capacities and to be given the space for civic engagement and to enhance the democratic culture (including in very dense education timetables).
- Children are sometimes stronger and better protected if they are part of strong movements.



**Theme III:
Upholding the rights of the child in a
fast-evolving technological world**

Deep-dive conversation A:

Protecting children from online sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

“Every time we remove one image, it prevents a child to be re-traumatised” (Susie Hargreaves, CEO of the Internet Watch Foundation)

The increasingly rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies offers children great opportunities for learning, connecting, recreation and more. However, this development also creates greater risks for children to become victims of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. In 2021, more than 252,000 reports were confirmed as child sexual abuse imagery by the Internet Watch Foundation, which equates to millions of images and videos. 68% of this content represented 11 to 13-year-old children. To fight against this phenomenon, IWF receives anonymous reports from the public and conducts proactive searches, with the aim of removing CSAM in a timely manner and preventing re-traumatisation of children. It works with the police to help identify child victims depicted in the material and protects its staff who review such content. Their URL list or “blocking-list” containing the “fingerprints” of identified CSAM is then deployed globally and used by the biggest internet companies.

Approximately 70% of the CSAM detected by the IWF in 2021 were self-generated images. Faced with this phenomenon, the Lanzarote Committee decided to dedicate its 2nd implementation report on the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos. The report covers 43 European states Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, and highlights ways to improve their legal framework, prevent this particular form of sexual exploitation of children, investigate and prosecute it and enhance the victims’ identification and protection.

It was stressed that perpetrators of grooming offences solicit children for sexual purposes, using words, not images. This calls for a reconsideration of the methods of detecting online sexual abuse.

Participants also emphasised the importance of child participation. It was said that it is essential to consult children in policies to make the online world safer for them. On this basis, the Lanzarote Committee has involved them in its latest monitoring report on the challenges raised by children's self-generated sexual material. The main challenge here is to respect and enforce their right to be heard, while avoiding confronting them with sensitive and potentially traumatic concepts. Furthermore, policy makers, businesses, civil society and adults in general need to act without over-empowering children in this area.

Another worrying trend for children is the development of the Metaverse, a new technology which will allow them to experience and navigate into a virtual reality. According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate Research, an abuse occurs every seven minutes in a virtual reality chat. Children are also at a greater risk to be groomed via chat or headset, making the abuse difficult to trace and report. Among the suggestions made to protect children in this new environment was the need to tackle the problem at its root, with education and awareness campaigns, the strengthening of age verification techniques and the continued involvement of tech companies in the fight against online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Finally, participants stressed that the upcoming European Union legislation on this issue should always consider the best interest of the child as a primary concern. While a careful balance must be struck with the right to privacy, children should never be left behind in the search for this balance.

Key conclusions

- **Awareness raising of online child sexual abuse (OCSEA)** is essential, both for children and parents/caretakers.
- Teachers should be better trained to deal with this issue.
- Privacy and child abuse should not be prioritised at the expense of each other.
- A cultural approach should be adopted in the fight against OCSEA.
- Tech companies should be more sensitised to the responsibility they have in protecting children in the online world. Governments are asked to follow the recommendations of the **Lanzarote Committee's last monitoring report** in order to efficiently respond to the **challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos.**

Deep dive conversation B:

Artificial intelligence: maximising opportunities while minimising risks



“Until we have a system in which safety of children comes before optimisation for profit and growth we will not have the digital world children deserve” (Leanda Barrington-Leach)

“Youth maybe the 10 percent of today but the 100 of tomorrow” “It’s time we look at technology and artificial intelligence as a tool to combat problems, not create them” (Alisha Arora).

The third strategic objective of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) identifies the risks and the benefits of artificial technologies. This “dive in session” aimed to contribute to this objective by exploring the potential positive and negative impact of AI systems on children’s rights in order to find solutions and maximize opportunities while minimising risks. The key conclusions of the conversation will be taken into consideration by the CDENF when preparing a report on the rights of the child and artificial intelligence, foreseen by 2025 according with its new Terms of Reference.

Speakers identified children as a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to Artificial Intelligence. The extensive evidence of significant risks to children’s physical and mental health, including child’s development, was highlighted. In addition, the lack of safety due to common AI systems being integrated into a wide variety of products and services that children use, from video gaming and virtual reality to search engines, chatbots or neuro-prosthesis. Risks include addiction, commercial exploitation, radicalisation, exposure to gender stereotypes, sexual violence (including pornography) and child sexual abuse.

The need of child rights-based national frameworks for AI that recognise the rights of the child in the digital environment in line with the UNCRC General Comment 25 and outline rights and duties for relevant stakeholders (adults, developers, data controllers, institutions) was outlined as a key challenge. In addition, tailored awareness raising initiatives and educational paths should be developed for target groups and stakeholders, always keeping in mind that the primary responsibility to design child-centred online systems is not with children but with companies and public authorities. Panellist also outlined the importance of further co-operation between neuroscientists and jurists when conducting research.

On the other hand, AI was recognized as providing opportunities for children and society as a whole, for instance by detecting safe shelters for refugees, improving drug discovery and medical treatment, automating tasks to reduce CO2 emissions. It was recommended that Governments invest in AI for the good of society as well as to unite key-stakeholders to make digital safety for children a priority.

Key conclusions

- Legal frameworks for AI specifically used by children or for systems that affect children up to the age of 18 are needed. While there are initiatives for regulating AI in Europe, we need frameworks that are fine-tuned to characteristics, needs and interests of children and young people. This includes tailored impact assessments.
- We need to support a culture of Safety, Privacy and Security by design.
- It is necessary to have spaces for multi-stakeholder interaction to align decision-making, including policymakers, research scientists, industry, international organizations and children and young people.



Theme IV: National strategies for the prevention of violence against children

Deep dive conversation A: Strengthening inter-agency collaboration



*“Consultation with children reveals that they are more likely to reveal violence in child-friendly environments”
(Olivia Lind)*

The Council of Europe Policy Guidelines on Integrated National Strategies for the Protection of Children from Violence have outlined a model approach for the adoption, implementation and monitoring of integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence. In this sense, the first strategic objective of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) includes a number of measures to strengthen legal systems and the gathering of evidence, stepping up prevention and reinforcing reporting and response systems through multi-disciplinary and interagency approaches. This “dive-in session” aimed to share best national practices regarding coordination of services, inter-agency

collaboration and data collection mechanisms to handle and prevent violence against children more effectively, including in the context of reporting systems for professionals and in crisis situations such as the ongoing pandemic.

The panellists introduced the new policy and legal frameworks to prevent and combat violence against children in Spain and Italy. Among the best practices shared, it is important to highlight the need for a broad and key definition of violence against children, the creation of a comprehensive framework including promotion, prevention, care and reparation in different areas where children are involved (such as school), the inclusion of several measures to protect children in the context of gender-based violence against their mothers, the promotion of the right of the child to be heard through new standards and permanent mechanisms and the creation of different bodies for coordination and inter-agency and regional collaboration. The importance to collect disaggregated and comprehensive data was considered vital to prevent violence and follow-up on cases.

Other speakers introduced the Barnahus quality standards and how this model has been implemented in Slovenia with the collaboration of the Council of Europe (joint EU DG REFORM-CoE project). The project resulted in a strong and coherent interagency team of experts, improved child participation mechanisms and a systematic approach to building child-friendly justice. Among the main challenges identified, participants highlighted the lack of trust in the Barnahus system, the need for continuous political commitment to keep long term processes going and of sharing information among collaborating agencies, the allocation of sufficient resources and the importance of committed and trained competent staff.

Key conclusions

- States should enact comprehensive, resourced, clear and specific legal frameworks, including a strong focus on prevention and early intervention.
- All actors should be mobilised and should support the practical implementation of the legal provisions.
- Exchange among different agencies should be facilitated. To this end, the law should enable clear and specific mechanisms.
- Action-oriented data collection is needed to use the information to address issues identified
- Child participation should be promoted on a more sustainable level, individually and collectively.

Deep-dive conversation B)

Comprehensive and age-appropriate sexuality education for preventing violence



“Unfortunately, we can't “childproof” the world. But with comprehensive sexuality education, we can “worldproof” our children”.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to be aware of their health, well-being and dignity, to develop respectful social and sexual relationships, to consider how their choices affect their own and others' wellbeing, and to understand and ensure the protection of their rights.

In order to facilitate the implementation of CSE by States, UNESCO has developed the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, which draws on current evidence and international good practice, and recognises the diversity of national contexts in which sexuality education takes place.

This is particularly necessary as there may be difficulties in implementing CSE in practice. The process of sexuality education reform in Albania illustrated these difficulties; in this specific national context, CSE faced oppositions from regional organisations, misconceptions from children themselves, teachers and parents who may have feared that it ran counter to traditional family values. Another challenge identified in this session was the lack of access to CSE for vulnerable groups of children. A young delegate in the audience added that while education, especially about consent, is very important, it is not enough. She insisted that those who are empowered on this issue educate others about the possibilities of CSE for children.

To counter these difficulties, the reform in Albania offers an interesting framework: it provides for continuous training of professionals (social protection officers, nurses, doctors, teachers), enhanced coordination between all the stakeholders, involvement of peer educators, engagement of community leaders, etc. These are just some of the avenues of reflection developed during this session, which ended with the acknowledgement that children will always explore their sexuality, including online, whether they are educated about it or not.

Key conclusions

Pornography can seriously harm children's mental, physical and emotional well-being and can reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, while erasing the vital distinction between violence and gender.

Comprehensive sex education can save lives:

- It must include the emotional aspect of consent, pleasure and intimacy. If delivered in this way, it reduces the risk of children abusing each other and increases the likelihood that abused children will speak out and get the help they deserve.
- Placing gender and power at the heart of CSE will empower children and prevent violence.
- Teachers need training, resources and a supportive environment, and parents need to be involved too!
- It is a guide to healthy behaviour, sustainable relationships and a fulfilling family life.
- It helps young people to think in advance about what they value and their personal limits; it helps them to react and make decisions that are right for them in specific situations.

Address by Mr Robert Spano, President of the European Court of Human Rights



The President of the European Court of Human Rights, Mr Robert Spano, addressed the role of the European Convention on Human Rights in strengthening the human rights of children. He explained how the European Court of Human Rights case-law has developed over the last decades to take into account a more child-centred, more humane, approach to human rights. The President of the Court then summarised the recent case-law of the

European Court of Human Rights in relation to the six strategic objectives of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027). In conclusion, Mr Spano highlighted that the Court has increasingly started to treat children as independent beneficiaries of all of rights guaranteed by the Convention, requiring legal protections on the basis of the primordial principle of the child's best interest and taking into account an intersectional approach.

The speech of Mr Spano can be accessed [here](#).

Closing session – “What do we take along on our journey towards a new era for the rights of the child?”



The closing session allowed participants to move forward and to summarise the key conclusions of the Conference. A report back from each “deep dive conversation” was presented by the moderator or one of the key speakers; the young delegation reported back from their sessions in a very interactive format. The final plenary session of the conference was also largely shaped by the young delegates, who shared their views and impressions on the two-day conference and the whole participatory process.



Ms Andriani Kostopoulou, the Chair of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), highlighted the crucial importance of the new Strategy for the Council of Europe, as the first Strategy formally prepared by the CDENF, which meant that every paragraph of the Strategy had been discussed at intergovernmental level. The increased support of member states was considered a strong determinant for

the creation of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child in 2020, the delegations of which shared the goal of making a real difference for the rights of all children in Europe. She affirmed that the outputs of the Conference would be taken into account to put the Strategy into motion. During the Rome conference, the Chair and Vicechair of the CDENF had also held a private session with children which was perceived as very fruitful from both sides. Children were encouraged to continue following the implementation of the Strategy.

Mr Alfredo Ferrante, Head of the International Relations Unit and Family Policies Department at the Prime Minister’s Office, and Member of the Bureau of the CDENF, highlighted the outstanding commitment of national Ministries to the Strategy and of the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers to the protection and promotion of children’s rights. He stressed that it was up to all stakeholders present at the Conference to implement the Strategy at European and national level.

Finally, the Head of the Council of Europe’s Children’s Rights Division and Council of Europe Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, Ms Regina Jensdottir, described how the Strategy would drive the Council of Europe’s actions in the following years. She announced that the Children’s Rights Division is working on a series of operational tools which would facilitate the follow-up of the implementation. The Strategy is expected to continue mobilising all Council of Europe’s bodies and sectors to mainstream children’s rights throughout their work and will continue building strategic partnerships with international and civil society organisations. She expressed the Council of Europe commitment to continue working for and with children in order to drive towards real change and to continue addressing topical challenges and children’s real needs. She warmly thanked all young delegates and the Italian authorities for hosting and organising this outstanding conference.

All documentation and material related to the Conference is accessible via the [dedicated webpage](#) on the Children’s Rights website.

www.coe.int/children

ENG

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union.

All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.



Presidency of Italy
Council of Europe
November 2021 - May 2022

Présidence de l'Italie
Conseil de l'Europe
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