

CHILD TRAFFICKING RESPONSE PROGRAMME IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE PHASE III (2009-2011)

Adolescent Voices

Key messages and recommendations by young people, participating in the Kjustendil Resource Centre, about their life and potential risk factors with regard to child rights, safe migration and trafficking in human beings



Introduction

The territory of Kjustendil Municipality borders Serbia and Macedonia and is an external border of the European Union. A big part of the adolescent population shares a common desire to travel and fulfil its dreams abroad – temporarily or permanently. If they do not possess the necessary skills to protect themselves, and if they do not recognise and avoid different risk factors, they will easily fall prey to various forms of abuse and violence, including human trafficking schemes. This requires an effective implementation of preventive programmes related to adolescent risks.

The Resource Centre team in Kjustendil participated as research staff in an international qualitative research on “Risk and Resilience” conducted by Save the Children. Since 2005 the Centre works with adolescents from the Tourism Vocational High School in Kjustendil in order to build their risk management skills related to human trafficking. These activities are part of the regional Child Trafficking Response Programme.

Currently the programme is in its third phase (2009-2011) and the activities carried out at the Resource Centre seek to revise existing preventive programmes related to adolescent risks, including trafficking in human beings, and develop effective programmes implemented by adolescents. This goal necessitates the establishment of an active adolescent group to carry out the programme among its peers and to act as a consultative body to the institutions working directly with children and adolescents. In regard to this necessity, we have developed this current Concept paper, whose main goal is to present adolescents’ point of view about their lives, problems and aspirations to the attention of the institutions with a child protection mandate. Considering children and adolescents’ opinion in the process of child policy and strategy development ensures their effective application in practice.

This document is developed on the basis of the results obtained from focus group discussions and interactive activities, carried out with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 years, who visit the Resource Centre of Partners Bulgaria Foundation in Kjustendil. Conclusions have also been drawn from the responses to a survey, distributed to 126 adolescents between the ages 14 and 15 years from the Tourism Vocational High School and 3rd Primary School in the town of Kjustendil.

Discussion Topics

The discussion topics have been selected to encompass adolescents’ perspective on different important areas of their lives. The information falls under the following categories:

- Rights and Responsibilities
- Risk and Resilience
- Social Support
- Safety and Danger
- General cultural norms, Habits and Attitudes

Rights and Responsibilities

85% of the respondents to the survey carried out among 126 adolescents from Kjustendil claim that they are familiar with child rights. Adolescents often know that they have rights; however, they do not realise their nature and function and do not link them to the responsibilities originating from these rights. These problems are also related to the methods of getting children acquainted with the topic of their rights. This situation necessitates cooperation with the professionals who conduct this type of training in order to ensure the application of specific methodological approaches and deeper understanding of the concept. The majority of respondents shares that they have learned about their rights at school or through the activity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Merely two out of 126 adolescents state that they have discussed the topic at home with their parents. These results indicate the need to develop models for inclusion of families in the process of child rights education. Being asked about the most common transgressor of child rights, 40% of the respondents indicate the school, 25% - the adults, and 35% - the other children. None of the respondents identified state institutions as potential violators of child rights. These results demonstrate once again the lack of understanding of the concept “child rights” and the need to improve school environment according to the needs and characteristics of the students. During a workshop at the Resource Centre in Kjustendil, the adolescents got acquainted with the state structure and its function – institutions, legislation, rights and responsibilities. The subsequent open discussion gave them an opportunity to share their own knowledge about the state and the rights and duties they have as citizens.

The adolescents underlined some problems, which they considered important in relation to the topic:

“If there are no restrictions, there is no state as well.”

“There are basic rights in our country which are not being observed.”

“Bulgaria is a country which everybody wants to emigrate from because nobody is following the rules.”

During the discussion, the adolescents shared that they have not been in direct contact with law enforcement agencies yet and are not familiar with their function, which indicates the need to hold information campaigns.

The assigned group task was to create their own state with the respective citizens’ rights and responsibilities. The adolescents added an entertaining element to the task and during the discussion shared the opinion that in order to live well in a state, our rights and responsibilities must be serious. That is why they created the ideal state, which they called the “right state”.

These are the rights and responsibilities of its citizens:

Rights	Responsibilities
Right to life	Responsibility to save life
Right to freedom of choice	Responsibility to ensure that freedom of choice does not harm the rights of others
Right to education	Responsibility to learn
Right to health service	Responsibility to take care of one’s health
Right to freedom of religion	Responsibility not to impose one’s religion on others
Right to work	Responsibility to uphold and not to harm the dignity of others
Right to recreation and holiday	Responsibility to ... - <i>here the list of rights and responsibilities remains open in order for each child to describe them according to personal experience</i>

As a conclusion, the adolescents shared:

“We have an idea how a good state should look like and how we have to live in it.”

Therefore, it is imperative to take into account the opinion of adolescents when devising strategies and policies concerning their lives. It also calls for mechanisms, which will enable local and national authorities to “hear” the voice of adolescents.

Risk and Resilience

A crucial part of an adolescent's skills involves social competences on the basis of which they develop resilience to risk factors in their everyday life. One of these risk factors is the involvement in different forms of trafficking and exploitation. The underlying reasons are numerous – lack of supportive environment, social status, social values and attitudes, coercion, lack of knowledge and skills. This is the reason why preventive work in line with development of skills for independent living and hence, resilience to risk, is of utmost importance to reach a decline in the number of victims of human trafficking.

The Resource Centre in Kjustendil offers activities to develop skills for identification of risk in different settings through role play, simulations, interactive activities, etc. Based on the feedback by adolescents, the team collected information about their attitudes, impressions and fears.

Below are some of the statements shared by them:

“What makes people weak are problems and lack of knowledge.”

“Before I thought that grades are more important than knowledge. Now I know that knowledge has a greater value than the grade alone.”

“We often do things only to please somebody else.”

“Sometimes pickpockets and women who work on the high way do that because of their children.”

“We cannot change people entirely but we can try.”

“I tell people exactly what I think because this is the only way to change things.”

“When somebody is talking bad about me, I ‘close my ears’ and move on.”

Social Support

“I have been disappointed to find out that people count on me, but I cannot count on them. They serve their own interest and I am striving to please them.”

The majority of factors that place adolescents at risk from being trafficked or abused are part of their own environment – lack or unsupportive family, parental inability to take adequate care, conditions in social institutions, idleness of competent authorities, deficits in the education system, unhealthy social environment.

Research findings about the main risk factors leading to child trafficking, conducted during the second phase of the Child Trafficking Response Programme with the participation of Partners Bulgaria Foundation, have been published in the report “Children Speak Out”. Most of the respondents defined supportive environment in terms of family and friends, school and state institutions.

During the interactive activities at the Resource Centre, the adolescents discussed the question: “Why do I like/not like it at school?” Their responses demonstrate some of the deficits of our education system through the prism of its main subject – the students. The positive statements, however, could and should be used as a practical direction regarding the improvement of pedagogical work with students and the overall quality of Bulgarian education. This would also benefit and decrease the number of cases of school drop-outs, which is a risk factor on its own.

[Here is how adolescents replied:](#)

- What do I like in school?

“I like school because of my friends and the fun activities; I don’t like it because of the studying.”

“I have always liked strict teachers and I wonder why the other kids do not like them.”

- What do I not like in school?

“It is not good that in Bulgaria teachers lure their students with promises (because of the quotas) and then they do not keep their promises.”

“I do not like it when teachers do not appreciate my diligence.”

“I do not like teachers who behave badly with their students because of their salaries.”

“I do not like it when I am bored, when I have to exercise something I already know, but I have to do it anyway because others might not know it yet.”

- Impressions and views of adolescents about their teachers:

“Teachers must be people with a life goal and they should know how to accomplish it.”

“Teachers must be smarter than us.”

“There are teachers who are harsh, but they do not teach us anything.”

“Very few of Bulgaria’s young people care about education nowadays. Very few of people our age value quality teachers and the motivation to study appears to be the presents received from parents for achieving good grades. This is why everybody prefers the sympathetic teachers because it is easier to get good grades in their classes.”

“Our deputy director has never worked with children; he only yells and never listens to us. He directly accuses us without listening to what exactly happened.”

- Adolescents also shared:

“Everybody thinks that when you go to college, the easy part comes when there is no need to prepare yourself further.”

“People in Bulgaria are not happy with life and this is why they are looking for another place. In other countries, scholarships are higher, and textbooks are free of charge.”

“The rules enforced in school have nothing to do with reality. This is why they are not observed.”

“Students who defend the rights of their peers during school council sessions are regarded mainly positively.”

“School orders are being read to us and we are not entitled to take decisions. We have student council but nobody respects our decisions.”

“They do not want to hear us, but we also do not care that much about it.”

Safety and Danger

According to the study “Children Speak Out”, the main part of risk situations is a consequence of a “failure” in one of their closest supportive environments. A relatively small part of adolescents though feels threatened by their immediate surrounding. Their fears are mostly related to the overall criminal setting in the country and the people who are entrusted to counteract criminal activity, i.e. police officers. Adolescents do not recognise police as an institution responsible for their protection, but rather as a restrictive body that treats them as criminals.

“The police cannot protect us. I called police officers once when there was a fight. They came and scolded us. They asked me why I took part in the argument.”

“When police officers come, they beat the violators with such brutal force that I am simply speechless.”

“When there is a fight, the police comes, arrests the main participants, they talk to them, then they beat them, but they do not have the right to beat anybody. I have not pressed charges because it will turn out that I am the guilty one.”

Part of the topic on adolescents’ safety is devoted to their skills to recognise dangerous situations and to protect themselves. Quite often the places and circumstances that are viewed by adolescents as dangerous do not coincide with the opinion expressed by adults. Therefore, when mapping risk zones and applying preventive programmes, professionals must consider the information provided by adolescents themselves.

Great importance for the development of resilience to risk factors should be placed on informing adolescents about trafficking in human beings, the causing dangers and the means to protect oneself. Adolescents recognise NGOs and schools as the channels of this

information. At the same time, it is also important to work towards development of individual social knowledge and skills, which enable adolescents to offer an adequate reaction in cases of a risk situation. The lack of such skills is a factor for an easy involvement in child trafficking schemes and other forms of abuse.

“When I am lost and cannot find my way, I try to befriend a boy and ask him for directions to the place where I want to go. This happened to me in Macedonia and it is much easier because people there are not so reserved.”

“I think I am sometimes inclined to dangerous things just because they are interesting to me.”

“New things scare me; this is why I was frightened to start in a new school.”

General cultural norms, habits and attitudes

According to the majority of the participants in the survey “Children Speak Out”, ethnic background is listed as a risk factor, when it is combined with poverty, illiteracy, social exclusion, and lack of social support. Adolescents from ethnic minorities discuss ethnic belonging more often than ethnic Bulgarian adolescents. They also link it to their difficult social and economic conditions and discrimination.

Adolescents nowadays are well informed about the diverse world in which they live and the differences between people. However, this knowledge does not make them more tolerant due to the fact that they are burdened by a number of stereotypes about people different from them. Negative stereotypes have been formed within the cognitive framework of adolescents, through which they construct their respective attitude.

The topic of tolerance and mutual understanding constitutes a big part of the topic on supportive environment, which makes adolescents resilient. This directly relates to EU policy priority on fighting racism and discrimination, as well as cooperation with education and social institutions in order to develop a constructive multicultural dialogue.

The survey among students from the Tourism Vocational High School and 3rd Primary school shows that 80% of adolescents define a tolerant person as one who respects and considers other people around them. In a topic-related case, they are able to identify an act of discrimination. According to 1/3 of them, though, integration is a negative process. The respondents grade the characteristics of difference according to importance in the following order – sex, age, ethnic belonging and religion.

The adolescents visiting the Resource Centre in Kjustendil are from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Communication in a non-formal setting, joint participation in group activities and short excursions are all preconditions for building friendships and developing tolerance to diversity.

During the discussions, adolescents shared that:

“Religion is important to the state because it teaches us rules.”

“People should have the freedom to profess their own religion, but they must not impose it on others.”

“The right to traditions is very important because there is no future without traditions.”

“In order to feel good, there must be a place for all sorts of people. The goal is to find your own place, a nice environment.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

1. Adolescents in Kjustendil know that they have rights but they do not realise their nature and function and do not link them to the responsibilities and duties that rights invoke.
2. Most of the adolescents do not recognise the function of law enforcement institutions.
3. In schools child participation in decision-making and rule development is greatly limited. Their opinion on different matters, concerning the education process and their life at school, is rarely taken into account.
4. Adolescents perceive law enforcement mostly as a restrictive body, which they fear, instead of viewing the police as a responsible institution for their protection.
5. Negative stereotypes have been formed within the cognitive framework of adolescents, through which they construct their respective attitude.

Recommendations:

1. Construct a model for family participation in the process of getting adolescents acquainted with their rights.
2. Carry out information campaigns in order to familiarise children and adolescents with law enforcement institutions and their function.

3. Conduct capacity building trainings for professionals who provide information on child rights. These trainings should be practical in nature and should lead to the development of specific methodological approaches and deeper understanding of the concept.
4. Develop a strategy for the improvement of school environments according to the characteristics and needs of the students.
5. Seek different methods of adolescent participation in decision-making on a local and national level.
6. Conduct preventive work for the development of skills for independent living through an individual approach.
7. Work towards the improvement of school environments and interaction in order to decrease the number of drop-outs.
8. Discuss school rules and regulations with adolescents during extended school council sessions.
9. Devise a map of risk zones in the municipality together with adolescents.
10. Conduct information campaigns in order to raise the awareness about human trafficking and safe migration.
11. Create conditions for informal interaction and participation in joint activities among adolescents of different ethnic backgrounds in order to build tolerance to diversity.

Every meeting of adolescents at the Resource Centre ends with sharing good words they can think of.

Here are some of the most commonly expressed ones:

smile

joy

happiness

love

peace/comfort

health

entertainment/fun

friendship

If these simple words are part of each child's life, the world we live in will become a better place for all of us. Let us remember these words each time we have to make a decision concerning the future of our children.

PARTNERS BULGARIA FOUNDATION

<http://www.partnersbg.org>

Adolescent Voices



This publication was published with the support from Save the Children with funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the OAK Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Save the Children.

The quotes in this publication are real and come from children and adolescents who participated in the Regional Child Trafficking Response Programme (CTRP).

All Rights Reserved. The contents of this publication may be freely used or copied for non-commercial purposes, provided that any such reproduction is accompanied by acknowledgement of Save the Children as the source.