**Speech for the 20 years celebration of the Cooperation of Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea region.**

Ingrid

First, we would like to thank you for inviting us to take part in this important celebration of the 20 years of cooperation on children at risk. It means a lot to both of us to see how the child cooperation that started 1998 with the Swedish Special group for children at risk in the Baltic Sea Region has developed to what it is today, an important cooperation over boarders actively working with children at risk with the aim to give children a better start in life free from abuse, exploration and trafficking. We want to look back to the very beginning of this work and share some of our experience of how it all started.

Agneta

In the years after the fall of the Berlin wall a movement of democratization was started between the countries around the Baltic Sea, including Norway and Iceland. Much of this cooperation begun on a grass root level between different organizations and authorities in the region. Originally the CBSS was meant to be a discussion forum. But before long the work broadened to include the Commissioners and working groups on several themes.

Sweden chaired the CBSS in 1996. At the summit in Visby that year it was decided that the organization should have a broader agenda and have a secretariat in Stockholm. The Swedish Foreign Ministry was asked by the Commissioner for Democracy to ensure that issues concerning sexually exploited children were put on the agenda and included in the cooperation. Sweden had hosted the 1st World Congress against Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1996 and offered to finance this work and see it as part of the follow-up work after the Congress. At the Riga summit in 1998 it was agreed that the work should include this topic. A mapping was done, which resulted in the appointment the Swedish Special Group for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region.

I was the contact person for the Special group at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and part of the WGCC and EGCC until I retired in 2012. It was considered as a high priority by the ministry through the years.

Ingrid

We were at the beginning three persons who got the assignment from the Swedish Ministry of Health and Welfare in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to initiate a practical cooperation within the Baltic region on issues concerning sexually exploited children. It was as chairman Ambassador Bo Henriksson, well known and an important negotiator at the Riga Summit, myself, head of Unit and Helena Seyfert senior official.

We had a lot of ideas and much enthusiasm and we started to find other enthusiastic professionals, with practical experience working with the Children but we also needed to include officials from the Government with the responsibility of the work in this field.

We contacted the NGOs in the different countries and found a lot of interesting projects working with the goal to stop sexual exploitation of children and to develop methods for working with the victims. We had many conferences and meetings between government officials and the social workers on the field. We produced a newsletter, “Children at Risk“, which was distributed over the Region, also those who were not part of the cooperation. The newsletter described good initiatives and different programs for abused children.

World Childhood Foundation founded by The Swedish Queen in 1999 focused at this time to support NGOs working against child abuse and sexual exploitation in the Baltic Region. I was contacted by their General Secretary Gunilla von Arbin and became also a part in Childhoods Advisory board. A win, win situation for both organizations. We had the knowledge and were constantly searching for organizations with new ideas on how to fulfill the aim of the Convention of the Rights of the Child concerning abuse and sexual exploitation. Childhood wanted to financially support organizations with ideas on how to develop knowledge in this area.

In many of our countries we had learned by practical work and research that the best way to approach work with children at risk was to work in a multi-professional way. Iceland had the year before we started our work opened the first Barnahus in Europe, with Bragi Gudbrandsen as very active member of the working group for children at risk we were inspired to work in the same way and to learn more about how cooperation between child protective services, the judicial system and the health services should be organized.

Competence Centers were established in all countries in the region to create a network of professionals and they worked together with the network of National coordinators representing the Government. They became good examples for others within and between the cooperating countries.

Together with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Norway we developed the IT-tool “The Child Centre “– a possibility to learn from each other and meet on the web. The IT-tool was partly financed by the STOP project within the EU. The idea from the beginning was to build a Barnahus on the internet with the possibility for professionals to meet in different and secret rooms. A challenge that we not fully were able to fulfil according to how the Internet developed during this time.

The three years with the child cooperation in the Baltic Sea region were fantastic, so many enthusiastic professionals and government officials came together and learned from each other and this made a difference.

In March 2002, the cooperation on children at risk in the Baltic sea region became a permanent part of the CBSS, as the Working Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea region, later the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk.

I am very proud of what we accomplished during the three years with the working group. And I am very impressed over how the cooperation has developed and how the Expert Group now is an important actor not only in Baltic Region but also within EU.

Working with abused children all my professional life. I know that children are not always in the first line for priority. I have seen so many good projects that have been stopped because the project time is over, meaning no more money and no possibility to continue the work. - But there are exceptions – one of these is CBSS Expert group on Children at Risk which now are celebrating 20 years.

The group has accomplished many good things and on the top of my list is that all countries now will establish ”Barnahus”.

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and although much has improved, there is always more to be done. We still have children at risk of being sexually and physically abused or trafficked. Children in migration need our extra support. To make this possible we have to cooperate within the countries and between countries. The Expert Group will not be out of work.

Thank you for listening and good luck in the coming 20 years!