# Annex 1: A history of the CBSS Cooperation on Children at Risk

The CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk is a unique example of international cooperation. In 1998, the CBSS Heads of Government of the member states initiated regional activities on children’s rights as the reverberations of two key events came together in synergy: the atmosphere of regional cooperation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the international drive to improve the situation for children after the 1996 World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. With the help of improved transportation and communication technologies, the sharing of knowledge, models, and expertise internationally has become a precondition for good public policy and services in all sectors.

Today, the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk is relied upon to anticipate needs, follow trends, and enable robust and dynamic international cooperation supporting the rights of the child.

## The Congress that shocked the world into action

In 1996, the world was shocked by the revelations from the First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, convened on the initiative of the Swedish Government. This Congress launched a global discussion about the evidence and scope of the atrocity – sexual and otherwise – of violence against children. Despite global efforts, sexual abuse and violence against children is still pervasive. In all countries and regions, across all societies, children are exploited in numerous ways – starting from infancy and at all ages.

The world congress coincided with the Swedish Presidency of the CBSS. The CBSS Ombudsman for Democracy and Human rights wrote a letter asking the Swedish Foreign Minister to put the issue of sexually exploited children on the agenda for regional cooperation.

In Riga in July 1997, the CBSS Foreign Ministers decided the organisation should work in the field of child sexual abuse, violence in the media, and the situation of asylum-seeking minors.

In September 1997, the CBSS Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) decided the CBSS should implement the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was in response to the May 1997 report issued by the CBSS on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a follow-up, the CBSS Working Group on Democratic Institutions (WGDI) reported in the 1997-1998 Annual Report that it decided to focus on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Baltic Sea region. With the support of a Swedish delegation to the WGDI, an ad-hoc expert group was established to develop a report on commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Region, and to make recommendations for cooperation projects. The report showed that continued multidisciplinary regional cooperation on the topic was well motivated. Conferences and seminars were among the proposed activities.

## CBSS cooperation on children at risk begins

In January 1998 the CBSS launched its Report on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Baltic Sea Region.

At the CBSS Summit in Riga in January 1998, the Prime Ministers of the CBSS took note of the findings and “proposed that the Presidency of the CBSS organise the continued work in this field in accordance with the report.” The Foreign Ministers of the CBSS “noted with satisfaction that the report on Combating Commercial sexual exploitation of children has resulted in initiatives to arrange seminars with a view to raising the awareness of the issue among the relevant decision makers.” The CSO also reflected on the report, saying it points “to the importance of exchange of information and knowledge about the phenomenon and the necessity to raise awareness of the issue among the relevant decision makers (police and public prosecutors, social and health services, schools, media etc.).”

The financing for the start of the work came from all over the region. Sweden and Norway put their funds towards regional activities, while Denmark and Germany aimed at locally based activities. It is notable that many Nordic countries, Sweden and Denmark included, were still sending aid funding to some of the CBSS member states.

Sweden, Norway, and Estonia organised the first conference in Tallinn in September 1998. The meeting emphasised the importance of multidisciplinary work. It further “supported a stronger regional collaboration on the issue but it was also argued to broaden the mandate to include children at risk in the regional collaboration.” In this context, Sweden and others wanted to target all sexual exploitation of children, not just commercial. The term ‘Children at Risk’ came into use, which eventually became the formal name of the cooperation as an umbrella term for the diverse needs and priorities of all CBSS member states, notably Russia’s interest in street children and children in institutions.

Denmark, Germany and Latvia organised a seminar held in Riga in October 1998. The theme was abused children: cooperation among services, exchange of experiences, practical needs of the child.

## The “Children at Risk project” takes form

The idea for an IT project first appeared during 1998. This became the “Child Centre” and was a key development in the establishment of the Expert Group.

The IT project and the ambition for comprehensive regional cooperation were strongly interconnected from the beginning. At the September 1998 conference in Tallinn on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Baltic Sea Region, participants largely agreed on the need for stronger communication and cooperation in the Region. To address this, the CBSS Ombudsman for Human Rights and Democracy proposed that “each country should appoint an authority or organisation to be responsible for coordinating the internal part of the regional work” which would take place using modern communication technology.

During November 1998, the CBSS Working Group on Democratic Institutions discussed following up the Tallinn conference and the IT project idea. At the meeting, “The Commissioner [of the CBSS] referred to his earlier proposal to establish national contact-points on children’s issues in all CBSS member states. The contact-points would have as their primary goal to ensure that all CBSS countries continue to prioritise international co-operation on establishing better conditions for children. In order to ensure the political backing of the project members of the contact-points should include senior officials. Sweden will elaborate a proposal for the future development of the national contact-points.”

In addition to cooperation activities, the CBSS Commissioner was particularly interested in the Child Ombudsman’s system and encouraged member states to establish the office.

[A ministerial meeting "Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region"](http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/1999Ministerial.pdf) was held in Stockholm on 17 March 1999 as a follow-up event to the Tallinn Conference. The IT network was proposed by the Swedish Minister for Social Security and Children as a way to use information technology as one way of improving co-operation, share information and for educational purposes. This was supported with a demonstration of teleconferencing between Stockholm and Russia. The demonstration impressed the audience despite its slow connectivity by modern standards. “[Minister] Klingvall proposed that the Swedish government would establish a group of experts to take forward the discussions and that this be done relatively quickly.”

The Swedish Minister for Social Affairs set up a special group for children at risk in the Baltic Sea Region in cooperation with the Norwegian Ministry for Children and Family Affairs. This group of four core representatives developed the idea of the IT network and also how to organise the cooperation among the member states on a more permanent basis. A CSO annual report from June 1999 notes “The Swedish Special Group for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region has also continued its work as a focal point for regional co-operation.”

The work on the IT network and regional cooperation on the topic developed organically for a time, and was seen as a follow-up activity of the 1996 World Congress. The “Cyber house” or “Child Centre” was envisioned to be a place to share knowledge and information. The visual of a house depicted how the IT network should function: different online “rooms” for different groups such as policymakers, scientists, professionals, children and young people. The idea was remarkable for its time, and as such difficult to be realised as planned.

The first meeting on the establishment of an IT-Network concerning Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region was held in Stockholm in [April 1999](http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ITProjectEstablishmentMemo.pdf), which was attended by CBSS staff. A meeting in Visby in 1999 agreed on the initial plan for the IT-network, which would tie the member states together though a single server. The most immediate success of this decision was anchoring the cooperation. In addition to the planning discussions, the meetings on the development of the IT network also featured exchanges of national practice.

## Integration into the CBSS

The restructuring of the CBSS Secretariat prompted the discussion on the integration of the work on Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region into the CBSS. The funding for the IT network would end around the same time that the integration was formalised. Before the current setup of the CBSS, the work and documentation was largely decentralised to the Foreign Ministries and line ministries.

An ad-hoc meeting was held in Stockholm in March 2000 to discuss priorities for future initiatives on children at risk. This meeting clarified that there was political support from all member states to continue the work. A priority paper was developed, which was discussed and confirmed in Oslo in June 2000 at the first meeting of the “Reference Group,” which was composed of Senior Officials representing their respective countries and who have been mandated to contribute to the decision making on future strategic and policy initiatives on Children at Risk. The Reference Group would support the development of the IT network.

A memo from a CBSS Secretariat staffer to the Secretariat reports on the Meeting of the Reference Group on Children at Risk in Riga 5-6 February 2001, where the group agreed to seek its integration into the CBSS. The chair of the meeting said, “… politically, the Project had been a CBSS endeavour since the very beginning, when the Prime Ministers decided to launch it at their Riga Summit in 1998. The Establishment of the Reference Group had further consolidated the Baltic Sea nature of the project.” The term “Project” here refers to the “Children at Risk Project”, which at this point had become conflated with the “IT network.”

The Chair also said “… the Reference Group had been created as a technical structure for the purpose of designing and launching the “Cyber House” Project. As the work progressed, the scope of the Group’s responsibilities had widened, which was reflected i.a. in the Bergen CBSS Communique.” The referenced June 2000 CBSS Foreign Ministers Communique “instructs the CSO and the WGDI to support the newly established reference group of senior officials from ministries responsible for child matters in its efforts to enforce a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach towards children at risk in the Baltic Sea region and to further develop the Child Centre for Children at Risk IT network for intergovernmental exchange of information and experiences in the area of child welfare and protection.”

A September 2001 meeting of the actors developing the IT network confirmed that the “Child Centre” should become a part of the work of the CBSS Secretariat.

In October 2001, the Ministers for Children’s Affairs in the Baltic Sea Region adopted a formal decision on the Secretariat function of the “C.A.R. Project” and the establishment of the Working Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk. In November the proposal to integrate was made to the CSO, which was adopted in February 2002. The unit was staffed from March 1st until June 30th by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and paid for both by Sweden and Norway. The delivery of an administrative and professional unit within the CBSS secretariat changed the way of working and strengthened the cooperation among the member states.

## Formal establishment and evolution

In January 2002, the CBSS Working Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk (WGCC) met for the first time in Vilnius. There they elected the first char and vice-chair, and agreed on the Terms of Reference for the group. They next met in Reykjavik in April, where they agreed on a proposal for the first Senior Advisor and Head of Unit, who took his post on 12 June 2002.

The priority paper from 2000 was updated and adopted by the Working Group in December 2002. The priorities included working against all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, protecting unaccompanied children and preventing exploitation and trafficking, protecting street children, children with antisocial and self-destructive behaviour and children in institutions.

One of the first tasks of the Working Group was to develop the Action Plan for the cooperation for improved assessment care and reintegration of unaccompanied and trafficked children in the Region of the Baltic Sea States, which was adopted in 2004. As part of this work, the group of National Contact Points for Unaccompanied and Trafficked Children in the Baltic Sea States was established, which was eventually integrated into the Expert Group.

The mandate was expanded in 2008 towards an integrated child protection approach. At the same time, the name changed to the Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk and the Expert Group (EGCC) in order to follow the standardized naming format established by the 2008 reform of the CBSS.

The Child Centre website was updated substantially in 2013. By this time, the connectivity, technology and privacy foreseen in the original website had long become obsolete. A private website for the archival documents of the Expert Group was created instead, and the focus of the public website changed to promoting the work and priorities of the Expert Group. In 2016 the name was simplified to the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk in conjunction with the adoption of a Terms of Reference for the group. The Expert Group adopted its 2017-2020 Mandate and Strategy documents, along with the new internal acronym CAR, at its May 2017 meeting. The URL of the website was changed, leaving the Child Centre framework formally in the past and highlighting instead the influence of the Children at Risk Expert Group.

## **Continued need to prioritise and combat violence against children**

Over the years, the regional and political environment and situation has changed. All the countries in the region are members of the Council of Europe and all have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and recommendations and guidelines concerning integrated child protection systems, child-friendly justice and child-friendly social services. Nearly all countries in the Baltic Sea Region apart from Iceland, Norway and Russia are European Union members, and thus are influenced directly and indirectly by the greater European political agenda.

A significant development in the education, health and welfare/protection fields has taken place in each of the 11-member states of the Council of the Baltic Sea States during the past 20 years. Many children are relatively well informed about their rights and live in safety and security in their family setting. However, too many children still experience different forms of violence and feel that they have few reliable adults to turn to. The atrocities are also ongoing and taking on new forms, such as real time streaming of sexual violence and the grooming and harassment of children through online devices and in real life. Furthermore, quite a few unaccompanied children are currently travelling from country to country in Europe in search of safety and livelihood. Thus, there is still a great need to keep the topic of children at risk as a priority area of work and give high attention to develop appropriate preventive and protective measures.

The mandate of the Expert Group for 2017-2020 prioritises accordingly support to the member States in bolstering their child protection and welfare systems in the areas of prevention, early intervention, parenting and family support, child-friendly justice, the wellbeing and best interests of children in alternative care, protecting children from sexual violence and exploitation, preventing trafficking and exploitation of children and the best interests of children in migration. The results of the flagship projects of the CBSS Expert Group have enabled regional exchange of good practices, knowledge and models which has influenced the evolution and improvement of public policy and services for children. The Expert Group enjoys a high level of respect in ministries, national agencies, ombudsmen’s offices, and organisations and among professionals, children and parents.