

**ENSURING JUSTICE AND PROTECTION
FOR ALL CHILDREN
3RD FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS CONFERENCE
7-8 December 2010, Brussels, Belgium**

Intervention by Ilze Brands Kehris

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Check against Delivery!

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear young people,

A very warm welcome to the third annual Fundamental Rights Conference organised by the Fundamental Rights Agency, together with the presidency of the EU - on this occasion the Belgian presidency.

Firstly, let me thank those within the Belgian presidency, as well as at the Council of Europe, UNICEF, Save the Children and the many others with whom we have collaborated in the development of this exiting conference programme. I hope that throughout these two days you will see the results of our successful cooperation. And more importantly, I hope that these results will translate into real change for vulnerable children in the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is not part of the official title of the conference – but for me the unofficial title must surely be “hand in hand”.

I say this for two reasons,

1) Firstly, because **children will take centre stage during this conference** – literally, as you have just seen, but also in all of the discussions that will take

place. The report that the Fundamental Rights Agency has published today gives separated, asylum-seeking children a voice, and it forms the basis on which we have prepared for this conference.

Today we are here with and for our children, and in particular, vulnerable children – those who have been through experiences no one should have to go through, let alone as children - like suffering domestic violence or being trafficked. But also children with intellectual disabilities and separated and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

(Improvisation based on children's presentation)

We need to stand hand in hand with these children to make this happen.

2) But we also need to stand hand in hand with each other.

We are here to see how we can work together in order to increase the protection of the rights of vulnerable children.

Each of us brings valuable experience, working towards the same goal but from different angles: as a legal practitioner or child ombudsperson, as someone from a local authority, from an intergovernmental organisation or a national government, or representing a national human rights institution or an Equality Body – but also as carers, or working in a victim support organisation or an NGO.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The legal framework designed to protect the rights of children in the EU is stronger than ever, yet the rights of children are still being violated in the European Union, daily.

We are all here today to ensure that we move from paper to practice, to ensure that we make these legal tools work for ALL children in the EU, including the most vulnerable of them. But to do this, **we need to join forces.**

Let me give you just two reasons why:

A child victim of domestic violence who is interviewed by social services and then again by the police, is re-experiencing the trauma each time she has to recount the horror of her experience; she becomes a double victim.

A child with an intellectual disability who arrives on his own at an EU border from a third country, who is not properly examined by the border authorities, does not have his particular vulnerability identified – his inability to articulate what has happened to him may be interpreted as him lying or pretending or wrongly put down to language barriers.

And on this note, let me stress that the division between the conference working groups into the four groups of vulnerable children that I mentioned earlier is not to set up barriers between our responses to individual vulnerabilities. Children's rights are complex and inter-related. Experience has shown that an issue-based approach focusing on specific groups alone risks resulting in fragmented responses. As the title of this conference suggests, we are here to promote comprehensive - and sustainable - solutions to protect that rights of ALL children. The working group headings do therefore not constitute a 'closed list' of categories of vulnerable children, but we here to discuss and learn from solutions that deliver justice and protection for every child, whatever his or her individual vulnerability.

But the two examples that I have cited highlight what we risk if we do not join together, if we do not coordinate activity, talk, listen, share ideas, and work as a team.

Working hand in hand means creating a matrix, a joined-up web of actors – only in this way can we ensure that no child falls through the gaps.

The Fundamental Rights Conferences are designed to do just that: to bring together a wide range of stakeholders - EU Commissioners and government Ministers, NGO representatives, experts, service-users and many more. They are an opportunity to reconnect with old partners and to reach out to new ones, to look back at how things have worked well or not so well and to be used as a springboard for future action.

And how will we do this over the next two days?

- By sharing ideas and information at the marketplace of ideas - talking about new developments, evaluating old ones and engaging with experts.
- By learning from innovative ideas and cutting-edge knowledge in the working groups.

- By engaging with practitioners, children themselves, and people working for and with children directly – in this way, we ensure that the web of actors in this area is as wide as possible, that as many voices as possible are heard, and that no consideration is ignored.
- And by opening up the conference to those who can't physically be with us – for the first time this year there will be live streaming and live blogging from the conference on the fra website. The Fundamental Rights Agency is also now on Facebook and Twitter, and will be updating its followers on what's going on here, as it happens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are many actors working to protect the rights of children in the EU. I say many, and by far not *too* many, because sadly there is more than enough to keep us busy.

But if we are really to do justice to ALL children, we have to stand hand in hand: with them, and crucially also with each other - listening, learning and sharing with each other.

I hope that this Fundamental Rights Conference will provide you with a forum where you can do that.