Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and honor to be here among colleagues and friends, whom I consider not only experts but really true child rights champions.

I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate CBSS Children at Risk Expert group on the significant 20 years mark of the very important work of creating safe and secure environments for children in the Baltic Sea region.

My organization Center Dardedze has had a privilege of being involved in the work of Children at Risk Unit from the very first days of our work in 2001. As a new organization with young and passionate professionals we were able to meet our need for inspiration, knowledge, best practice examples and support from more experienced experts in the field coming from countries with better developed welfare and child protection systems at that time. And we were lucky to have this regional support so close by and we are truly grateful for the impact you have made on us as an organization and as a country, inspiring us to do the very best we can for the sake of our children.

When we look back at a time 20 years ago and try to identify the biggest achievement or something that has changed in the system that would make it better now for children, I ask the question:

Is there a system in place that makes country a safe place for children to grow up and does this system work?

I can see several important factors to consider that might answer the question:

1. Firstly, System is built upon regulations - We have changed and adapted many legislative regulations that are so important in respecting, promoting and implementing the rights of a child; And I think we all have scored rather high on this homework.
2. Secondly, System is operated through agencies, institutions, organizations - We have many state, municipal and non-governmental organizations in the field of education, health care and child protection that function, but I believe that there is yet place to improve our performance in striving to operate based on child rights principles. Doing the planning, implementing, measuring, evaluating, and planning again, and implementing again through the lense of child participation, non-discrimination, do no harm, strengths based and child’s best interest principles.

1. Thirdly – system only lives through the people who are in it. We believe that at least for Latvia it is now the prime time to invest in the people – teachers, social workers, police, doctors and parents – adults who are close to children, because they are the only change agents as well as children themselves. It is up to us – adults to fully start respecting children, value their input, as they are the best experts of their own situations.

That is one of the most significant lessons we as Center Dardedze has taken also from this Baltic Sea Region cooperation, the power of child participation, that we strongly try to implement and promote with every opportunity we face.

Center Dardedze believe that violence against children is preventable, and we are so excited that after 20 years of intensive work, we can see the slow shift in the systems focus, when we begin considering prevention equally important to responding and intervening when harm has been done.

Just to conclude, I hope that in every action - weather it’s bringing BarnaHus model and trying to find the best way to implement it in Latvia, or striving to make non-violent childhoods a reality in Latvia, we will always manage to keep a child focus in every decision we make, every policy we draft, every program that we develop because that is the only way how we can make children’s rights reality and not keep them only as formality.

Thank you very much and congratulations once again!

On behalf of Center Dardedze

Agnese Sladzevska