



THE COMMISSIONER FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS
THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HUNGARY

NOTE

Conference on children's right to a healthy environment

Date: 26th June, 2013.

Venue: Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Budapest, Hungary

Prof. Máté Szabó, Commissioner for fundamental Rights of Hungary hosted a conference on the actual situation, problems and challenges concerning children's right to a healthy environment. Several scholars and representatives of governmental bodies and the civil society were presented on the one-day event.

Ombudsman Máté Szabó in his welcoming notes emphasized the importance of examining children's right to health in a **broader context**, focusing as well on the **interest of future generations, poverty, environmental risks and access to basic services**, like **clean water**. The Ombudsman, referring to one of his inquiries concerning heavy schoolbags, commented that schoolbag is a fine symbol for expectations, requirements, problems and stress burdening children..

Mrs. Ágnes Lux, deputy head of department of the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights briefly summarized the **inquiries** conducted in the course of 2013 concerning **children's right to a healthy environment** in the framework of the children's rights project launched by Ombudsman Szabó in 2008. During the inquiries, the commissioner relied not solely on previous related works of the parliamentary commissioner for future generations and the parliamentary commissioner for the national and ethnic minorities' rights but on the results of the project 2011 on children's physical-mental health and provisions of the Basic Law and the UN Convention on the rights of the child, as well. Mrs. Lux emphasized that environment has positive and negative impacts on human rights. It plays a vital role in ensuring human life, producing food and raw materials essential for the industry and development. At the same time, **some environmental risk factors like excessive radiation or contaminated drinking water may endanger** children's fundamental right to a healthy environment or even life. In view of this, the inquiries focused on **three main areas**: right to a **healthy environment in schools** (education, special trainings, environmental consciousness, access to services, meals/special needs, bio organic food, local products); **environmental hazards' effects on children** (air pollution, noise, waste management) and **ensuring rights of disadvantaged children** or children living in extremely poor or conditions in the context of the right to a healthy environment.

Mrs. Judit Pump, legal advisor of the secretariat of the deputy-commissioner for the interest of future generations presented the **EU Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe program (CEHAPE)**. CEHAPE is a policy document with accompanying tools presenting **4 Regional Priority Goals**: 1) preventing and reducing morbidity and mortality arising from gastrointestinal

disorders and other health effects, by ensuring that adequate measures are taken to **improve access to safe water and adequate sanitation for all children**; 2) to prevent and substantially reduce health consequences from accidents and injuries and pursue a decrease in morbidity from lack of adequate physical activity by **promoting safe, secure and supportive human settlements for all children**; 3) preventing and reducing respiratory disease due to outdoor and indoor air pollution, thereby contributing to a reduction in the frequency of asthmatic attacks in order **to ensure that children can live in an environment with clean air**; 4) **reducing the risk** of disease and disability arising from **exposure to hazardous chemicals** (such as heavy metals), physical agents (e.g. excessive noise) and biological agents and to hazardous working environments during pregnancy, childhood and adolescence. **In 2010**, European governments adopted a **declaration pledging to reduce the adverse health impact of environmental threats in the next decade**. The text was endorsed by 53 Member States attending the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Parma, Italy. Through the Declaration and Commitment to Act, and referring to the CEHAPE program, participating governments agreed to implement national programs to provide equal opportunities to each child by 2020 by ensuring access to safe water and sanitation, opportunities for physical activity and a healthy diet, improved air quality and an environment free of toxic chemicals

Mr. László Fórika, senior legal advisor of the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights summarized the **experiences gained during the on-the-spot inquiries conducted on Roma compounds situated in the Northern region of Hungary**. Mr. Fórika explained that Hungarian society faces serious problems of integration. **Unemployment** and **poverty** are an increasingly serious problem, and the **most affected group of society are Roma** people. These problems can be detected at regional level, as well (1/3 of the Roma population in Hungary live in the Northern region of the country.). **Mental depression** is very common and living conditions (like in **ghettos**) make it very difficult to find a job or to have access to healthcare services, education or housing. **50-60%** of the Roma people living in these slums are **children**. Life expectancy is low, career prospects are poor. Roma **segregation in schools** is very common in this region. Kindergartens and schools are not able to cope with the problems of these children with cumulated disadvantages. **Competency level** of these children is often very **low**. Some might continue studying in vocational schools but **drop-out is very common**. And the vicious circle starts all over again: unemployment, poverty, a lot of children, segregation in schools ...

Mrs. Ágnes Kozicz, chief legal advisor of the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights summarized the findings of the Ombudsman's inquiry concerning good and bad practices of **schoolbag carriage, the weight of children's schoolbags** and the negative consequences of such heavy loads on the developing spine. Children might develop **irreversible back deformities** because of the weight of the bags they carry to school. The reason for choosing this topic was that from **2004 national legislation went into effect** on measures to be taken in order to reduce schoolbag weight but according to media reports, **practice does not seem to be in line with the relevant regulations**. For this reason, the commissioner conducted an **ex officio inquiry into the structure of schedules** and the **weight of schoolbags** and the **availability of physiotherapy or spinal stabilization training** in schools as a possible way to **avoid possible risk of future spinal problems**.

Mrs. Szilvia Kéri, legal advisor of the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights summarized the findings of two inquiries conducted ex officio concerning **children's access to clean water** and the **situation of environmental education and training in public education**. The inquiry – titled „Does

the child have access to tap water if he/she is thirsty?" – found that it might constitute a violation of the child's right to protection and care if access to clean water is not possible for several reasons. As a result of cooperation between the competent ministries and other relevant bodies, **temporary water supply** is ensured in those settlements where – due to some amendments of the relevant regulations – **tap water quality does not meet required standards**. As the Ombudsman pointed out, given this situation it is up to the families' choice whether to consume low standard quality tap water or to drink safe drinking water available at external water supply distribution points, which is more complicated and time consuming. **Communities should be adequately informed** concerning the availability of temporary drinking water supply availability in order to **ensure the right to health and access to safe drinking water**. The report also stated that further measures (like water supply network reconstructions), are needed to be taken in order to ensure adequate drinking water supply in these regions. Concerning his other inquiry, the Ombudsman found that children should be given adequate **education concerning environmental protection/sustainability** in order to ensure that life conditions of future generations based on natural resources are well protected.

Mrs. Ágnes Darvas, associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Eötvös Lóránd University spoke about **child poverty** and health in Hungary. Social inequalities have worsened even at regional level. **Poverty risk for families with children is larger** than average. Status of families is worsened by earning conditions that become more and more difficult. Long term poverty has very **serious mental and physical impact** on a **child's whole life**. Poverty and deprivation have negative effects on a child's personal capacity development, social integration and might lead to social exclusion. Therefore, well coordinated, long-term programs and their implementation are needed to prevent and combat child poverty with the **development of early childhood services**.

Mr. Attila Varga, senior researcher of the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development gave a presentation on the **role of ecoschools in environmental education**. He gave a short summary of the most important international initiatives in this field (**UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development-2005-2014; the European Council conclusions on education for sustainable development**). At the national level, Mr. Varga summarized the **role and the place of eco-schools in the new national educational-institutional framework** emphasizing that environmental education is a cross-curricular priority area of the National Core Curriculum. Finally he shortly presented the **functioning and activities of the EcoSchool Network** and some projects which aim to promote the work of this network. One of these **projects is "Widening Green Kindergarten and Ecoschool movements"** project sponsored by the Swiss government. The main goal of the project is to strengthen the environmental consciousness of children and pupils. For this purpose, the level of environmental education in public institutions is increased by widening the green kindergarten and ecoschool movements. The green institutions integrate the topic Natura 2000 in their environmental education activities in a systematic way.

Reflecting to the presentations, **Mr. Gyula Dura, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health** emphasized that the institution attaches priority to decreasing the burden of disease due to environment pollution and to the protection of the health of children and vulnerable population groups, determination, identification and investigation of environmental risk factors that are determinants of health and disease, as well as elaboration.

Why the state has to examine children's health condition? The **burden of diseases** of environmental origin is **increasing**. The number of non-infectious diseases (asthma, accidents, potential damages caused by endocrine-disruptors) is raising among children. Therefore it is essential to examine and **understand environmental risks effecting children** (transportation, accidents, contaminated soil of urbanizations or playgrounds), to survey disease burden (like respiratory diseases or allergy) and **support the development of child-friendly and healthy environments** (in-door air quality, rural and urban development etc.)

Mrs. Zsófia Pusztai, office manager of WHO Country Office Hungary briefly summarized the office's main activities and goals concerning **social inequalities and "health-inequalities"** and the fields of cooperation with WHO. The main objectives of collaboration reflect the **new goals of WHO included in the WHO/Europe's new Country Strategy and the European health policy – Health 2020**. The aim of this program is to **reduce inequity** in the **distribution of health** within the population and raise the level of health (with particular emphasis on **vulnerable and the Roma population**. As to **Hungary**, Mrs. Pusztai emphasized that Hungary needs a comprehensive strategy for mobilizing resources for health at governmental level in order to address challenges of economic policy objectives and the **health care professionals human resource crisis** emerging in the country. The Hungarian Ministry of Human Resources is now preparing a **study** – in cooperation with WHO Regional Office Europe – **on health-inequalities and health determinants of society** in Hungary. Civil society, local governments, experts, and governmental bodies will be consulted for the preparation of the study in order to contribute to the promotion of **awareness**, political commitment and action to address the conditions that make people vulnerable to ill health and in particular to address the needs and expectations of vulnerable groups.

Mrs. Mária Herczog, member of the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** spoke about the importance of **encouraging early child development**. Health, social skills and learning are to a great extent determined by the quality of care and education in the first years of life. **Essential** cognitive, emotional and social **competences develop during this period**. In present day **Hungary, parents lack the appropriate knowledge** and skills at the time of starting a family and in the period following is — among many other factors — a fundamental determinant of social marginalization and isolation, failures at school and the subsequent generation problems. **Parenting, motherhood and skills** are primarily acquired: parenthood, the developmental needs of the child and the appropriate ways to respond to these **needs must be learnt and the most successful methods identified**. She emphasized that people with low levels of education, those living in difficult social circumstances or in social isolation, those struggling with mental problems or disabilities and those out of work are in a particularly difficult situation but those people with a higher social status are not immune to problems either.

Mr. Iván Sörös, (Head of Section, Dep. Responsible for Social Inclusion, Ministry of Human Resources) summarized the on-going **social inclusion programs** of the ministry. He emphasized, that in the framework of these programs the ministry is conducting an intensive and structured **dialogue with regional and local authorities, the civil society and churches**. The **monitoring system** of the social inclusion strategy keeps track of the progress of implementation and the social impacts of the measures, extends to all relevant sectors, and supports added data collection and research. He mentioned as well the **strategy called "Making things better for our children"** which aims to **tackle**

child poverty, promote their social inclusion and to avoid reproduction of social exclusion, deprivation and poverty.

Mr. Sörös highlighted another program called “**Sure Start**”. This program was launched against child poverty and exclusion in the United Kingdom in 1999. The program has two main purposes: to promote children’s social and emotional development, skills and abilities, advancement and healthcare. and to promote and strengthen the family as a community. **Hungary joined the Sure Start Program in 2003** to provide children **aged between 0 and 6** and their families with some chance and help in order to facilitate their abilities and to develop their skills. Model programs were introduced in 2003 in different types of settlements and townships, such as Ózd, Vásárosnamény, Józsefváros in Budapest, Csurgó and Írtilos. From 2005 Katymár and Gyir also started their local *Sure Start* experimental model program.

Since its starting, the program could provide approximately 400 families and 700 children with disadvantages under the age 6. One among many excellent programs works in a nursery in Józsefváros District in Budapest.

/Note prepared by Mrs. Nikolett Babos, dr, legal advisor, Dep. of International and Civil Relations, Office of the Commissioner for fundamental Rights/