

Dear colleagues,

Distinguished guests and speakers,

It's wonderful that we meet here in Iceland, to share our thoughts, to listen carefully to our young advisors and to draw conclusions that will help us take a step forward in the protection and promotion of children's rights collectively at a national and European level. It has been a long time since we last saw each other in person, and I feel the need to offer an overview of our priorities and concerns after a year full of activities and interventions.

All conferences, all our statements, meetings and persistent efforts are strongly connected to our mission to uphold all children's rights and, moreover, to achieve a shift of paradigm from one that views children as imperfect and empty vessels that need to fill with knowledge to another one of viewing them as empowered young rights holders.

However, these last three years, apart from fighting the old and familiar systemic deficiencies and stereotypes, the absence of coherent child protection systems in many countries and the shortcomings of our educational systems, we are also dealing with the constant state of emergency.

After the pandemic crisis and the detrimental impact of the restrictive measures on children's wellbeing -as reflected in ENOC's synthesis report and statement- a devastating war broke out after Russia's invasion to Ukraine.

ENOC has had to use all its resources to respond, by coordinating its members to monitor our states' emergency measures, providing information, enhancing synergies with important stakeholders and addressing recommendations that covered all aspects of the needs of Ukrainian children (in terms of registration, guardianship, reception and living conditions, child friendly procedures and financial support to reception countries), while still remaining equally dedicated and vigilant for all children on the move.

ENOC is still working to identify additional ways of support and coordination and its members are strongly committed to monitoring the conditions of reception as well as initiatives to promote the inclusion for Ukrainian children and all children on the move, while also exploring the possibility of systematic collaboration with other organisations.

Even before the war though, all experts involved in anti-poverty policies noticed an increase in inflation rates and prices all over Europe that eventually sky rocketed following the outbreak of the war and the scarcity of energy supplies.

This new cost of living crisis will affect further the most vulnerable children, leading them to poverty and social exclusion and leading the ones living already in such conditions to destitution. According to Eurostat, in 2021 -before the energy crisis- over one-fifth (22.5 %) of the EU population living in households with dependent children was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. We can already foresee a dramatic deterioration of children's lives under this pressure. Poverty is after all the most significant human rights issue affecting children across ENOC countries and a manifold threat affecting all CRC rights including adequate standard of living, education, health, play, expression of views, social security, family life, protection from all forms of violence. Poverty is, therefore, the most crucial undermining factor of social cohesion.

This is the reason I would like to kindly draw your attention to the second statement we sent recently to our colleagues, to address the imminent danger of the cost-of-living crisis and recommend the

adoption of regulating and income support measures for children and families to mitigate the devastating effects of the rise of the cost.

And this leads us to our topic this year. Because the cost of living crisis should be seen in the light of, and as inextricable from, the ongoing climate crisis and this is why climate justice is such an important thematic area for ENOC, in terms of identifying effective middle to long-term measures.

It is also -as I have already mentioned- a brilliant opportunity to discuss the dynamic, ever evolving nature of the interpretation of rights enshrined in the UNCRC as well as the contemporary representation of children in our societies and their access to effective remedy and justice.

According to art 24 of the UNCRC “States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health”. In addition, art 6 -which is one of the four cornerstones of the Convention- stipulates that states parties recognize the child’s inherent right to life, survival and according to the Committee’s interpretation, not just the development of the child, but rather a “holistic concept of development, embracing the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological and social development”.

Nevertheless, climate change affects children’s everyday lives and future in so many ways and is the source of multiple violations of their rights. Global warming, the destruction of the ecosystems and the natural environment, the impact on their health of the pollution of air and water and unsustainable methods of production undermine their right to physical health and to a holistic development, and fuel another kind of anxiety for children called eco-anxiety.

This is - among other reasons- why General Comment 26 -which will be discussed here- regarding Children’s rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, is being drafted as we speak by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This is also why even the jurisprudence of the UN Human Rights Committee has determined -in a landmark ruling- that people who flee the effects of climate change and natural disasters should not be returned to their country of origin if essential human rights could be at risk upon return.

All these concerns and priorities require more than our usual capacity, performance and understanding. This is a transitional period, which requires adjustments and stamina but also a great opportunity to reinvent ourselves, to redefine our role and responsibilities and to introduce even more effective standards and transparent procedures to engage with children and uphold their views. In the coming year, we will have the opportunity to take a deep dive into these issues and explore ways to improve and evolve.

I mentioned last year at the closing of our 25th Conference that ENOC will become bigger and this year ENOC indeed has enhanced its synergies, increased its interventions and visibility and reaffirmed its bonds with our allies in this field. But beyond ENOC’s ability and consistency in pushing for the necessary reforms and addressing recommendations to European institutions, national governments and stakeholders, ENOC has been and is there for its members. For their support, their training, their sharing of experience and their development towards a child centered culture where children are heard.

This is why this Conference apart from its critical thematic area offers us the opportunity to express ourselves freely, to inspire and be inspired, to discuss and disagree if necessary. All this empowerment is very much needed during these times.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank our Chair-elect Salvör Nordal and her office for their wonderful hospitality, and ENOC Secretariat, Polina Atanasova and Greta Faieta for their invaluable support.

I wish everyone a rich and productive conference.