



Children
at Risk

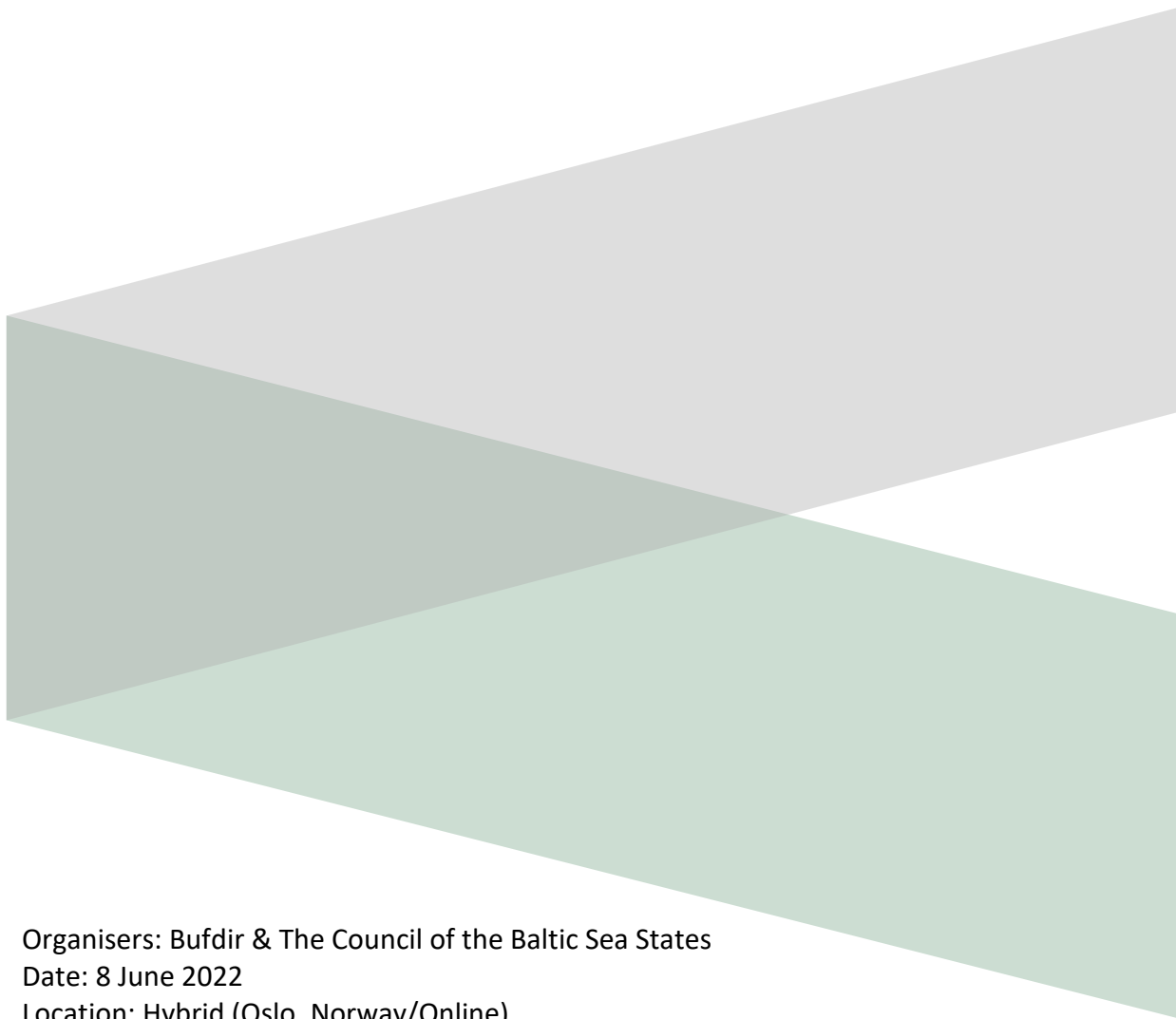


Bufdir

Resilient and inclusive child protection systems – building mutual trust and collaboration

Norwegian Presidency Conference of the
CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk

Conference Report



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Speakers

Mr Asgeir Falch-Erisken, PhD is an associate professor and Head of the academic unit on Globalisation and Social Sustainability at the Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy at Oslo Metropolitan University.

Mr Ásmundur Einar Daðason, Minister of Education and Children's Affairs in Iceland

Ms Andrea Hormazabal, Coordinator Child and youth at The National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden

Ms Atieno Odenyo, Senior Associate at Maestral International

Ms Chloe Lelievre, Programme Lead & Policy Analyst, Justice Services - Public Governance at the OECD

Mr Jan Kato Fremstad, the Director at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

Dr Jørn Holm-Hansen, research-professor at Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research at Oslo Metropolitan University

Mr Kai Finsnes, Deputy Director General in the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal, Human Geographer and Research Professor, The Peace Research Institute, Oslo

Mr Olav Berstad, the Chair of the CBSS Committee of Senior Officials, MFA of Norway

Ms Unni Nygaard, Special Adviser at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

Panel Discussion Participants

Ms Atieno Odenyo

Ms Andrea Hormazabal

Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen

Mr Ásmundur Einar Daðason

Mr Jørn Holm Hansen

Ms Marta Bivand Erdal

Opening Remarks

Mr Jan Kato Fremstad

Mr Jan Kato Fremstad welcomed everyone and stated that the conference marks the end of the Norwegian Presidency of the CBSS.

During the Norwegian Presidency, the Children at Risk Expert Group, under Bufdir's leadership, has carried out a mapping of child protection systems in seven CBSS member states. The purpose of the mapping is to strengthen mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration in the Baltic Sea Region, and to identify good practice in the field of child protection, including on its resilience in dealing with national and international crisis that affect the welfare of vulnerable children and families.

Mr Fremstad continued by saying that the welfare systems and child protection have changed due to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These events prove how critical it is to have sustainable child protection systems that can quickly adapt, coordinate with other sectors, and develop services focused on the fundamental rights of children and families.

Ms Unni Nygaard

Ms Unni Nygaard introduced the Children at Risk Expert Group and its work, which celebrates its twentieth anniversary as a formal group of the CBSS this year. The first Chair was elected and the first terms of reference was adopted in Vilnius, January 2002. Today, the CBSS has 10 Member States: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and Norway. Russia was suspended and subsequently resigned. The Children at Risk Expert Group stimulates dialogue and exchange on cross-border concerns and contributes to the development and implementation of tangible projects. The Children at Risk Expert group enjoys strong global partnerships including with the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the UN and others. The members of the expert group on Children at Risk meet at least twice a year with to facilitate exchange on national and regional child protection concerns and solutions.

Under the Lithuanian presidency and the current Norwegian presidency, the expert group focussed on the consequences of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and families within the region. The expert group shared solutions, experiences and knowledge that hopefully will strengthen child protection and child welfare systems.

Ms Nygaard noted that the war in Ukraine has led to Russia's suspension and subsequent resignation from the CBSS, but confirmed that the Children at Risk Expert Group will continue its activities without Russia as a member. Children at risk become even more vulnerable during times

of crisis, and it is therefore crucial that the expert group continues its cross-border cooperation and exchange.

Furthermore, as Ukraine is an observer state in the CBSS, Child Welfare authorities from Ukraine were invited to an informal roundtable arranged by the Children at Risk Expert Group. The roundtable shared information about the consequences of war on vulnerable children in Ukraine as well as the current situation regarding refugees from Ukraine in the CBSS member states. The members and the delegation from Ukraine found it especially useful to directly exchange information within the collaborative and trusted environment as provided by the Children at Risk platform at the CBSS.

Mr Kai Finsnes

Mr Kai Finsnes congratulated the expert group on the report on child protection and highlighted the importance of the work the expert group, and its mission to promote implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children. Mr Finsnes noted that it is our responsibility to have effective child protection legislation in place to ensure that children grow up in healthy and safe environments. The mapping on child protection systems contributes to broadening perspectives on inclusive, sustainable, and resilient national child protection systems. He welcomed the focus on integrated services to support families to prevent inadequate care and family separation. Efforts should be made to ensure that children can continue to grow up in a family environment. Bilateral, regional, and international cooperation can play an important role in generating a deeper understanding of good practice and the measures that need to be taken to protect children. Most countries share an agreement that children should be kept from harm and that the best interest of the child should always prevail, and this is the starting point for building mutual trust and collaboration. The similarities are greater than the differences but there is still some way to go to ensure mutual understanding and trust in transnational child protection cases.

Mr Ásmundur Einar Daðason

Minister Ásmundur Einar Daðason stated that the Baltic-Nordic cooperation in promoting children's rights is of great importance to Iceland and that child protection is one of the most important sectors of every government. Even though most countries introduced special measures to support children during Covid-19, negative side effects such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse are still affecting children. Research has shown that the impact of violence can lead to acute and serious long-term problems for children's physical and psychological health, which can make them more vulnerable to violence and in some cases prone to violence themselves when they become adults. Ensuring early intervention is key in the context of child protection.

The main objective of the Icelandic Child Protection Act is to ensure that children are raised in satisfactory conditions to protect the child from harm. The guiding principle of all child protection work should be the best interest of the child. Early interventions to prevent current and potential future harm of the child is central.

Cross sectoral work, including between countries, is essential to ensure effective child protection and addressing different types of crises. This includes strong connections between child protection, social services, education system, the health care system, and the justice system. Minister Daðason noted that children should be placed at the heart of the system and that all sectors should work together to ensure the prosperity of the child.

The Barnahus model is an example of good practice in terms of cross-sectoral collaboration. Barnahus is a model of multidisciplinary and interagency practice working with and for children in responding to violence against children. Iceland has been at the forefront of sharing its Barnahus knowledge since 1998 and has also benefited from international exchange to learn about new practices and new findings from other Barnahus abroad.

Minister Daðason emphasized the importance of mapping child protection systems in the Baltic Sea region as it will bring new findings and further knowledge that each country can learn from and adapt to its national context.

Mapping of national child protection systems and good/ promising practices in the Baltic Sea Region

Dr Jørn Holm-Hansen and Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen

Dr Jørn Holm-Hansen together with Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen introduced findings from an ongoing project called “Consent, Cosmopolitan return and Democratic Sentiments”, which is a comparative analysis between the Romanian and the Norwegian child protection systems, exploring the respective systems coherence with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The research suggests that there are numerous ways to use human rights standards to develop professional practices, policies, and legislation and looks into how the two countries are enforcing the rights of the child to non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, family life, and the right to participation.

Since the research is ongoing, the findings are still preliminary. In-depth interviews with Romanian experts, at a preliminary stage of the analysis, show that experts, scholars, and politicians in Romania link child protection to welfare in a wider sense by referring to social gaps, inequality, and cultural aspects.

Concerning non-discrimination, the experts linked concerns with social gaps in Romania, stating that there is a distinctive gap between high-income families and low-income families, in that low-income

families are exposed to discrimination to a larger extent. Children from ethnic groups and children with disabilities and disease are particularly vulnerable.

Concerning the best interests of the child, many experts focussed on the problems children may face in the context of divorce, in particular in terms of custody and the child's own wishes. Some legal provisions have been put in place to address this, but practice is still affected by culture and tradition. An interesting observation from the interviews was that the experts to a large extent did not share insights and comments on the best interests of the child. This remains an area of further investigation.

Regarding child participation, the experts said that social gaps often have an impact on the extent that this right is implemented, noting that children studying in elite schools learn how to participate and how to have their voices heard, whilst children in less fortunate schools are taught to be silent.

The preliminary findings of the comparative analysis display that the differences between the Norwegian and Romanian systems are modest.

Ms Atieno Odenyo

Ms Atieno Odenyo introduced the CBSS mapping child protection systems report, and its initial results. The study was conducted in seven Member States, looking at key elements and good practices in well-functioning, inclusive and resilient child protection systems.

The conceptual framework of the research is based on internationally recognised elements of child protection systems, including the INSPIRE framework. The research looks at the policy and legal framework, governance, coordination mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, different service delivery models, prevention and response services, the social service workforce, resources, accountability mechanisms, learning and data management systems and child participation.

The research was carried out through desk research and interviews with key informants. Approximately 57 semi-structured key interviews were performed across the seven countries. The findings displayed the diversity across countries, in particular child population and the setup of systems, and pointed to general findings and trends, including:

- All countries have ratified the CRC and are characterised by strong child protection systems with all elements of the system in place. The findings showed that CPS have expanded considerably in a relatively short time span and offers a wide and varied range of services.
- All countries differed in terms of how CRC is reflected and domesticated in national policy and legislative frameworks.
- All countries are consistently interrogating the robustness of their child protection systems and are making concerted efforts to:
 - Ensure that interventions are undertaken with the best interest of the child as the central consideration.
 - Ensure to strengthen prevention and early intervention.

- Shifting from institutional responses towards family programmes that aim to decrease the need for institutional care in the long term.
- Provide relevant services at decentralized level that ultimately improve the outcomes and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable children and families.
- Some countries are also strengthening the professional workforce for greater efficiency and effectiveness of services delivery.
- The process of policy and legislative reforms is tending to always focus on participation.

Ms Chloe Lelievre

Ms Chloe Lelievre presented a joint OECD and Latvia project to support Latvia in its commitment to improve its child protection system through the establishment of the Barnahus model.

Together with the Ministry of Welfare, the OECD is carrying out an analytical study including an assessment of the Barnahus model. There is also an assessment of justice pathways and experiences from a child perspective and a cost-benefit analysis to better understand the associated cost and benefits from delivering justice services. This includes social and economic impact and responsiveness to the user needs. The report will further include four key assessments and methodological tools that are currently being implemented, including the OECD framework for child friendly justice, the OECD Criteria for PC design and the delivery of justice, children's experiences and voices, and finally, international and multidisciplinary expertise. The findings from these assessments and tools will be finalized in the draft assessment report that will be launched in early 2023, which also will contain tailored recommendations for Latvia specifically.

A roundtable hosted by Latvia will take place 19 September 2022, where mutual exchange of good practices and lessons learned will be at focus. It will allow policymakers to share experiences on improving access to justice for all, including from the perspective of vulnerable and specific groups. Ms Lelievre welcomed everyone to join this roundtable as it will feature a discussion on child centred justice and the implementation of the Barnahus model.

Ms Andrea Hormazabal

Ms Andrea Hormazabal focused on the Swedish ongoing governmental assessments and national strategies that have an important impact on the support and the protection of children in Sweden.

Sweden has 21 different regions/county councils providing health and medical care and 290 local authorities/municipalities providing social services, education, preschool, housing, and finance assistance. The idea is that every local authority and county council should provide the same services. Unfortunately, this is not the case as there are still many children who do not receive the support that they need. Even though Sweden has a good child protection system, there are still many gaps to fill and issues that need to be addressed.

In April last year the government appointed a commission with the task to propose a national strategy to prevent and combat violence against children, including “honour-related” violence and oppression. The strategy will take a holistic perspective and strive for a coherent focus in the work of preventing violence against children during the next ten-year period. The investigation will also propose long-term goals and identify shortcomings and possible measures. The investigation will draw attention to violence and abuse of children, including violence on the internet and social media, violence between and towards children, socio-economic factors, racism, and other vulnerabilities. It is particularly important to point out that child perspectives should be an important part of the development of a national strategy and requires special efforts to reach to the most vulnerable children. The results of the investigation will be reported in December 2022.

Another ongoing governmental investigation looks at homecare placements. In 2020, about 27 300 children were placed in out-of-home care. The majority (55 percent) were over 15 years old and most of them were boys placed in family-based care. Research shows that children who are placed in out-of-home care have significantly more health problems and a greater need for health, medical and dental care in comparison to other children. Furthermore, research also show that interruptions in schooling are common. The Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO) stated in their annual report that municipalities fail in addressing the shortcomings in social child and youth care and the quality thus varies. According to the authority, many children are exposed to violence and abuse, and it is difficult to offer specific care to the target group, for example to address severe psychiatric problems, neuropsychiatric disabilities and to prevent serious crime. The government needs to ensure that children placed in out-of-home care are guaranteed security and safety. The investigation will make suggestions on how to ensure quality of care and how the support for children can be improved when such care has ceased. It will also analyse and give recommendations on how to increase the quality of care to specific target groups locally as well as nationally. The investigation will be reported no later than April 10, 2023.

Furthermore, to strengthen the commitments in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government will investigate whether Sweden should ratify the third Additional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The investigation will also explain how the individual right of appeal has worked in the context of other UN committees and will also describe how other countries that have introduced individual right of appeal have handled this, in particular, how it affects health care cases and migration cases. The investigation will be reported no later than 28 August 2023.

The government has also presented the first national action plan for a child guarantee with the aim to combat poverty and social exclusion of children under the age of 18, including focus on education, preschool health, housing, etc. Sweden has identified shortcomings where children are most vulnerable; children who are financially vulnerable, children living in deficient housing or insecure housing or who are homeless, children who are socio-economically disadvantaged, children with disabilities and children placed in out-of-home care. This new action plan is important as it focuses on all aspects of children up to 18 years old. The action plan applies to a ten-year period and was submitted to the European Commission in March 2022. Sweden will have to report the progress to the European Commission every two years and the government is responsible for regular monitoring of the action plan.

The National Board of Health and Welfare has currently 80 ongoing government- and self-initiated assignments around children and youth. These assignments include collaboration with schools, health care, social services, the police, and civil society. For example, a study is currently being conducted about a national health care program for children and youth with the purpose to understand what children and their parents should be offered in terms of health visits and support. The National Board of Health and Welfare is currently analysing how its 80 assignments capture the target group based on age, prevention levels and if the purpose of the assignments meet the needs of the target groups. It has been questioned whether the assignments are being implemented in all the 290 Swedish municipalities and 21 regions/county councils. To investigate this is of importance to see what gaps there are and whether the work that is done by the National Board of Health and Welfare really contributes to higher goal fulfilments or not and whether it guarantees that children really receive the support and protection they need.

Ms Hormazabal concluded by stating that it is important to strengthen collaboration with other authorities, regions, and municipalities and that it is imperative that children are involved.

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal presented a project called “Building trust across borders” and shared some of the experiences, the approach and some lessons learned from the project.

The project was co-funded by the Polish and Norwegian authorities to address the need for improved dialogue in areas which are prone to challenges and conflict in the context of child protection. The project involved Polish and Norwegian child welfare authorities alongside embassies in both countries.

The lessons learned of this project pertains mainly to communication challenges, underscoring the need for dialogue. Systematic review of existing knowledge was published, focussing on child welfare services, the cooperation across borders in this context and how migrant populations come into this.

A key barrier to building trust is the lack of a common language. Even though the core research team spoke Polish, Norwegian and English, natively or fluently, it was still hard to understand different professional terms and what they meant. One of the approaches to face this barrier was to create a glossary together with the team both from Norway and Poland and to find a common definition of each term. This contributed to fruitful and interesting discussions confirming the importance of not taking languages for granted as it is very easy to become lost in translation. One such example is the understanding of “the best interest of the child” and what it really means concretely in the different child welfare cases the project studied. The aim was not always to have complete consensus, but to learn to accept and give room for disagreement as well.

Panel Discussion

Question 1: Based on what has been presented at the conference. Are there any specific core elements you want to highlight in terms of building mutual trust and cross border collaboration in child protection cases?

Minister Ásmundur Einar Daðason noted that it is important to build trust across sectors and bring people with different views and opinions together. This can result in innovative practices and solutions. Building trust between these different sectors and in political affairs is an important element of child protection. He also noted that child protection and child protection in general should have a more prominent position in political discussions and decisions.

Dr Jørn Holm-Hansen drew inspiration from Marta's presentation regarding the importance of building trust across borders, noting the value of coming together to discuss specific cases, even when some are hypothetical, since this can lead to a common understanding and enhanced trust between countries.

Ms Atieno Odenyo believed that there is a need for interaction, especially interaction between countries where they can learn from each other. Policies, legislation etc., have many similarities but it is when you translate them into practice that differences become apparent, especially in terms of institutional setups. Another challenge concerns data about vulnerable children – if there is no data essential information cannot be transformed into practice that address vulnerabilities. Ms Odenyo also referred to the lifecycle approach, with a focus on prevention, and not only response services.

Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen stated that child protection discourses often are driven by national agendas. It is important to understand that even though some efforts might be successful in one national context, it does not mean that other countries will address it the same way. Even if countries have similar systems and the same norms, it does not mean that all countries understand them in the same way. In order to achieve trust across borders, there needs to be a dedicated effort between countries to collaborate and understand each others' expectations.

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal emphasized that it is important to look at child protection pathways through the eyes of the "users". Many vulnerable children and parents often lack trust in child protection systems. To tackle this, there is a need of a holistic societal approach. Countries could learn from each other in terms of how you meet a diverse population in this area and there could be lessons learned for other parts of society and governments as well.

Ms Andrea Hormazabal stated that it is important to see the person behind a specific child protection case. It is important to talk about the best interest of the child with the child and not only with the adults.

Question 2: We know that the best interest of the child is perceived differently in different countries, could you give some comments on this important consideration that everyone can agree upon?

Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen noted that it is important to come to a joint understanding, involving the child, of what the best interests of the child entails in each case, and that the child can influence the decision-making in cases that concern them.

The Minister Ásmundur Einar Daðason said that a key challenge in securing early intervention and child protection, is to learn the perspective and wishes of the child concerned. This is also one of the main reasons why Iceland reformed the child protection system and made it into a new law focussing on the prosperity for children, especially vulnerable children. In the next four years, Iceland will implement changes in order to make voices of children heard in every decision-making process.

Ms Andrea Hormazabal noted that you need to create mutual trust between the child and the social worker. It is important to create an arena where the social worker has the time to create mutual trust with the child and family. This is often a long-term approach, which demands time, that social workers often are short of.

Dr Jørn Holm-Hansen referred to his research in Romania, noting that the best interest of the child often is seen as an elusive concept and sometime accepted as merely having a “good intention” and being “nice to the child”.

Mr Asgeir Falch-Eriksen connected his comment to Dr Holm-Hansens argument above. Romania does not have many resources in terms of its child protection system, which means that the core objective of protecting the child from harm often takes precedence over a thorough assessment and understanding of the “best interests of the child”.

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal noted that all parts of a society should be included to build mutual trust, looking at the way a society is organised, who is responsible for what and what levels of services you can expect, and what civil society and the populations themselves can contribute.

Question 3: What important lessons have we learned now in connection to Covid-19 and the situation in Ukraine that can help us make our child protection systems inclusive and resilient, including in times of crisis?

Ms Andrea Hormazabal noted challenges in terms of disseminating information to all citizens in Sweden. It is important to ensure that child friendly information is adapted to different stages of development and language so that all children can access and understand.

Ms Atieno Odenyo said that crisis can present opportunities to increase an understanding that child welfare is central and that it plays an essential role in a society. In terms of the situation in Ukraine, one can see that if there is a political will there is action.

Dr Marta Bivand Erdal said that one of the observations in the Norwegian context was that the Norwegian authorities were largely not prepared to communicate with a diverse population in these crises. For example, translation of information does not automatically mean that the information is being communicated and understood by the target group.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has proven the importance of political willingness to address a specific concern. There are indications that refugees from Ukraine have received many privileges that other migrants haven't. One such example is children receiving schooling in their own language.

Minister Ásmundur Einar Daðason agreed that there were not enough efforts when it came to Covid-19 and migrant families. He noted that measuring cost effectiveness is a challenge, but important in terms of generating an understanding that investing in child protection is cost effective and an investment in societies.

Final remarks

Olav Berstad

Mr Berstad closed the conference by expressing his gratitude for the important contribution of the expert group to the CBSS priority area Safe and Secure. He noted that the Children at Risk expert group has done a remarkable job in terms of adapting to change during the pandemic, and in the context of the war in Ukraine and the challenges it has posed on the region and the CBSS. He ended with a special thank you to the chair of the Expert group and the Children at risk unit in the Secretariat.