

**Opening of  
South East Europe Consultation on  
Reform of the child care system:  
Taking stock and accelerating action**

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**Speech by Maria Calivis, Regional Director,  
UNICEF Regional Office for  
Central and Eastern Europe and  
Commonwealth of Independent States**

I am delighted and honoured to participate in this first regional consultation on child care system reform. At the outset, I would like to thank the Government of Bulgaria and here Excellency the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Ms. Emilia Maslarova and the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection for organizing this milestone meeting in Sofia and for your gracious hospitality. I would also like to warmly greet all the delegations here present and the team of experts and representatives from civil societies.

I would also like to acknowledge the partners who made this consultation possible, namely the Government of Sweden and the World Bank. I am also pleased that the European Union is joining us here today, considering the important role they play in supporting the reforms for child care systems.

It is not the first time countries from this region meet to discuss these critical issues for children. Two international conferences have been dedicated to this topic in Stockholm, Sweden in 1999 and 2003. And in 2000, UNICEF and the World Bank jointly organised the conference “Children deprived of Parental Care: Rights and Realities in the CEE/CIS region”. Back then, participating governments and NGOs agreed on the two guiding principles for the reform: the importance of family-based care and de-institutionalisation. To support the reform, UNICEF jointly with the World Bank, launched the initiative “Changing Minds, Policies and Lives”. This joint work produced important tools to help with good “gate-keeping” mechanisms, articulation of standards and reorganisation of financial flows and incentives.

Today, half a decade later, where do we stand? How far have we come? What lessons have we learned? Is it fair to say that in every part of South East Europe **attitudes** towards child care systems have changed? There is no longer questioning of the fact that the family is the most appropriate environment for children to grow up in, and that the focus of our support must be on families.

**Policies** are also changing. The recent and excellent assessments carried out in Albania, Bulgaria, FYR Macedonia and Serbia in preparation of this consultations highlight many areas of progress, which I would like to mention here:

- **Gate-keeping** functions of the child care system are improving so that eventually there will only be one entry point, instead of several as in the past.
- **Standards** for services are being developed and **licensing systems** are emerging. More **inspections** are taking place to spot weaknesses in the system.
- The assessments also confirmed that **many new types of welfare services** are being developed. **Family support services** such as counselling, legal aid, and day care re increasing the support tot families and children at risk and attempting to prevent separation of children from their families. Placement in institutions is no longer the only option for children without parental care. **New family substitute services**, such as foster care are being made available.
- Quality of services is also improving. Standards are being introduced and there is an increasing openness to allow NGOs and private providers to participate in service provision.
- Planning and decision-making for welfare services are shifting to sub-national or local level of governance alongside other decentralization efforts – a process that is both positive and complex at the same time.

In summary, the on-going reforms are beginning to show encouraging and at the same time remarkable transformations in this region. The compilation of reform examples from this region prepared for this consultation includes some 50 examples of promising reform practices and innovation. This is just a snap-shot of the wealth of information and experience that we can benefit from.

The challenge that we have ahead of us is to make sure that these reforms have a visible impact on the lives of children. But as the data shows, there is still some distance to go. The rate of children who are in the care system has increased consistently since 2001 and today there are as many as 126 000 children across South East Europe who grow up in public care.

Although more children now grow up in family-based care – precisely 44%, 56% are still placed in residential institutions. This is the ratio that must change. Secondly, the constant flow of children in the care system is a clear sign that children at risk are not sufficiently supported by policies and services.

Thirdly, we have to better understand the obstacles to reform at different levels. We know that in some cases resistance come from staff within existing child protection systems. We have to be creative and transform those opposing change into its strongest supporters.

Coordination among partners is also critical. We need to look at how, together, we can ensure that support to reform is “coherent” and avoids fragmentation.

Friends and colleagues, I have no doubt that this consultation will be a success and of help to you in your work. I have also no doubt that we will all be learning from each other good practices as well as failures. My hope is that this consultation will trigger a new “movement” across South East Europe, which does not stop with this meeting. That new networks will be created for exchanging ideas, innovations, and sharing successes. Until reform is truly irreversible. And children do not find themselves growing up in institutions, except as a matter of last resort. That social protection and child care reform support are complementary to each other. That families, as the best place for children, are supported with services, and that within families children are treated with dignity and respect.

And finally, there is no doubt that many professional friendships will be forged here in Sofia. When this meeting is over and we go home to face the every day challenges of the reform – please, rest assured that the international partners present here today stand ready to support you in your efforts.

Thank you, once again, to the Government of Bulgaria for hosting the consultation. And the very best to you all for the work ahead. And a very happy birthday to Minister Maslarova. Thank you.