



Save the Children



**MODELS OF THE BEST PRACTICE - OMBUDSMEN'S  
COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN:**

# **HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND OMBUDSMEN IN SEE**

**Produced by: Save the Children North-West Balkans  
April 2013**





# Save the Children

Save the Children is the world's leading independent organisation for children.

**OUR VISION** is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation.

**OUR MISSION** is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.

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# INTRODUCTION

Save the Children is the world's leading independent organization for children. Its vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation. Its mission is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.

Taking into account the needs and rights of children and the situation in the region, Save the Children together with its partners works towards improving the situation for children in following areas: child rights governance, rights of children to education, rights of children to protection against violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect and ensuring the rights of children in emergency situations. In all mentioned areas, we ensure the professional and financial support to our partners. In the North-Western Balkans Save the Children is working in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro and supports the implementation of regional initiatives in South East Europe.

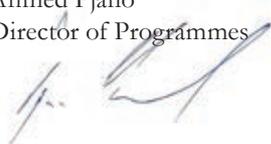
One of such initiatives is the *Children's Rights Ombudspersons' Network in South and Eastern Europe-CRONSEE* established in 2006. The network currently consists of 14 the institutions of Ombudsman from 12 countries in the region and its overall objective is enforcement of child rights according to the Convention of the Rights of the Child in South East Europe<sup>1</sup>. As part of our on-going collaboration, we have decided to look into experiences these institutions have gained in the past few years to assess practices in communicating with children, with an aim to single out examples of best practices to serve as basis for recommendations useful in the future work of the CRONSEE members.

Contact with a child is a starting point of efforts to advance its rights. Very often it happens that matters of importance for children are debated by legislators and adults in general who fail to ensure or even consider child participation. On the other hand, Save the Children, as well as our partners in the CRONSEE network, believes that creating and maintaining direct contact with children is crucial in planning our activities, setting organizational objectives and mechanisms to achieve them.

For this reason, we have prepared a report that outlines models of best practices the institutions of Ombudsman in the South-East Europe employ to achieve effective communication with children. It sums up their years-long efforts and our continuous cooperation on numerous projects with an overall objective to enforce child rights in according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in South East Europe.

I truly hope that this report will contribute to an improved communication between the institutions of Ombudsman and children, to ensure that ombudsmen continue to be true allies and voices of the children towards realization and a full affirmation of the child rights.

Ahmed Pjano  
Director of Programmes



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<sup>1</sup> CRONSEE members are: People's Advocate - Albania, Human Rights Ombudsman – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children (BiH), Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, Ombudsman for Children (Croatia), Office of the Commissioner of Administration (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Cyprus, Ombudsperson – Kosovo, Greek Ombudsman, Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia, Protector of Human Rights and Freedom of Montenegro, People's Advocate - Romania, Protector of Citizens – Serbia, Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia, Provincial Ombudsman of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Serbia).



Photo: Save the Children

Children groups performance in the BiH parliament on the occasion of the International Children's Day, 20 November 2012

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European continent is going through what could be described as the Age of Austerity. Budget cuts seem not to spare even the most developed countries, causing loud opposition from trade unions and workers, but also vulnerable groups such as disabled persons and pensioners. Europe's poorest countries in the South-East region are arguably hit even harder as the current crisis has come after years of exhausting economic and political instabilities in these mainly transitional societies.

Every segment of the society is affected, but human rights institutions, including ombudsmen, are particularly prone to face a challenge of working with reduced budgets and increased demands. In the region where such institution does not have a long tradition, they had first to educate both legislators and the public on role of the office, gain support and build credibility. In the current stage, they have moved forward in actively partaking in resolving some of the key problems in their respective countries.

In South-East Europe, children are far from being at the top of the political agenda. In such atmosphere, the institutions of Ombudsman have been playing a crucial role to educate children on their rights and ways they can protect them. In order to further improve their work by exchanging experiences and collaborating on regional projects of shared importance, these institutions gathered around the network called the *Children's Rights Ombudspersons' Network in South and Eastern Europe-CRONSEE*.

Ombudsmen communicate with children mainly for the purpose of **intervention** (responding to a complaint), **education** (teaching children about their rights, role and competencies of Ombudsman), **learning** (creating opportunities in which Ombudsman learns from children about their opinions and ideas) and **participation** (involving children in planning, evaluating and promoting Ombudsman's activities). In all these examples, institutions recognized that the **direct communication** with children is absolutely necessary, thus they have been considering new ways and how to improve mechanisms already in place to facilitate this process.

Assessing the past year, most ombudsmen determined that their **communication with children has become more frequent** and/or of better quality than that was the case in previously. Main reason for this, as commented by the institutions of Ombudsman, were introduction of innovative or new channels or tools not used before, such as launching a Facebook page or publishing children comics. Regardless, they still continue to register comparatively **small number of complaints filed by children**. This is why many of the institutions of Ombudsman included in this study have focused on activities aiming to encourage children to directly contact institution in a case of need. They do this by visit schools, day care centres, institutions for disabled children, street children centres, etc., producing multimedia content on the topic and intensifying their campaigns, such as Montenegro's "Address The Ombudsman" campaign. **Raising awareness** of children on the rights stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ways to protect them, the role of Ombudsman and what it can do for children (and how to file complaint) is regular activity of all institutions of Ombudsman.

Ombudsmen have also carried out significant number of **research projects** whose objective was to learn what children think or what are they experiences on topics such as economic and sexual exploitation, violence in schools, internet safety, bullying, etc. Whether children took part through a participation in focused group or personal interviews, institutions of Ombudsmen ensure that experts talk to children in space they feel comfortable in, with child safety on a top of its priorities. Outcome and information gathered from these projects is not used just for presentation of the findings, but also in preparation of recommendations and in planning the strategy of Ombudsman's own activities.

**Children participation** has been increasing in the work of the institutions of Ombudsman, as they find new ways of involving children and making them interested. Children determine messages of the campaigns; draw images used on posters and dissemination the materials among their peers. They take active part in conducting a research project, by participation in formulating questionnaires, administrating them to their peers and even analysing the data. They are being asked to evaluate Ombudsman's activities, and their assessment is considered when planning the future projects or meetings.

Much has been achieved, primarily in the way institutions see their position in comparison with children: they are equal partners. Institutions of Ombudsmen make effort to learn as much as possible about children as their **target group(s)**, and ensuring that their **messages** are child- and result-oriented, simple and precise. In conveying them, the institutions have been employing new communication tools and channels; some launched specialized **webpages**, Facebook, Twitter and Skype accounts. In terms of presentation, it has become an increasing practice to involve children in creating promotional and educational materials. Used as **experts** in communication with their age group, Ombudsmen rely on children input in terms of drawings and textual input. In some cases, children are members of organized young advisors groups regularly working with Ombudsmen by discussing and offering input on issue of their interest and concern.

This report contains numerous examples and descriptions of models of good practice of the institutions of Ombudsman when communicating with children. More details of majority of mentioned projects or initiatives are available at their websites.

# I – LANDSCAPE

There are 14 the institutions of Ombudsman in this region that are either exclusively committed to the rights of children (as it is the case with Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia) or have specialized departments. A majority of the institutions of Ombudsman have only 3-4 persons working in the child rights department, who often share this with duties and work carried out in other departments. Twelve of these institutions took part in this study of their experiences in communicating with children assessed against resources at disposal for this purpose.

In 2013, many of the questioned Ombudsmen have either faced budget cuts or were granted budgets which do not allow more opportunities to meet children by travelling around the country, organizing meetings with young advisors (where applicable) and alike. In such circumstances, some of them have decided to become partners of the civil society organizations working in this field or employ new technologies to maintain direct contact with children. Despite the fact that many have adapted to the situation by devising creative solutions, in some cases the institutions of Ombudsman are forced to spend equal or even more time raising funds or creating opportunities to meet children, than that used for actual contact.

Whereas staff in departments for children are not the only ones communicating with children, it is primarily their responsibility to devise and implement this segment of the institution's work.



7th Annual Conference of the network of Ombudsman for Children of South-East Europe (CRONSEE)

Table 1: Resources of the institutions of Ombudsman

Institution	No. employees	Staff in department for children	Volunteers or interns in dept. for children	Budget cuts in 2012 and/or 2013
People's Advocate – Albania	47	3 (not exclusively)	1	Yes
Human Rights Ombudsman – Bosnia and Herzegovina	55	3	3 interns	Yes
Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria	53	3		Restricted budget
Ombudsman for Children (Croatia)	19	n/a		No
Ombudsman - Kosovo <sup>2</sup>	50	4		No
Greek Ombudsman	187	12	1	Yes
Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia	78	3		No budget line for children
Protector of Human Rights and Freedom of Montenegro	25	2	1	Yes
Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children (BiH)	19	n/a		Restricted budget
People's Advocate – Romania		6 (Dept. for children rights, youth, family, pensioners and disabled)		
Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia	40	4 (not exclusively)		No
Provincial Ombudsman of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Serbia)	29	3		Yes

In addition to a relatively small number of staff members working in departments for children, the institutions of Ombudsman also require providing training and other types of informal education in communication with children for those staff members as they are mainly lawyers and paralegals. As they are aware of this, it is not a rare situation in for these institutions to work with specialized NGOs to overcome this issue.

<sup>2</sup> In line with the UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99

## II – PURPOSE

Survey conducted among the institutions of Ombudsman in the region shows that they generally communicate with children in the following four situations, corresponding to their organizational objectives and purposes:

- **RESPONSE** - working on the case involving a child/children (whether a complaint was filed by a child, adult or an institution);
- **EDUCATION** – visiting schools, day care centres, youth clubs and other places in which children gather for educational purpose, leisure time or day care, to build awareness on the rights stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and mechanisms available to protect them;
- **LEARNING** - (direct) communication with children in research projects to learn about their stances, views and beliefs on a topic, as well as priorities and problems;
- **PARTICIPATION** – encourage participation of children in planning, evaluating and promoting ombudsmen activities or issues pertaining to their mandates.



Photo: Save the Children

Workshop “Ombudsman in your school”, High School Rizah Odžečkić in Zavidovići, April 2012

All institutions that took part in this survey acknowledge that **direct communication** with children is essential to maintain a practice of effective communication with this target group for any purpose. These contacts appear to be frequent: ombudsmen use various events, celebrations and gatherings to communicate with children, most often in schools, kindergartens, day care centres, etc., but also initiate such contact.

Assessing the past year, most ombudsmen determined that their **communication with children has become more frequent** and/or of better quality than that was the case in previous years. Number of inquiries, questions or complaints the institutions receive from the children regularly increase in the months when they organize schools visits, workshops, seminars and research projects.

Republika Srpska Ombudsmen for Children, for instance, found that its staff increased presence in the child-appropriate spaces has prompted children to more often directly contact institution for whatever reason, to seek advice, file complaint or learn more about their rights. Whether the contact was made directly through the Ombudsmen or its Young Advisors Network, the institution also made sure that a reaction was immediate, deeming this an important part of trust-building process. Kosovo Ombudsman has also recorded an increase in communication, deeming that the main reason for this was the fact that more schools were visited, especially those in more remote areas of Mitrovica, Prizren and Pec.

Montenegrin Ombudsman reports maintaining regular contact with increasing number of children, despite the fact that a lack of financial and human resources does not allow the institution to strategically use this opportunity by organizing a group of young advisors or holding regular meetings. Still, meetings are organized when needed and pending on circumstances, while the contact through email, Facebook account and telephone is continuous and efforts are being made to further improve them: in the recent period, the Ombudsman carried out two campaigns, “Address the Ombudsmen” and “Children, write to Ombudsman” (*more details further below*). The institution also deems that contacts with children placed in the institutions are invaluable in its work.

Vojvodina Provincial Ombudsman believes that recorded more frequent contacts with children are mostly a result of using social media, such as Facebook page and Twitter account. In Bulgaria, Ombudsman’s media presence has increased and the institution has also introduced a practice of holding regular meetings with children and students. Every Thursday, Ombudsman now personally receives citizens in both the headquarters and other areas in the country, when separate meetings are also always held with students in a local school.

Staff dealing with children rights within the Greek Ombudsman were surprised last year to realize that a result of their efforts was entirely different from expectations based on the fact that they have had less staff and almost no resources: not only that the communication with children did not suffer from the budget cuts, but it has actually increased. The reason, it was assessed, was the fact that the Ombudsman introduced a web replying form, gaining more popularity with both the children and teachers.

Department for Children’s Rights in the Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Ombudsman has also considered ways to overcome a lack of human and financial resources, deciding on concrete steps to improve communication with children in 2013, especially in the stage of planning the institution’s activities. They reported doing so by expanding their cooperation and creating partnerships with the NGOs working in the same field.

## I. RESPONSE

All the institutions of Ombudsman included in this survey have set up mechanisms and channels through which citizens, including children, may file a complaint, seek advice or simply ask a question on a particular issue. In order to preserve confidentiality of personal information and prevent disclosing sensitive details, purpose of this report was not to evaluate quality or nature of the communication between the institutions of Ombudsman and children in the case work. Yet, there are aspects of this segment whose consideration is an important indicator in assessing success of communication efforts, especially a segment of frequency of child-submitted complaints or questions received from children.

*Table 2: Number of cases involving children in 2012*

Institution	No. of cases in 2012	Institution	No. of cases in 2012
Albania	26	<b>Macedonia</b>	161
Bosnia and Herzegovina	124	<b>Montenegro</b>	24
Bulgaria	10-12	<b>Republika Srpska (BiH)</b>	No data
Croatia	1228 cases involving 1825 children	<b>Romania</b>	n/a
Kosovo	No data	<b>Slovenia</b>	150
Greece	650	<b>Vojvodina (Serbia)</b>	115

Numbers shown in table above in no way reflect a scope of child rights' violations in a respective country, or a number of children involved as cases often refer to a group of children. Whether complaints were filed by children, adults or institutions, number of cases vary greatly from one institution to another. Regardless of the fact that almost all institutions included in the survey noted an increase in communication with children, they still continue to register comparatively small number of complaints filed directly by children. This is why many of the institutions of Ombudsman included in this study have focused on measures and activities aimed to encourage children to directly contact institution in a case of need. This has been done by implementing information campaigns, visiting children in schools to educate them on how to file complaints or producing multimedia content on this topic.

All the institutions of Ombudsman have clear guidelines on how to act when informed of a situation in which rights of child/children are being potentially threatened or violated. For instance, when it visits the institutions in which children are placed by the system (i.e. institutions for disabled children, street children, etc.), Croatian Ombudsmen for Children makes sure that communication with those children is foremost focused at ensuring that children feel safe and comfortable. When it learns of certain irregularities in

the institution's work or any inappropriate behaviour towards the children, Ombudsman staff pay particular attention to the issue of safety and protection of children who warned of such practice. They return to the institution several times to ensure that children were not mistreated in any way because of the complaint. Whenever possible, Ombudsman contact children to tell them about what has been done about their suggestion or complaints, deeming that offering a feedback is an important part of the communication practice.

In Bulgaria, Ombudsman and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science jointly launched an initiative "I Participate in Making a Change" that includes regular meetings with students in schools around the country to discuss the rights of the children and cases in which Ombudsman can intervene. In addition, as part of the National Prevention Mechanism (NPM) under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), the Ombudsman's experts visit institutions in which children are placed, such as institutions for children without appropriate parental care or children with disabilities, to monitor conditions and compliance with various international and national legal standards pertaining to the rights of the child. During these visits experts always engage in direct conversation with children and sometimes receive complaints on inappropriate punishments, conditions in the institutions, mistreatment, etc. Bulgaria is expected to soon publish the first separate report with findings and recommendations of the NPM.

Macedonian Ombudsman has encountered several complaints about the violation of children rights in schools. When such situation emerges, it's practice is to directly visit the child that has reported possible rights violations, or to visit the school or kindergarten in question. Practice and guidelines when responding to or intervening in a case of potential or actual violations of the children rights employed by The institutions of Ombudsman are good basis for communication with children in any other situation. Whether they talk to one or a group of children, when asked about main features of the effective communication with children, experts from the institutions of Ombudsman all mentioned few simple yet crucial principles: honesty, precision, simplicity and promptness.

Not every institution of Ombudsman has a complaint form adapted to children, however even those that do are not insisting for children to fill them out for their complaint to be considered. It is sufficient to make a phone call, send email or use visits to tell simply Ombudsman's staff about a particular situation. It is important to note that the institutions of Ombudsman do not intervene only in the cases when a complaint was filed, but also when they themselves observe irregularities in application of the children rights.

## 2. EDUCATION

Raising children awareness, i.e. educating them on the rights stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ways to protect them, the role of Ombudsman and what it can do for children whose rights are threatened and how to file complaint is the activity that every institution of Ombudsman consulted greatly focuses on in its work. Education of children is carried out by both the child rights experts within the Ombudsman institution and through peer education facilitated by the Ombudsman.

Primarily with a purpose to educate them and promote the institution, Ombudsmen mainly communicate with children in educational institutions (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, centres for education of children with disabilities, etc.), but also day care centres, social care institutions (homes for children without appropriate parental care), hospitals, prisons, etc. By visiting those groups, the institutions of Ombudsman also observe conditions of these children and a level of their participation.

Assessing how an Ombudsman institution engages in communication with children for this purpose, the survey showed that they pay attention to preparation, presentation style, type of event and feedback from children. For instance, at the beginning of Bosnia

and Herzegovina Ombudsman's outreach activities, its staff felt that the result was not achieved. Namely, at the time Department for Children Rights used prepared presentation on the child rights and the role of the Ombudsman, which it then delivered to children in schools. After several such visits, institution evaluated those efforts noting that children did not participate and showed every little or no interest in the presentation. Steps were undertaken to change this and the institution sought assistance from professionals to learn how to organize workshops for children. Ombudsman's staff received training and guidelines in how to engage children in direct communication. Results improved significantly as presentations were adapted to child-friendly language and the age group, meaning that the institution no longer used the same presentation and messages for all its target groups (primary school children, teenagers, high school students), instead adapting to profile of its audience. Secondly, staff gained skills to facilitate pro-active involvement of children: for instance, classrooms were re-organized to break up a sentiment of teacher-student relation, instead placing chairs in a circle. Children were also given the so-called motivation questions, and the goal at the end of each visit and discussion with children was to ensure that even the quietest child in the room spoke. Working with smaller groups of children in this way made a huge change for the Ombudsman, especially in reaching out to the primary school children.

Every week, the Greek Ombudsman meets in average 2-3 groups of children each consisting of 15 to 30 children either in schools or in the Ombudsman's office; less frequently, it visits Roma camps, detentions and jails to communicate with vulnerable groups of children. Visits are structured and well prepared in advance in terms of timing and what should happen at what stage: meeting with a group of 15-30 children takes, in total, approximately 90 minutes. In the first part (45 minutes), children are taught about the role of the Ombudsman and the meaning of the Children's Rights, all explained through examples and discussion with students. In the second part, teachers are asked to leave the meeting so that children would feel more comfortable speaking and expressing their thoughts and concerns. Depending on the interests and questions of students, Ombudsman staff may decide to focus on a particular issue, further elaborating and facilitating exchange of opinions among children divided in smaller groups, and listening to their stances and proposals. After the meeting, Ombudsman offers to meet individually with any child seeking an advice or with a question on personal manner. Finally, Ombudsman's staff meet with school teachers and other educators to gain more general view of the particular setting.

In the last few years, Kosovo Ombudsman has regularly visited schools in both urban and rural areas mainly to educate them about its mandate, ways it can protect both children and adults, but also about the existence of the team working on children rights within this institution. Institution's activities regarding the issues in these areas were than based on information provided by the children, while it would also inform the children how to recognize if their rights are violated and whom to address. Department for children in Macedonian Ombudsman also plans annual schedule of visiting primary and secondary schools in order to directly communicate with children, in average one or twice a month. In addition, its staff also participate in events organized by various NGOs, visit day care centres for disabled or street children, and they also organize visits to the Ombudsman's office.

Bulgarian Ombudsman regularly visits schools to discuss children rights with students, whereas Albanian Regional Office in Shkoder holds regular Friday meetings with students, youth and schoolchildren with purpose of educating them about their rights, conventions, ways to file complaints and competencies of various public institutions. Slovenian Ombudsman plans for 10 to 15 meetings with schoolchildren per year, as well as participation in the so-called Children Parliament, when they educate children about rights stemming from the children rights convention and national legislative (Vojvodina ombudsman has similar practice).

Croatian Ombudsman for Children most often educates children on their rights, how this office functions, its Young Advisors Network and ways they can communicate with the Ombudsman. Additionally, children are provided with information whom to contact or address to when they are faced with violence and other inappropriate behaviours of adults or other children. Employees of the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children every year visit about 30 schools to hold workshops, usually from September to November. In summer, Ombudsman organized workshops on child rights with children participating in the Project of Socialization of

Children in Kumbor, where children from all around Republika Srpska come to, among other things, talk about their opinions, questions and problems. In addition, Ombudsman assists its young advisors to organize their own workshops, using peer education as a way of raising awareness methods among children. Ombudsman and its staff also educate children on topics they propose; for instance, upon children's initiative, cooperation was established with the Gender Centre to education children about the gender equality.

Montenegrin Ombudsman aims to devise creative workshops and debates with children to educate them about their rights, the institution of Ombudsman and ways to address them. Part of these efforts were focused around campaigns "Address the Ombudsman" and "Children, Write to Ombudsman". Boxes for complaints, proposal and suggestions for institutionalized children were set up, promotional materials disseminated among children in primary and secondary schools, and public debates were held in majority of primary schools in Montenegro. Whenever needed or asked, the institution also organizes an educational event on a particular topic. Romania Ombudsman used the regular school visits as part of its campaign launched together with the National Veterinary Union to educate children on the responsibility of pet owners regarding human and animal health. Experts from both the Ombudsman and Union talked to children, explaining them the vaccination process, registration of animals, etc.

Recognizing innovation in approach to children, Vojvodina Ombudsman has joined the Hu.Ri.Su. – Human Rights Sungaze project implemented by the Student Cultural Centre from Novi Sad. The first stage of the project was carried out in 2011 and 2012, and it included workshops on human rights for youth following Spanish methodology and development of a concept of a social game on human rights for children and youth. In 2013 and 2014, the Ombudsman institution will take part in preparation of educational and promotional activities of this project, especially in advocating the application of and amending children rights-related legislation at the local level. An important feature of this project is that the game will be available online (through Facebook), while the plan is to encourage children to play by organizing regional competitions, debates and discussions with youth and other stakeholders in local communities.

### 3. LEARNING

In order to achieve the best results in their work, the Ombudsmen for Children or Departments for Child Rights within the institutions of Ombudsman need not only to educate children on their rights and ways to protect them, but also to create opportunities to, in return, learn from children on their opinions, views, beliefs and problems. This is particularly important in terms of setting strategic priorities for the institutions of Ombudsman in terms of focusing its rather scarce resources, but also in deciding on the best approach in addressing a particular issue. In this process, children are in fact used as experts.

When an objective is primarily to learn from the children, the institutions of Ombudsman mainly employ the following methods:

- Round-tables with children on a specific topic;
- Meetings with children organized in groups such as Young Advisors Network;
- Research projects undertaken on regular or ad hoc basis.

Whether alone or in a partnership with a civil society organization working on similar issues, a majority of the institutions of Ombudsman in the past devised and implemented research projects involving children. Research is recognized as an opportunity to ensure active participation of children in the work of the institutions, but also as a tool of gathering input of children in preparation of recommendations and conclusions submitted to the authorized ministries, agencies and other governmental bodies.

When conducting a research, three methodologies are used for data gathering:

- custom-tailored questionnaires;
- personal or group interviews; and
- focus groups.

In both preparation and administration of any of these methodologies, institutions should involve experts in order to ensure that the process is child-friendly, sensitive to their safety and confidentiality of the information shared in this way. In a situation when such experts are not available in-house, assistance should be sought within the partner organizations. For instance, in the past Bosnia and Herzegovina Ombudsman's staff in Department for Children Rights comprising of paralegals and interns felt inadequately prepared and trained to conduct focus groups and interviews with children discussing sensitive topics, such as violence committed against the children. Instead, they reported working together with NGOs able to provide experts in the field of communication with children.

Research projects are also an opportunity for raising awareness activities. Kosovo Ombudsman has researched increasing occurrences of school violence, part of which were questionnaires administrated by the experts from the institution's team working on the fight against all types of discrimination. They visited schools in Pristina area, not only interviewing students, but also using this opportunity to inform them about the existence and a content of the Law Against Discrimination, as well as the Ombudsman's capacities and competencies to react in this field in line with the law. In interviews, the institution gathered valuable information from children who felt comfortable enough to describe and talk about the cases in which they felt discriminated in social or economic sense, or in cases of physical and psychological violence. Furthermore, these visits were also used as an opportunity to discuss safety in schools and health care. In a conclusion of the project, on 1 July 2012 the Ombudsman held a round table discussion on a topic "Stop Discrimination of Children" raising awareness and educating other stakeholders about children's beliefs, opinions and situation.

In Macedonia, Ombudsman institution was particularly interested in learning about the situation of children and their opinions regarding the conditions in the institutions they are placed in, such as Daily Centre for Disabled Children and Street Children Day Care Centre. They also conducted research projects involving children to learn about their opinions on application of the child rights to education, as well as the cases of sexual exploitation, domestic violence and trafficking in children.

Violence committed against and by children was also very much in a focus of the activities of the Romanian Ombudsman which, together with the authorized Ministries of Interior and of Labour, Social Policy, Education, Youth and Science, carried out research whose findings were presented at the conference that gathered all relevant stakeholders in both the governmental and NGO sectors. Basis for conclusions and recommendations were information and feedback from focus groups organized in three schools.

For many of the institutions of Ombudsman consulted during the preparation of this report, internet safety has become an important issue. Number of internet users, especially among children and youth, in the region is rapidly increasing while many parents and educational workers do not fully comprehend how dangerous can be child's online presence without adult and self-control. Alike a number of their counterparts in the region, Montenegrin Ombudsman is currently conducting a survey on exploitation of children through internet that also includes focus groups with primary and secondary school children. Same research was also carried by the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children which included its Young Advisors Network in interviewing children regarding the time they spend using internet, their activities, level of knowledge of risks and personal experiences. Greek Ombudsman also used its Youth Advisory Panel for research, facilitating the process in which these children actually disseminated, administrated and analysed the questionnaires. The result was very positive, as many children felt even more comfortable talking to their peers (*more details further below*).

Less than two years ago, Vojvodina Ombudsman carried out a research on economic exploitation of children whose most important component were focus groups and interviews with vulnerable groups of children, especially child beggars. As talking to affected groups is particularly sensitive, the communication with those children was strictly controlled – children were questioned by experts, interviews were conducted in places where children feel comfortable, question asked were honest, clear and simple, and they listened.

Listening to children is the most important step in ensuring participation of children in a work of any institution dealing with children. For Croatian Ombudsman for Children, it is regular practice to ask children for advice or opinion on certain issues. Before it established the Young Advisors Network, Croatian Ombudsman frequently organized focus groups with children, using outcomes and findings to advocate for concrete changes in the society. In one such instance, children were organized in focus groups to discuss legal age of consent for sexual relations with an adult. According to the Crime Code in force at the time, consent age was 14. Talking to children in focus groups, Ombudsman learned that they generally disagree with the age limit. Ombudsman further consulted with the then newly established Young Advisors Network which shared the opinion that the Crime Code should be changed. The third step of this comprehensive research included administrating questionnaires to 2500 high school children from various parts of Croatia – almost 95% of them believed that the legislation did not adequately address this issue. Collecting feedback from all these children, the Institution approached directly the legislator, finally achieving parliamentary endorsement of the Crime Code changes setting consent age to 15. This institution employed similar strategy on two other occasions – in preparation of recommendations on legal rights of children and parental care, and in the activities dealing with a topic of the sexual education of young persons.

Same issue was also a topic of the research recently conducted by the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children. Upon the proposal by children themselves, the institution has looked into this and the issue of peer violence, carrying out research and producing conclusions and issuing recommendations to the relevant stakeholders together with the children. Similar researches were organized on alcohol abuse, justices for children and child-friendly health care.

In a conclusion, research can be expensive, time consuming and demanding activity requiring significant resources, but also economic and time effective way to involve children in a work of any institution dealing with this target group. Majority of the institutions of Ombudsman included in this report have recognized this as an important part of their activities, as well as a way to communicate with children to further decide on their own priorities and strategic objectives.

## 4. PARTICIPATION

In activities aiming to either educate children or learn from them about particular topic, the institutions of Ombudsman collect information from the children that should be then, and often are, used to ensure their participation in the society at the highest level possible.

Save the Children is committed to ensuring child participation in all its activities, as well as those of its partner organizations. In addition to Practice Standards for Children Participation for its staff, it has been employing principles of the **Ladder of Participation** model developed by Roger Hart.<sup>3</sup> In the ladder, its lower rung is manipulation where adults have complete authority and abuse their authority by failing to use it in the best interests of the children. Next is decoration, example of which is when a group of children are asked to sing a song about rights for an audience of adults attending an international conference on children's rights, and tokenism

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3 Roger A Hart (1997) "Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care", UNICEF, New York

used to describe when children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions.

The model determines “that for participation to be genuine there are a number of important requirements which must be met:

- The children must understand the purpose of the activity.
- They must know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why.
- They should have a meaningful role.
- They should volunteer for the activity after the activity was made clear to them.”

Only when these conditions are met, genuine and effective participation of children is possible – from informed participation in activities, to being consulted by adults, involvement in decision-making to child initiated and directed activities, and shared decision-making between adults and children.

Using these principles, this report has assessed to what extent the institutions of Ombudsman in the region communicate with children in a way that ensures their effective participation, especially in terms of setting organization’s own priorities, strategic objectives and directions. It was established that the ombudsmen in the region most commonly communicate with children with a purpose of their participation in campaigns, advocacy efforts, evaluation of the institution’s own activities and alike.

Slovenian Ombudsman includes children in preparation and as active participants of the conferences on children rights. Republika Srpska Ombudsman deems that it is very important to provide children with an opportunity to express their opinions publicly, especially at the round tables and conferences as these are unique opportunities for them to ask questions and receive answers from the authorized officials. Any feedback gathered from children is very important for Kosovo Ombudsman, alike for the others, in planning further steps and projects, as every communication with children on a particular topic is also a an opportunity to identify potential topics for the future.

While the BiH Ombudsman for Human Rights has not established group of young advisors, it uses existing network of Student Councils to hold regular meetings and consult with children. Bulgarian Ombudsman regularly meets with the members of the Children Council within the State Agency for Child Protection established in 2003 and comprising of children from all parts of the country, with an objective to ensure that opinion of children is taken into account in devising national policies.

## Young Advisors Network / Youth Advisory Panel

When communicating with children with a goal to ensure their participation in terms of setting institution’s own priorities, Ombudsmen stressed treating the children groups (either formal or informal) as equal partners in a dialogue.

One of the best examples of such practice is the so-called Young Advisors Networks or Youth Advisory Panels established by several institutions of Ombudsman in the region. These are selected groups of (mainly high school) children who volunteered to become members of the network taking active part in the work of the Ombudsman. They come from various parts of a respective country, maintain regular contact with each other and with the Ombudsman by offering advice, giving suggestions and carrying out entire projects.

**Croatian Ombudsman for Children** established the Young Advisors Network in 2010. It is comprised of 25 children age 12 to 17, selected on a basis of the public invitation the Ombudsman published in media targeting children and through schools. After the first generation, structured and well control selection process now also includes former members of the network, in addition to the Ombudsman staff and adult advisors coordinating Network's activities. Children who apply to become members are highly motivated to participate, and keen to share their opinions and stances. They come from various parts of the country and with versatile experience. As they are not delegated to the network as representatives of a certain group of children, they have no burden of representing anyone else though they convey experiences of their generation. Croatian Ombudsman finds this to be an important factor in ensure children feel comfortable and free to express their opinion.

Communication with the group is regular, using both emails and online closed forum. Children define topics for discussions they deem are important for lives of children, and the institution uses this input to further address the issues with authorized bodies, investigate a problem children indicated and issue recommendations towards improving a specific situation for children. The Ombudsman also organizes regional meetings with Network's members living in areas where Ombudsman has regional offices. An important role of the Young Advisors Network is to educate their peers and share information on children rights and ways to protect them, and the competencies of the Ombudsman for Children. Its members usually do this in their own schools, but also through media appearances, especially in children's TV shows. Despite the fact that the Croatian Ombudsman for Children registered less number of complaints filed by children in 2012 than in previous year, it has noted more intense communication with children primarily owing to very active Young Advisors Network.

In a similar fashion, **the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children** works with its Young Advisors Network to determine its priorities and activities. The institutions seeks to involve children in all of its activities in capacities of advisors and experts in order to achieve their full participation. Three times a year Ombudsman organizes three-day seminars for young advisors which are used, among other things, to plan further cooperation with children and listen to their proposals regarding the topics they want to discuss or learn more. On such occasions they are also educated about children rights and peer education skills for facilitation of workshops on the children rights, the work of Ombudsman institution and in particular, the role of the Network. They are also engaged in designing promotional materials, by choosing or creating themselves images and messages, and in conducting researches, such as those on sexual exploitation of children and internet safety. Network members communicate through online closed forum, which however is not exclusive as all other children can register to participate in this dialogue without adult presence.

**The Greek Deputy Ombudsman in charge of Children Rights** works closely with the Youth Advisory Panel (YAP), communicating with these children in consultation meetings, project implementation and campaigning. In one such example of their cooperation, in July 2011 the Greek ombudsman and YAP members discussed an influence of gripping financial crisis in this country on children. In the following three months, the institution and its youth advisory body narrowed down priorities and decided to take concrete steps towards learning about experiences and opinions of children from all parts of the country. They jointly prepared a poster and a questionnaire, aiming to administrate it to 1000 children in 25 to 30 schools around Greece. The goal was not to conduct a scientific survey, but to draw up a general picture and exchange thoughts and ideas about the on-going situation. Soon, a number of YAP members volunteered to disseminate the questionnaire, and the institution trained them to fill out previously prepared excel sheet for data analysis. At the end, 1211 children from 22 schools filled out those questionnaires, based on which conclusions and recommendations were prepared on how to ensure the children's wellbeing in the face of the crisis. Ombudsman institution additionally supported these activities by working to ensure strong media presence, and it has been using its mechanisms to promote these conclusions among authorities.

For two years, **Macedonian Ombudsman** marked great success with the Children Board comprising of children educated in child and human rights in general. Those children came from primary and secondary schools, and their main role was to share ideas

on changes needed in a society (or more specifically, their schools and other institutions in their immediate environment), discuss conditions in schools and alike.<sup>5</sup>

A number of other institutions have either implemented or are presently doing so a project of educating children and youth to become a peer mediators or ombudsmen in their schools and local communities. Projects marked a very good success, however in many cases they were halted for a lack of time of funds.

## Campaigning

The survey conducted among the CRONSEE members showed that the institutions of Ombudsman have been increasingly involving children in their campaigning and advocacy efforts. Some have advanced communication with children for this purpose to the level of their genuine participation in the work of the institution. Others have partially involved children; yet all of them invested efforts in consulting with children on topics, messages and channels of conveying those messages to either children or adults with powers to make a change.

Children are involved in various stages of campaigning: in some cases, they decide on a campaign topic, target groups and messages; in the others, they actively participate the entire process and even decide on or create images and messages, disseminate the material and evaluate the campaign success. In one such example, the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children involved children in a production of posters for the „Say No to Alcohol among Youth“ campaign, and all promotional materials for the Young Advisors Network. In Croatia, the Ombudsman for Children worked with the students of the Fine Arts and Design High School to design a poster for the November 19<sup>th</sup> marking of the World Day of Prevention of Child Abuse. Children who decided to volunteer their talent and efforts created visual and verbal messages for children and youth aimed at prevention of violence. The best poster was selected, printed and distributed, while all other works were presented to public in exhibition<sup>6</sup> and the reprints were published in the bilingual (English-Croatian) catalogue.

In promoting the work of the Ombudsman institution in Albania and its Department for Children Rights, the institution created promotional video involving children, aired at the nation-wide TV station. In Greece, the Ombudsman worked together with children in production of 4 radio jingles, two entitled „Children Have Rights!“, one to promote the Youth Advisory Panel and one against the corporal punishment. In this process, children wrote text themselves after the discussion with their peers and the Ombudsman, and they recorded those jingles. During a campaign to ban corporal punishment, the Greek Ombudsman worked with children, as well as their teachers, to jointly produce materials disseminated to other children.

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<sup>5</sup> The project was financed by UNICEF; however it was terminated after two years owing to lack of funds.

<sup>6</sup> Photo gallery of the posters created by high school students available at [http://www.dijete.hr/hr/fotogalerije/908-izloba-radova-uenika-kole-primijenjene-umjetnosti-i-dizajna-u-zagrebu.html#!prettyPhoto\[gallery7d076344a3\]/1/](http://www.dijete.hr/hr/fotogalerije/908-izloba-radova-uenika-kole-primijenjene-umjetnosti-i-dizajna-u-zagrebu.html#!prettyPhoto[gallery7d076344a3]/1/)



The photo on the left shows a poster used by the Greek Ombudsman during its campaign promoting internet safety. As mentioned, Ombudsmen throughout the region have been paying special attention to this issue, whereas their Greek counterpart relied on children for production of posters and other promotional/education materials on this topic. Entitled “Recipe for Internet Safety”, this poster was an entirely produced by the Youth Advisory Panel members. Topic and a production process were first discussed with the Ombudsman’s experts.

In 2012, acting upon a proposal made by children, Montenegrin Ombudsman for Human Rights commenced preparations to design and print comics about the children rights. At first, the institution was somewhat surprised that children were so eager to use comics to convey their messages, deeming that children today had very little interest in this few were selected form of expression in comparison with modern technologies. Yet, they decided to launch a project involving children in all its stages: Ombudsman invited children to propose topics for comic, by describing a certain situation from their immediate environment (school, family or local community) in which children rights were violated.

Ombudsman institution reviewed all submissions, looking for the most commonly described problems and situations. This way it selected topics for scenarios of the

comics. Children were again asked to participate by submitting scenarios; and child-produced scenarios were selected for a final version of the comics<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, call for applications was also published for adult professionals to facilitate production of comics, the best candidate was selected by children. The project is expected to be finalized in September 2013; in words of the Montenegrin Ombudsman, it has already been a great success.

Vojvodina Ombudsman also involves children in campaigning whenever it deems it appropriate, depending on a topic and type of activity. They also encourage children and youth who visit their institution to tell their peers about the experience they had and disseminate promotional and educational materials.



In 2012, acting upon a proposal made by children, Montenegrin Protector of Human Rights commenced preparations to design and print comics about the children rights.

<sup>7</sup> Gallery of comics is available at <http://www.ombudsman.co.me/djeca/page.php?id=268>

## Advocacy

All institutions of Ombudsman conduct advocacy activities as part of efforts to create lasting change for children, but they have different approaches or emphasis, depending on their internal policies and process, and their respective contexts.

Children can participate in advocacy in different ways. They can be involved in advocacy that is led by adults on issues concerning children (child-centered advocacy), or they can be empowered to be advocates themselves (child-led advocacy). Organisations that work on issues affecting children need to move from talking for children to giving children opportunities to speak and empowering them to speak for themselves and their peers. Institutions of Ombudsman in the SEE region have not yet fully developed a practice of including children in their advocacy at regular basis, however some steps towards this direction have been made.

Greek Ombudsman institution includes children in high level meetings on children rights. For instance, young advisors presented their views on school democracy and a necessity to ensure student involvement in school regulations promotion to the Minister of Education. Last year, a group of students were brought along for a visit to the President on occasion of marking the National Day Against Violence in Schools. They presented the President with a proposal on children participation in all programmes tackling school violence. In preparation of the reports to the government, speeches, books, articles and other materials Ombudsman uses to address various target groups, the institution considers information gathered at the consultations with children in schools, organized open discussions and dialogue with YAP. Montenegrin Ombudsman has a practice of promoting a certain idea together with children, while Croatian Ombudsman for Children very much relies on its Young Advisors Network to advocate on certain issues (above mentioned example of legal consent age).

In Vojvodina, Ombudsman has also involved children in its advocacy efforts, such as those aimed at youth mobilization in local communities, or through establishing Youth Forum in communities where inter-ethnic incidents among young people are frequent.

## Evaluation

Involving children in evaluation of the Ombudsman's work is an important feature of effective communication with children, as they are not only asked to participate in certain activity previously initiated by adults but also to be actively involved in planning institution's work in a future. Where children have been involved in evaluation process, they can be more effectively involved in decision-making and follow up action. Involving children in this process helps define key issues and concerns, and it leads to better information. Creating a lasting change in lives of children involves asking them about the impact of the activities and actions to date. Their participation in every stage of the communications process enables institutions to know how effective and successful they were.

After every meeting with the young advisors, the Greek Ombudsman and Croatian Ombudsman for Children ask children to evaluate the meeting organization, content, facilitation and their own engagement, using this input in preparation of the next gathering. Their Vojvodina counterparts involved children in evaluation following the seminar about peer mediation, using this feedback to improve future cycles of the project, as well as to promote its results and impact. Children are additionally included in defining priorities; for instance, during the visits to the institutions for children, Ombudsman's staff engage in conversation with children and youth about their opinions, experiences and wishes, taking them into consideration when they prepare recommendations in improving the conditions in those institutions. Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children uses children not only to assess their joint meetings, but also other institutions' activities.

In 2009, Montenegrin Ombudsman carried out the research on violence against children, including a section in which children were asked to assess this institution. Results were not very impressive, instead it showed many children were entirely unfamiliar with the existence of the institution, let alone with its competencies and role. The institution then strategized and strengthened efforts to introduce Ombudsman to children mainly by creating opportunities for direct communication with them. Three years later, their efforts seem to be rather fruitful.

## III - TARGET GROUP AND MESSAGES

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children, Save the Children considers everyone under 18 to be a child.

Something that all CRONSEE members that took part in this survey have recognized is that **direct communication with children is a MUST**. This requires more flexibility on the part of the Ombudsman institution in terms of agenda planning and time management, as contacts with children can never be based on the same structure as cooperation with public agencies and organizations.

In most cases, the institutions of Ombudsman in this region do not have guidelines for communication with children set at the organizational level (with an expectation of Albania, which has developed standards and guidelines for communication with children in cooperation with the Save the Children Albania). Instead, in case of Croatian Ombudsman for Children, those working directly with children use experience, knowledge and skills of, multi-disciplinary team of advisors comprised of paralegals, social workers, educators, special education experts and psychologists. Children rights experts in the Greek Ombudsman institution jointly discuss methodology of a meeting with a group of children, taking into consideration its objective and target audience, later adapting to those circumstances. In Montenegro, communication with children on behalf of the Ombudsman institution is carried out by staff specialized in such work.

Last year, Macedonian Ombudsman developed a communication strategy that also indicates children as one of the target groups. In the next phase of the project, Ombudsman plans to implement the recommendations and guidelines from this document.



Scene from the animated film “You have the right to know” encouraging children to contact ombudsmen, produced by Save the Children for CRONSEE members.

All children are considered to be main target group of the communication efforts undertaken by the experts in Departments for Children Rights in the institutions of Ombudsman, or those in specialized Ombudsman for Children. Yet, term “all children” is as broad as “general public”, thus it is necessary to further determine specific features of groups of children a respective institution is targeting in order ensure maximum impact. Defining those features becomes a key to coming up with the most effective messages. For instance, when communicating with children for educational purposes, it is important to keep in mind their level of awareness and knowledge, preferred methods for receiving information, motivations and obstacles to hearing and accepting shared information. More institution knows about its target audience, more precise and effective communication will be.

Examples of communication with children described in the previous section show that The institutions of Ombudsman generally understand that in reaching out to children, it is important to ask:

- Who will best help them achieve their goals? (*in order to ensure full children participation in their work, some ombudsmen established networks of young advisors to help them in their future activities*);
- What institution knows about the best ways to reach its target audience?

The survey showed that the institutions of Ombudsman in the region are generally either well familiar with their target group or aware of situations in which they should seek further assistance or get advice from partner organizations or children themselves. Furthermore, they have all recognized that in order to maximize impact of the communication with children, the following criteria have to be met:

- Communication has to be quick and two-way, i.e. complaints and questions require prompt and immediate reaction.
- Communication has to be honest, open and without judgment.
- Messages have to be adapted to a particular group, not same for all.
- Messages must be short, simple, precise and written in child-friendly language (without abbreviations, long technical and overly specialized terms, etc.) in order to ensure they are understood and easily memorized.
- Messages should be focused, credible, relevant, timed and reflexing institution’s commitment.

When strategically planning the communication with children (which has not yet become a part of Ombudsmen regular activities), it is important to ask the following questions:

- What change is desired?
- What target audience should know?
- What action should follow as result of the communication efforts?

## IV- COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND TOOLS

After setting the purpose and objectives of the communication efforts, defining target group and messages, one should decide on communication channels and tools to facilitate this process. They should not be randomly selected; instead, channels and tools should be appropriate, feasible and acceptable.

Survey showed that the institutions of Ombudsman in the region have either set up or are currently working to provide children with as many channels and tools to communicate with them. It is characteristic that no institution has abandoned traditional communications tools, such as letters, in favour of modern technologies; instead, all options are left open increasing chances for direct communication with various groups of children.

Generally speaking, children may communicate with an ombudsman institution in their respective country by:

- Sending snail mail or fax letters;
- Using phone lines generally operating on work days;
- Sending an email to the account either exclusively dedicated to children, or available for all citizens to file complaint, post a question or seek advice;
- Filling out a complaint form available at the ombudsman's website;
- Filling out web form specifically designed for children's questions;
- Sending email to Ombudsmen's young advisors groups.



Scene from the animated film “You have the right to know” encouraging children to contact ombudsmen, produced by Save the Children for CRONSEE members.

A common communication practice for all institutions is to reply to a child in same way, or any other that a child noted as a prefer way of communication. In this section, a focus in on those tools and channels used to directly communicate with children for any of four above mentioned purposes and objectives.

## Phone, letters and fax

All the institutions of Ombudsman included in this report operate a phone line for citizens to ask questions or file complaint. In majority of cases, the same phone line is used for children to make inquiries during the designated working hours.

In Bulgaria, the State Agency for Child Protection has a specialized **phone line** for children, recording very high number of phone calls (in 2012, over 100,000 calls from children were received and about 2000 consultations held). At the same time, Ombudsman itself registered a very few phone calls from children, mostly dealing with those who live in poverty, or encounter administrative obstacles or problems in school. Similar practice occurs in Romania, where the Association of Child Helpline 116 111 informs and advises children about their rights. In order to increase a number of complaints directly filed by children, country Ombudsman decided to get into partnership with the Association in the phone line project.

Greek Ombudsman receives about 80 to 100 calls a month, mostly by adults concerned about a particular problem involving a child. When children do contact them directly, they are mostly looking for an advice regarding problems in schools (with either their peers or teachers) and family. Slovenian and Bosnia and Herzegovina's ombudsmen have been having similar experiences with the phone calls from children. In the case of latter, when the phone call is about a case involving a child, it is forwarded to staff of the Department for Children Rights in one of two main offices. While other institutions operate their phone lines within designated working hours, Kosovo Ombudsman employed a simple solution of installing an answering machine allowing people, children included, to contact the institutions 24/7. All these calls made after the working hours are listened to the first thing next morning, after which the Ombudsman staff contact a person using contact information he/she provided.

Croatian Ombudsman for Children operates telephone lines in four regional offices, however it does not advertise any of them to be exclusively for children or adults. As this is the institution specialized in children rights, all its services are anyway dedicated to improving the situation on children. The institution operates in total 7 fixed lines and 3 mobile numbers.

Children even more rarely use **snail mail** to directly contact the Ombudsman institution in their respective country. Montenegrin ombudsman receives 2 to 3 such letters monthly, Greek received about 20 written complaints in the past year, Vojvodina less than 10 and Slovenian 5 in total. In case of Albania, as Ombudsman institution does not yet have e-mail account in place, a large number of letters are received from NGOs in relation to various situations concerning children. Regardless, if a child contacts an ombudsman sending a letter, the institution will answer the same way, unless asked otherwise. In some cases, the letter will be also followed by phone contact. Croatian Ombudsman for Children sends back letters as registered mail, meaning that a postman will deliver a letter directly to a child, preventing anyone else from reading it first.

Majority of institutions also operate fax lines that children can use to submit their questions or complaints, however very rarely do they contact the ombudsman in this way.

## Email

During the survey conducted among CRONSEE members to assess the best practices of the communication with children, all of them pointed out that children prefer communicating with the institution through email, online forums or social media. Because of this, they have either set up or plan to set up email accounts, discussion forums, Facebook and Twitters accounts and web content adapted for children's use. In case when there are no such channels available, those appear not to be a result of a lack of willingness on part of the institution to communicate with children this way, but rather of a lack of both human and financial resources. Online communication is fast and it allows numerous opportunities, yet it also demands dedication in terms of answering email inquiries as soon as possible, and regularly updating relevant content at the web sites, pages and social media accounts.

In case of email, all institutions stated they regularly check their email accounts and answer back as soon as they are able to, preferably the same day. Messages are forwarded to the institution's experts on a topic who then either directly communicates with a child or further investigates the case before continuing a communication.

Alike with the phones, institutions rarely open email accounts exclusively for children, however they advertise (general) email at all their promotional materials (web sites, leaflets, posters, video clips, radio and TV spots, power-point presentations). The RS Ombudsman for Children asked a number of high schools and other institutions to include institution's banner on their websites, directing users on Ombudsman's web site and contact information.

Institutions also noted that a number of messages children send increases after the school workshops, trainings, seminars or researches. Owing to expanded outreach activities, the Greek Ombudsman last year received about 100 emails from children who had never before contacted the institution. Emails (as well as closed forums) are also used to maintain regular contact with the Ombudsmen's young advisors networks and panels.

Croatian Ombudsman for Children has two separate email addresses, one for adults and another one exclusively for children to post questions, make a comment or file a complaint. Both email accounts are checked on daily basis and all messages are answered as soon as possible. Last year, the institution received 24 complaints about violations of children rights directly filed by children.

Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children set up separate email for children as part of its efforts to promote internet safety. Namely, the web site promoting internet safety principles among children includes the so-called Brave Inbox, inviting children to describe inappropriate experience they had when using internet or a mobile phone, and to seek protection.

## Websites

All the institutions of Ombudsman have clearly realized that - to ensure effective and continuous communication with children - it is very important to maintain website, specialized web pages and social media presence. As children spend significant amount of their time surfing the internet, they are more likely to learn about the Ombudsman, its role and competencies through its online presence than arguably any other (with an exception – to some extent - of TV) communication channel.

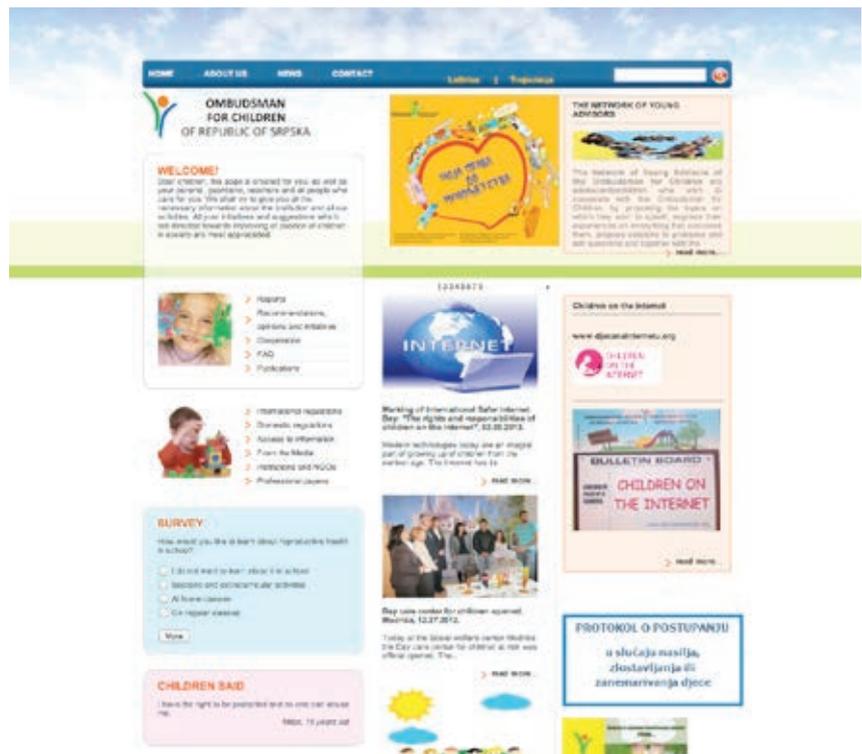
Yet, despite the fact that the institutions of Ombudsman acknowledge an importance of having a website, not all of them have been using this resource for two-way communication with a child (or any other person) but rather as the presentation tool. Websites

of ombudsmen contain information about the institution, its competencies, reports, news, contact information, etc. They contain information of interests to various stakeholders (instance, complaint forms for citizens, reports for other institutions, etc.); however in majority of cases, these websites do not have child-friendly content. As language may seem overly complicated for a child, it is unlikely that anyone but a very interested high school student will absorb the information in a way that would ensure it was comprehended and memorized. Reason for this deficiency, as survey showed, is mainly a result of the Ombudsmen's lack of resources rather than interest to address directly to children. For instance, Vojvodina Ombudsman is currently in a process of designing a specialized web site for children to be used for direct communication with the institution, while Bulgaria plans to do the same in a future. Macedonia's Ombudsman would also like to have specialized web page maintained by the Department for Children, however this is not yet possible.

There are however several models of good practice that are easily replicable and sustainable. Website of the Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children does not have a specialized web page for children, however the institution is trying to compensate by publishing child-focused content mostly as suggested by their young advisors. It also offers information about the Network, inviting children to register for a closed-type forum at the website where children engage in discussions without adult presence. In addition, Ombudsman publishes information about all outreach activities that involve children, such as school visits, workshops and seminars. This also helps increasing site's visibility, as children involved in those activities share links with their peers.

All these are very good examples of using the web site to communicate with children to the extent that this institution's resource allow it. Still, an example that should be particularly stressed if probably one of the most simple things a web site can contain, a greeting. As one opens the RS Ombudsman for Children's web site, one is immediately greeted with a message that directly addresses children: *"Dear Children, this website is intended for you, as well as you parents, care takers, teachers and all the other persons taking care of you."* Visible and prominently placed at the home page, this message immediately sets a tone of communication, where child feels important and invited to further explore the site content.

Montenegrin Ombudsman has recently created a specialized web page for children. Information contained is adapted to children, presented in user-friendly way and focused on children issues, problems and interests. This web page allows questions to be directly posed to the ombudsman.



RS Ombudsman for Children's web site

Prominent attention in this site is given to banners and leaflets encouraging children to write to Ombudsman in case their rights are violated or threatened, or if they are familiar with such cases involving other children. Text is written in a way that directly addresses a child (reader) and shows commitment to honest, confidential and continuous communication. Despite these efforts, the Montenegrin Ombudsman did not achieve expected result in an increase of number of complaints filed by children. Part of the reason, institution believes, is the fact that children may feel shy. Still the Ombudsman realizes that these efforts should not be halted as at this stage, it is crucial that children are aware of their rights, that they recognized situations when those rights are violated and they know of institutions that can help should a child decide to seek assistance.

Croatian Ombudsman for Children has a website whose target audiences are primarily its “adult” stakeholders, such as institutions, authorities, media and general public, which is than linked to the specialized web page for children whose slogan is “For A Stronger Voice of Children in Society”. Web page is very simple to navigate and it’s design is adjusted to children (attention was paid to fonts, colours and images used). Language is child-friendly and easily understood by a wider age-group. Content wise, page focuses on the following areas: who and what is Ombudsman, what are rights stemming from the Convention on the Child Rights and activities of the Young Advisors Network. In one of the finest examples of the communication with children, Ombudsman introduces her workers and herself in style very different to the biographies from the Ombudsman home page targeting adults. Finally, children can use the page to fill out a complaint form that has also been adapted to children.



Prominent attention is given to banners and leaflets encouraging children to write to Ombudsman (in picture is shown leaflet produced by the Protector of Human Rights and Freedom of Montenegro)

## Social media

Any communication with children, including the one through online platforms, requires planning, control and sensitivity. It is time-consuming task, yet as new generations increasingly use social media to not only stay in touch with their friends, but also gain new knowledge, the institutions of Ombudsman in the South-Eastern Europe joined some of the social media or plan to do so in a near future.

There is a wide range of social media children use for talking, sharing, playing, learning and working with one another. They are about expressing identity, discovering new friends and enemies, cultivating relationships, and pursuing common interests. As Facebook is arguably the most popular among them, the institutions of Ombudsman first focus on it, but also Skype, YouTube and Twitter.

Bulgarian Ombudsman regularly shares video and sound recordings of Ombudsman’s interviews in media through YouTube. When disabled from directly meeting them, the Greek Deputy Ombudsmen uses Skype to organize video meetings with children in schools.

In case when the Ombudsman has a Facebook page, it is mainly managed as platform for information upload for all target groups, not only children. There is an understanding that the content has to be regularly updated using various textual, video and audio

materials related to the Ombudsman activities, but also a wide range of issues pertaining to its mandate. Vojvodina Ombudsman has both Facebook and Twitter accounts where they share human rights related information; it also plans to launch a Facebook page targeting children soon. The Greek Ombudsman administers the Facebook page for its Youth Advisory Panel members, who use this channel to keep in touch with one another and have discussions on various topics. Republika Srpska Ombudsman for Children has also been using Facebook to maintain a communication level among the members of the Young Advisors Network, concluding after some time that children are particularly keen of this communication channel as they quickly obtain necessary information and have an opportunity to comment, and share their ideas and stances.

Montenegrin Ombudsman has had a particularly good experience with the Facebook page dedicated to children. Institution staff regularly update the content (on daily basis), gaining more and more returning users. They believe, however, that this was not a key to its success, but the fact that their Facebook page was promoted by a group of particularly interested and involved children – a small group of only 6 or 7 of them – who have been in regular contact with the institution for some time. Namely, the institution noticed that when visiting schools and other places in which children gather, there is always a child displaying a particular interest in the human rights and the Ombudsman institution's Department for Children, with whom staff continue to communicate even after the visits or meetings. These children have proven to be great asset for the institution, acting as its messengers - they pass their knowledge on to their peers, encourage other children to take interest, forward information from the Ombudsman's Facebook account and so on.

## Forums

As it has been stated before, several institutions of Ombudsman – such as those in Croatia, Republika Srpska (BiH) and Greece – administer online discussion forums for children. They are mainly closed-type forums for members of the young advisors networks and panels. In Greece, nearly 100 children are members, 1/3 of them active. Croatian Ombudsman for Children facilitates forum discussions; topics are equally suggested by both children and adults who act as administrators and moderators. In Republika Srpska, the forum is also opened to all other children that register. All institutions noted children appear to be very comfortable and interested in this type of communication.

## TV, radio, posters, leaflets

This report has focused on those communication channels and tools allowing a direct communication between the Ombudsman and children. In addition to those mentioned above, the institutions also use electronic and print media, and promotional materials to indirectly reach out to children mainly to educate them about their rights and the role of Ombudsman, but also prompting them to report cases of rights abuse. As mentioned, the institutions of Ombudsman have produced radio jingles, TV spots, leaflets, brochures, catalogues, reports and other documents on topics concerning children. These materials are usually available at their web sites, Facebook pages or YouTube channels. In some instances, as it was the case with Macedonia, Ombudsman created a partnership with TV station, to produce and air programme dedicated to the human, including children, rights.

In addressing the children in these ways, institutions gave examples of materials that were either created in cooperation or entirely by the children. Children take part in selection of images and messages conveyed to other children, dissemination of these materials, as well as in their media promotion.

## V – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purpose of this report, in addition to the desk research and review of our own experiences, we have disseminated tailor-made questionnaires and held follow-up, more in-depth interviews with 12 institutions of Ombudsman, CRONSEE members. We focused on achievements and examples of the last year or two, comparing these against the work of the institutions in previous years and their plans for a future.

Children Rights Departments within the institutions of Ombudsman generally lack both human and financial resources. Often, only 3 to 4 persons work in this department and not even exclusively. As the institutions of Ombudsman are working on numerous human rights violations and challenges particularly visible in post-communist, post-war and transition societies of this region, it is not realistic to expect that situation will significantly improve in terms of staff and budget any time soon. In given circumstances, much has already been achieved and there is plenty more to do. Ombudsmen divide their time and resources to adequately fill out all their strategic objectives: to efficiently intervene in the case of child rights abuse, to offer advice and educate, to learn directly from the children and to ensure their genuine participation in their work. Some have done so with better results, others marked less success. Regardless, it is important that efforts are being made and they have impact.

Discussing various opportunities and occasions for direct communication with children, Ombudsmen themselves pointed out what are main features of effective and of high quality communication with children that should serve as standards.



Scene from the animated film “You have the right to know” encouraging children to contact ombudsmen, produced by Save the Children for CRONSEE members.

Summed up, these recommendations and guidelines are:

- *Direct communication is necessary and irreplaceable.* For an institution dealing with children, it is not sufficient to engage only in indirect communication, such as traditional advertising in TV, radio and print media. Cooperation with children for a purpose of ensuring their full participation requires effective communication. Direct communication is the most effective means of communication when trying to cooperate.
- *Communication has to be two-way.* Key principles to effective communication include with listening skills, the two-way process, trust building and alignment of mutual goals. With children, to achieve this, speeches and long monologues should be avoided, instead asking questions and avoiding to guide a child towards an answer: listening to what they have to say rather than what one wants to hear. Avoid being judgemental when discussing an issue with a child/children; and strive to involve everyone.
- *Communication style has to be clear and precise.* For a communication effort to achieve its goal, it is essential to match the style of a communication to, in this case, children, their background, age and situation. This is best done when ensuring that information offered during the communication is clear (avoid ambiguities) and precise (to the point). If messages conveyed to children are short, simple and precise, they are more likely to understand, memorize and act upon them.
- *Do not lie to children.* In order to build a trust and credibility, it is essential to avoid lying to children. They will soon learn they are being lied to; they will lose both trust toward and respect for a person/institution. Instead, offer honest feedback on institution's capacities, powers and competencies to act on an issue, and avoid ungrounded promises regarding their suggestions and appeals. Set up an agreement on terms of discussion and confidentiality, and stick to those terms.
- *Communication is continuous process.* Communication is not one-time event or activity. Instead, it is a creative and dynamic process of continuous improvement. This requires constant employment of innovative solutions and methods.

When these standards are in place and endorsed by a person communicating with children on behalf of an institution of Ombudsman/ People's Advocate, one can then brainstorm on the best, most feasible and appropriate ways to ensure that this communication takes place.

In meeting children directly, Ombudsmen are encouraged – as a number of them does already – to be creative and avoid power-point style of presentations. Instead, it is important to structure a **meeting** with children by allocating time slots for various discussion parts (presentation, Q&A session, small group discussion, conclusion, etc.) and organize the meeting in a way that all topics are covered within specified time. Any content should be presented in a way that children find interesting – for instance, through simulation and role-playing games.

After gathering information from children through educational visits, campaigning, advocacy efforts, meetings or research projects, Ombudsmen (and all other institutions working with children) should ensure that their feedback and input is further incorporated in the institution's activities. This is the best way to ensure **child participation**, especially when setting strategic objectives and priorities, as well as deciding on advocacy and campaigning activities. In some examples presented in this report, children were used as experts on a topic.

When communicating with children, it is crucial to use **messages** specifically designed to reach them as a separate target group from adults. Some messages cannot be delivered to children in primary schools, high schools or vulnerable minors. Common to any specific situation is ensuring that messages are simple and precise in order to maximise chances for children to understand, memorize and act upon them. In designing message or talking points, the best results are reached when message(s) is/are:

- Passionate, showing institution's enthusiasm;
- Optimistic, positive and forward looking;
- Inspirational, moving a child to take action;
- Challenging, confronting an issue;
- Credible, children believe it;
- Preserving, proving of the institution's commitment; and
- Delivering results, showing what has been achieved.

Aside efforts to reach out to children, the institutions of Ombudsman have been also set up various mechanisms for children to reach the institution. It is important and a model of good practice that the Ombudsmen maintain various **communication channels and tools**, occasionally considering and introducing the new ones. By providing information on how they can be contacted through fax, phone or snail mail, at the same time promoting electronic and online communication, the institutions of Ombudsman have ensured to cover a wide range of channels available to children in whatever situation they are. As stressed by several ombudsmen, it is important to listen to the children on what are the best ways to promote and protect their rights (whether through arts, informative or educational content, email or Facebook communication, etc.).

An important part of the effective communication with children is using innovative tools and channels to both reach out as many children as possible and use these contacts to their maximum. In case of the CRONSEE members, many have been planning to ensure that their online presence is more child-centred and –friendly, by creating specialized Facebook pages, blogs, online social games, etc.

In a conclusion, the institutions of Ombudsman have generally invested significant efforts to involve children and communicate with them in the most useful, appropriate and result-oriented way. They have allocated time, money and staff to enable this process to the extent it was possible within the approved (mostly decreased) budgets. Some of those activities produced desired results, while the others were less successful. This is particularly common with a regard to institutions' efforts to encourage children to directly file complaints or contact the institution more often in case when they feel their rights are violated or threatened. Yet, no obvious mistake has been made, but it is rather the question of time: raising awareness, promotion and education are all only steps in a very long-term process of achieving a desired behavioural change among the members of a specific target group, in this case children. In this region, both adults and children, have not yet fully realized that regardless of frequently complex political and economic situation, there are numerous and diverse mechanisms available to them to protect their rights. At the same time, those mechanisms – in our case, institutions of Ombudsmen – are still struggling to gain position that would allow them to work without a pressure from other stakeholders (authorities, donors, NGOs, etc.), regardless of whether they are of political, financial or any other nature. Thus, patience becomes crucial in achieving desired outcomes.

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