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Taking Stock: Progress in Europe and Central Asia since the first World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Stockholm 1996)¹

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a complex and diverse problem, with clear regional, national and even local variations and specificities. It is clear, therefore, that no single synthesis analysis can do justice to the whole range of issues related to CSEC in all the countries of Europe and Central Asia.

The 52 countries comprising Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Baltic States— all loosely grouped as ‘Europe and Central Asia’ for the needs of this paper -- offer a rich and wide-ranging diversity of languages, cultures, political and legal systems and economic realities. Within Western Europe are affluent industrial countries alongside poorer neighbours, small and large nations in terms of land mass and/or population. In the CEE/CIS and Baltic States, these differences are also present, but these sub-regions are also characterized by more than a decade of sweeping economic and political transition, in some cases war and conflict, all of which variously play a part in the position and status of children, their life chances and life experiences.

What the recent reworking of political, economic and social links between North and South, East and West Europe has done, however, is open up dialogue and exchange about human rights issues, including children’s and women’s rights. Knowledge about abuse and violence has also increased, revealing similarities and differences across Europe and Central Asia.

Western Europe is a source of sex tourists, has high levels of consumption of child pornography and expanding sex industries increasingly populated by foreign nationals. Western Europe is also a region where children and young people are exploited in their home countries. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the CEE/CIS states have become source and transit countries for trafficking. Sex industries are burgeoning in much of the region.

Two critical elements in CSEC are the status of children, and having the misfortune to meet someone who facilitates entry into prostitution or pornography. This person may be another child, but most often is a pimp, recruiter, trafficker or customer. In some cases a child is prostituted by someone who is already sexually abusing the child, including members of their families. Certain other factors seem common to many sexually exploited children: having lived in a children’s home; being homeless/living on the street; running away because of sexual abuse and/or violence at home. These factors are common across European countries and offer potential intervention points for those working to prevent exploitation from happening.

Important contextual elements adding to the vulnerability of children are poverty and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, disability, or citizenship status. In many of the

transition countries, for example, high levels of unemployment, inadequate skills and training for available employment opportunities, and poor preparation of children and young people for work and social integration, all increase pressures on children to seek alternative ways to earn money for their family or their future. This may make them more vulnerable to pimps and recruiters who may exploit them in commercial sex work or encourage them – or indeed force them – to move within the country or across borders where perceived returns are greater.

Increased legal and irregular migration, family breakdown, rampant consumerism and high-risk lifestyle behaviour including drug and alcohol use are also major causes for increased vulnerability to exploitation and to movement into high-risk situations. In the transition countries, the more than one million children who are growing up in institutions, rather than with their families, are at particular risk as they exit unprepared into societies that are equally unprepared to integrate them.

Although some of these children and young people may relocate and become sex workers ‘willingly’, they have no idea of the nature of the exploitation that awaits them, nor of the slavery-like conditions in which they may find themselves,² and the concept of ‘willingness’ is in any case not relevant in the several instruments of international law that now provide a framework for action against CSEC.

Armed conflict also appears to be connected to increases in CSEC, for a number of reasons. Not only does conflict make children’s survival more fragile due to factors such as the break-up of families, displacement, and interrupted schooling and training for employment, it also brings children into contact with military forces – national, para-military and expatriate – a known factor associated with expansion in local sex industries.

New trends and knowledge

At the time of the Stockholm Congress, the focus of concern centred on sex tourism and child pornography. Since that time, the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation (and other human rights abuses including forced labour, begging, and in some cases organ transplantation) has taken centre stage. This has been the result of a number of shifts in the pattern both of ‘demand’ and ‘supply’. What is clear is that, as a result of increased public and governmental awareness and intolerance of CSEC, protection of children has improved in some areas of the region. There are indications that more stringent laws, and better implementation and policing, may have made some countries less ‘profitable’ for exploiters and less ‘safe’ for abusers.

As demand has developed, the ‘supply’ of children and women vulnerable to trafficking has increased as economic differentials have widened further, globalization has increased consumer pressures on people – especially young people – in the less affluent countries of Europe and Central Asia, and continuing conflict in some sub-regions has made relocation, even if it includes coercive labour and illegal status, seem a viable alternative.³

The people movements involved are both domestic and cross-border, within the CEE/CIS and into Western Europe. The numbers involved are considerable, although accurate estimates remain illusive (see box). Among the main source countries most frequently mentioned in research and media accounts are Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Russia and Ukraine; initial destination countries cited most often are Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Turkey, with movement from there into the sex industries of Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Other routes link the Baltic and Nordic states. These processes are also linked to the expansion of sex industries in Western and Eastern Europe,⁴ and many women and girls are prostituted in transit, primarily within the Balkans.⁵

While most trafficking into the commercial sex trade involves young adult women, minors are also exploited, including some children under 16. For example, recent research from the Kyrgyz

Republic and Armenia notes demand for girls from the age of 15 in some of the Gulf States (the most common destination countries for those trafficked from Central Asia), where after this age girls are considered adults.⁶ The majority of customers for child sex in every country are local men, but the presence of foreign tourists, businessmen and even peacekeeping forces has been cited as a contributory factor.

A trafficking pattern has been identified alongside the increase in unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in western European countries. Traffickers have taken advantage of this movement to exploit children. Research on the prostitution of local children has increasingly revealed the extent to which in-country trafficking (often in the form of taking children to towns and cities they are unfamiliar with, putting them on the street and telling them they will be collected when they have earned a certain amount of money) is used as a strategy to control them. There are variations across Europe in the extent to which minors are visible in street prostitution or are invisible since their sexual exploitation takes place in off-street locations such as brothels, flats and hotels.

Knowledge about the nature and scope of trafficking has improved in recent years, but the extent to which it is dominated by organized crime, or looser networks, or a combination of both is still unclear. Increased understanding of trafficking has exposed the underbelly of the sex industry: the brutality and viciousness of many pimps and brothel owners; the interest among customers for unsafe sex; and the demand across Europe for sex with women and children who are 'other-ized'.⁷ The complete disregard for children's rights on the part of exploiters was graphically illustrated in a UK newspaper report based on an interview with a pimp who trafficked girls from South Africa.⁸ He stated that the girls were 'worn out' after three months, using the term 'disintegrate', and implied that the lack of condom use is due to the girls' ignorance -- ignorance no doubt that neither he nor his customers choose to correct.

In relation to child pornography and child prostitution, European research has shown that these forms of sexual abuse are more widespread than previously thought;⁹ that they are not the preserve of 'paedophiles' but may be linked to both sexual abuse in the family and to prostitute and pornography use more generally. Evidence is also emerging of sex tourism routes within Europe, with a number of cities emerging as places where male and female minors are exploited. A recent report from Italy links sex tourism and trafficking through 'sex cruises' between the mainland and Sardinia and Elba.¹⁰

Despite the recommendations from the Stockholm Congress, and considerable efforts by researchers, there are still no accurate measurements of either the extent of sexual exploitation, or of cases that are the subject of official intervention by either law enforcement or social welfare agencies in individual countries and for Europe and Central Asia.¹¹ The 'hidden' nature of CSEC is a specific challenge to research and data collection, as a result of which even the most scrupulous investigation probably understates the magnitude of the problem.

Responses post-Stockholm

Following the Stockholm Congress, considerable activity at the regional, sub-regional and intergovernmental levels is evident; a number of countries have taken various actions; and NGOs have continued to innovate. There has also been progress in terms of research focused on sexual exploitation. The Stockholm Agenda for Action set a number of goals including: the development of national Plans of Action; the establishment of national focal points and compilation of disaggregated data; review of laws to ensure children are protected; better law enforcement; and the development of sanctuary and support for exploited children.

European and intergovernmental action

Both the Council of Europe and the European Union have developed strong and incremental responses to the sexual exploitation of children, echoing and extending the Stockholm Agenda.

The Council of Europe Recommendation on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation was adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 31 October 2001. The Council of Europe International Cyber-crime Convention (open for signature in November 2001) is an important step in tackling the growth not only of on-line pornography but also the use of the Internet for other forms of CSEC such as on-line 'stalking' of children by those who wish to abuse them, for example by meeting them in Internet chat rooms. Indeed, the inclusion of measures to combat CSEC in organized crime strategies, instruments and actions more generally is an important development since Stockholm.

In this regard, the European Commission has produced two draft framework decisions, one on trafficking in human beings and one on sexual exploitation of children. Taken together, if implemented at the national level, they would constitute a coherent and co-ordinated response to CSEC under the banner of combating transnational organized crime.

Both European bodies have also supported capacity building: the Council of Europe through its work on governance and human rights in the CEE countries; the European Commission through the Daphne and STOP funding lines that have supported research, innovative projects and direct action. In addition, the European Commission's work post-Stockholm has included Europe-wide information campaigns against sex tourism, Internet content research, and a number of Joint Actions that commit Member States to harmonizing laws relating to sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have played an important role, supporting the development of work on trafficking, and the OSCE has additionally been pro-active in programming in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The IOM has also been pro-active, initiating research, capacity building at governmental and NGO levels, and conducting awareness-raising and prevention campaigns. IOM is also the key agency involved in return and reintegration programmes. Work has also taken place within the ASEM group and among the Baltic states.

Within the Stability Pact framework, UNICEF has taken the lead for advocacy, awareness raising and research related to prevention of trafficking. Jointly with national partners in South-Eastern Europe, it is promoting life-skills education and developing standards, monitoring mechanisms and referral systems to address violence against women and children. In eight countries of Central and Eastern Europe, UNICEF has provided initial support for development of national Plans of Action against sexual exploitation of children.

With the Governments of Germany and Bosnia Herzegovina, UNICEF also helped organize the first-ever intergovernmental conference on Children in Europe and Central Asia, in Berlin in May 2001, as part of regional preparations for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children. The 52 countries present adopted a final statement including the commitment to take 'all necessary measures' to end CSEC, and adopt an attitude of 'zero-tolerance' for this kind of abuse.

National progress

While all countries in Europe and Central Asia have ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a majority ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour, very few have ratified the CRC's Optional Protocol against sexual exploitation of children or the trafficking Protocol supplementary to the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime. Only 14 countries in the region have a specific Plan of Action against sexual exploitation of children -- almost half produced in 2000/2001 -- and few have established a specific government focal point for CSEC issues. The lack of progress on data collection has already been noted. Where Plans of Action do exist, their status and substance vary -- only a

minority use the Stockholm Agenda for Action as their framework, and almost half remain at the level of either reporting on what has been done, or of vague aspirational statements. The most likely to have effect are those that set out principles and future actions with short- and long-term time frames and allocation of resources.

There has been significant legal reform post-Stockholm, with almost half the countries in the region enacting new or enforcing existing legislation on child pornography, and a third on child prostitution, trafficking and extra-territorial jurisdiction. Some of this legislation has been comprehensive, linked to children's rights; other more limited reforms have been prompted as issues were raised on international and national political agendas. The much sought-for harmonization has, however, not yet been achieved, with variations in ages for protection remaining, and differences relating to which offences are included, and to sentencing. This fact alone militates against one of the underlying principles of the Stockholm Agenda: that children be defined as those under 18, and that sexually exploited children be defined and treated in law as victims, not perpetrators of crime. Europol has compiled a manual of national child pornography legislation, and a plan for something similar with respect to trafficking for states in the Balkans, that will include a best practice guide for law enforcement, will be compiled in 2002.¹²

Progress with respect to law enforcement has been mixed, and varies within as well as between countries. There is no doubt that there have been a number of successful high profile operations which have broken and prosecuted transnational networks involved in child pornography, child prostitution and trafficking. There have also been a number of extra-territorial prosecutions, notably in Germany, but also in Switzerland, Sweden and the UK. Making the possession of child pornography illegal has also facilitated prosecutions; importantly in this instance without the need to rely on children's testimony. However, law enforcement officers and NGOs continue to note gaps in legislation, lack of resources, evidential requirements that disadvantage children, and lack of judicial awareness as barriers to investigation and prosecution. The deployment of specialist teams appears to increase effective law enforcement, but they remain the exception rather than the rule across Europe and Central Asia.¹³

There are also positive developments within Europe with respect to the tourist and Internet industries. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have proved willing to discuss the issue of child pornography, but progress towards any consistent policy has been slow and uneven.¹⁴ Independent hotlines have been established in many countries and a European network, INHOPE, has been set up to link and strengthen them. The involvement of the private sector has primarily been through voluntary agreements to combat CSEC within their operations. While voluntary involvement is welcome, the possibilities for external assessment and evaluation remain limited.

NGO developments

The role of NGOs has been crucial in promoting the issue of sexual exploitation and in developing innovative responses. The NGO sector has focused on direct support for children and young people, with Barnardos in the UK developing innovative work enabling girls to exit prostitution, Save the Children Norway continuing efforts against child pornography, and a range of NGOs in the Balkans establishing shelters for victims of trafficking. The EU Daphne Programme, for example, has funded some 250 NGO projects since 1996, involving more than 600 NGOs and covering pilot projects developing new research methodologies, training and awareness-raising materials, direct work with children victims and activists, and crossing sectoral and national boundaries.¹⁵

What is especially evident post-Stockholm has been the emergence of NGO networks and networking, partly encouraged and enabled by the Daphne and STOP Programmes. The 'Crossing Borders' project has linked NGOs working on trafficking across the Baltic. This and

other transnational projects have made clear the extent to which building capacity in child protection generally is a core necessity in the CEE/CIS countries. A number of these networks have developed websites through which their work and the lessons learned can be shared with wider audiences.

A number of NGOs, especially in CEE/CIS countries with respect to trafficking, have begun taking the issue of sexual exploitation into schools and work with young people. This has taken the form of games, plays and case studies that address issues of recruitment and myths about the sex industry. IOM Romania organized debates and discussions for 6,000 15-19 year olds at summer camps in 2001, and will use the young people's responses in planning the next stages of its awareness-raising campaigns. So far, however, awareness raising has focused on the potential for becoming a victim of sexual exploitation, and very little work has taken place on discouraging young men from involvement in either recruitment or demand.

A number of innovative attempts at targeting demand have begun in the CEE/CIS states, for example organized by La Strada or IOM. Powerful messages are employed, such as 'You pay for a night; she pays with her life'. There may be some transferable lessons here, and pulling together the experiences and evaluations would be an important contribution. Recently a UK-based NGO, the Catholic Institute for International Relations, organized a highly successful European ideas-sharing tour for a group of Latin American men who have devised new methods to effect behaviour change among men in that region, where 'machismo' is a major factor in tolerance of demand.

Both support work and research by NGOs have extended knowledge. Two examples are work by social services in the UK and Terre des Hommes in the Netherlands, unpicking the particular ways in which ritual was used to control West African girls, and through this finding ways to prevent them from disappearing from reception centres into the hands of traffickers.¹⁶ A study of trafficking in children in Albania discovered an unintended consequence of raised awareness: the prevalence of abduction of girls in one area resulted in some parents stopping sending girls to school, especially where it involved a long walk.¹⁷ This illustrates how protection activities need to be carefully planned and evaluated, so that the long-term impact on the child can be measured; in this case, for example, the loss of schooling is likely to increase the vulnerability of girls in the future.

Challenges for the future

This overview has revealed both progress and the lack of it, innovation and inaction. The most obvious challenge for the future is to translate the aspirations in the Stockholm Agenda for Action and subsequent European policy documents into action. Taking stock of recent responses has revealed a number of recurring problems and remaining challenges: these are outlined below as matters needing further attention in the region.

- Limited implementation of international and national legislation and policies, and the lack of an effective monitoring process.
- Inadequate targeted research using appropriate methodologies and agreed working definitions and parameters to allow comparability across countries/sub-regions.
- Lack of harmonization in legal statute and child protection frameworks.
- A continuing challenge in the collection, collation and publishing of data on sexual exploitation cases.
- Inadequate evaluation, measurement and review of programmes and interventions, including evaluation of impact on the children beneficiaries or intermediary target groups.

- A tendency to react to shocking cases, or extremes-based media coverage, rather than developing integrated and coherent approaches that focus on prevention of CSEC and reintegration of exploited children.
- A reactive approach from all sectors, responding to issues that develop a high profile, which results in a piecemeal response, and a lack of sustained policy and practice development.
- A tendency to separate sexual exploitation from areas to which it is inextricably connected: child protection generally, violence and discrimination against women and girls, HIV/AIDS and sexual behaviour, consumerism, poverty and social development generally.

¹ This paper was drafted for UNICEF by Professor Liz Kelly, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, University of North London, with additional input from Dr June Kane, UNICEF Consultant, and represents the views of the authors.

² The notion of ‘willingness’ is extremely complex, since trickery, deceit and coercion often accompany promises made to vulnerable children and most, in any case, have no idea of the hazardous realities of sexual exploitation and illegal migration. It is in this spirit that the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* stipulates that any movement of minors that results in exploitation or involves deceit or trickery is, by nature, an illegal act of trafficking. In short, the concept of ‘willingness’ does not apply.

³ It remains to be seen how the current emergency in Afghanistan will play out for the young people who flee that country and those in neighbouring countries. Their situation contains elements of vulnerability to trafficking that have been identified elsewhere: family disruption, lack of basic necessities, dislocation, interrupted school or training, lack of access to the job market or to social welfare services, health needs etc.

⁴ Professor Julia O’Connell Davidson has noted that the commercial sexual exploitation of children in prostitution – in brothels and on the streets – is generally an extension of the adult sex sector and that a general growth in adult prostitution will contribute to increased CSEC. See *The Sex Exploiter*, theme paper for the 2nd World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Yokohama, Japan, 17-20 December 2001, on the Congress website: www.focalpointngo.org/yokohama

⁵ See, for example, Koci, H (ed), 2000, *Through the Traffic of Women*, Vlore, Albania, Agim Celibashi.

⁶ See, IOM Yerevan, 2001, *Trafficking in Women and Children from the Republic of Armenia*, unpublished report; Professional Manger Consulting Firm, 2000, *Research on Trafficking in Migrants* (Kyrgyz Republic, 1999), Bishkek, IOM.

⁷ This phrase is used by Julia O’Connell Davidson to describe the way abusers attempt to justify their actions by measuring them against societal norms and transferring blame for perceived ab-normal actions to the children themselves. To do this, they seek out or just classify the children they abuse as ‘others’ – sometimes as a result of their ethnic origin, sometimes because they are poor and so ‘different’, sometimes based on physical characteristics.

⁸ *The Observer*, 24 December 2000.

⁹ See *Rhetorics and Realities: Sexual Exploitation of Children Across Europe*, 2000 (Liz Kelly and Linda Regan, London, CWASU)

¹⁰ BBC Online, 9 April, 2001.

¹¹ See note 9.

¹² This project will be managed jointly by UNDP and the Romanian government, and is funded by USAID.

¹³ For more on child pornography in general, see *Child Pornography*, one of six theme papers produced for the 2nd World Congress (website as above).

¹⁴ See note 9.

¹⁵ The Daphne Programme database contains reports of completed projects and can be accessed at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/justice_home/project/daphne.

¹⁶ See note 9.

¹⁷ *Child Trafficking in Albania* (Daniel Renton, 2001, Save the Children UK).