

THE DOWN TO ZERO  
ALLIANCE LAUNCHES

# A CALL FOR RESTARTING TRAVEL & TOURISM WITH CHILD PROTECTION IN FOCUS



**25 September 2020 – The Down to Zero Alliance comprising Terre des Hommes Netherlands, Defence for Children-ECPAT, ECPAT International, Free a Girl, ICCO and Plan International Netherlands<sup>1</sup> calls upon the intergovernmental bodies, governments and the private sector to consider child protection as a key element for sustainable and responsible development now, and as the Travel & Tourism industry recovers. This call is based on insights from a series of webinars organized as part of the efforts to end the sexual exploitation of children. This Call for restarting Travel & Tourism with Child Protection in focus was motivated by the COVID-19 crisis and is based on the contributions from the panelists and the participants that represented the intergovernmental bodies, governments, the private sector, CSOs and academia during these events.<sup>2</sup>**

Unprecedented challenges are posed to the implementation of all children's rights by the COVID-19 pandemic and these consequences are felt across regions all over the world. The crisis has been and is still affecting economies and disrupting businesses, as a consequence making families and children more vulnerable than ever. The Travel & Tourism sector has been among the hardest hit, including a wide range of global companies, medium and small enterprises; in particular, informal small businesses, unorganized sector and street vendors. This disruption is especially devastating for the Asian and Latin American regions, where countries are strongly dependent on the travel and tourism industry, with high rates of informal economy.

Before the pandemic, the extraordinary growth of the Travel & Tourism sector in the last decades had been very important in terms of contributing to economic growth, particularly in Asia and Latin America. While at the same time, it brought along a number of challenges to child protection, with child sex offenders misusing travel and tourism and ICT infrastructures.<sup>3</sup> Sexual exploitation of children in this context has not stopped with the closure of borders and travel restrictions caused by COVID-19. Travelling child sex offenders are not only foreigners, they are also local men and women, including long term residents; they keep

1. [The Down to Zero Alliance](#) was created with the support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
2. This Call was developed based on the contributions from the panelists and participants of the three online events: a [side session](#) at the [UN Virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights](#) and the two regional webinars organized by ECPAT International and the Down to Zero Alliance in Asia and in Latin America.
3. As agreed upon by the participants in the first International Summit on Child Protection in Travel and Tourism, Bogotá, Colombia (6-7 June 2018) in the [Declaration and Call for Action for the Protection of Children in Travel and Tourism](#), see also the [report](#).

adapting their modus operandi when opportunities arise, contexts change and technologies evolve.

The sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT) is still sometimes commonly referred to as 'child sex tourism'. However, it is not another form of tourism but a crime – and needs to be addressed as such.<sup>4</sup> Sexual exploitation of children is a persisting problem, but as the world responds to the pandemic, push factors and root causes that facilitate or lead to all forms of violence

against children online and offline are intensifying.

**Considering that existing vulnerabilities of children have been exacerbated by the pandemic and new ones are emerging, this is a call upon the intergovernmental bodies, governments and the private sector to include child protection as a key element for sustainable and responsible development now, and as the Travel & Tourism industry recovers.**

## KEY RISKS AND CHALLENGES

- **The socio-economic impact of COVID-19** is increasing risks to the implementation of a wide range of children's rights. Families pushed further into poverty, facing food insecurity, reduced access to education and economic hardships are an easier prey for child sex offenders; while some companies opening up for their own survival – without strong regulations to protect children – may fall into tolerating sexual exploitation of children.
- **The situation of migrant and indigenous children and families** has been particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including living conditions in refugee camps that put children at particular risk of trafficking and all other forms of sexual exploitation.
- **The disruption of education and public services** results in children being increasingly exposed to domestic violence, spending more time unsupervised online viewing inappropriate content, being out of the reach of trusted adults who can detect any signs of harm done to them and being at an increased risk of being groomed and exposed to other online risks or harm.
- **Offenders keep adapting their modus operandi** especially during the pandemic to create more opportunities to have access to children: they approach victims online, exploit via live streaming or other means, sometimes use the technology to document the exploitation, connect via online forums and make plans to travel, also within a country to sexually exploit children offline.
- **The crisis has reduced access to healthcare and psychological services** for children in need of being attended, further increasing their psychological vulnerabilities, leading to greater challenges to their mental wellbeing and even suicide attempts.
- **Orphanage tourism, some forms of voluntourism and un-vetted access to children** along with aggravating socio-economic external factors, continue to contribute to institutionalization of children, in particular in the countries where no family-based care alternatives are provided, putting them at risk of trafficking and all other forms of sexual exploitation, aggravated as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

4. [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, adopted by the Interagency Working Group in Luxembourg](#). Definition: *A child is a victim of sexual exploitation when they take part in a sexual activity in exchange for something that either they or third parties receive. Different forms of SEC include exploitation of children in prostitution, online child sexual exploitation, sale and trafficking of children for sexual purposes, sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism and some forms of child, early and forced marriage.*

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE RESTART OF TRAVEL & TOURISM WITH CHILD PROTECTION IN FOCUS



## FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL BODIES AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Ensure stimulus packages** with obligatory child protection screening criteria and conditions for the Travel & Tourism industry, local community programmes and informal sector to generate employment opportunities, as well as economic assistance to low income families and communities and help them meet basic needs in order to prevent the sexual exploitation of children, and child labour.
- **Examine the provisions of the UNWTO Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics**, sign the convention, ratify it and revise national laws to ensure that domestic legal frameworks address all forms of sexual exploitation of children adequately.
- **Harmonize legal frameworks** in the regions to close gaps between existing legislation and its enactment, implementation and enforcement to protect children; and monitor progress.<sup>5</sup> This includes: establishing obligatory child protection standards/codes for the tourism industry, making reporting by all professionals that may come across suspected cases of sexual exploitation of children obligatory, ensuring liability of the private sector under due diligence laws and introducing the criminal background checks for every national or non-national applying for work with or for children.
- **Mainstream child protection** in the context of travel and tourism with its online elements in regional and national action plans and policies to strengthen the responsibility, accountability and actions by the private sector, as well as increase awareness, including among parents, caregivers, teachers and children themselves about the risks of being sexually exploited both online and offline.
- **Progress from residential care models to supporting family reintegration**, foster care and other family-based care models, while strengthening the capacity of social services to identify children that are at risk of being abandoned or separated from their families as the result of COVID-19.
- **Develop or strengthen reporting and referral mechanisms** for both online and offline sexual exploitation of children at national and international levels; ensure that law enforcement takes a proactive approach in identifying cases of sexual exploitation of children and have the capacity to respond and investigate; and that financial resources are in place for hotlines, helplines and civil society organisations that operate low-threshold reporting mechanisms to provide help and support to children and their families.

5. See: [Legal Checklist – Key legal interventions to protect children from sexual exploitation in travel and tourism](#).

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## FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- **Uphold commitments to ensure that child protection from trafficking and all other forms of sexual exploitation remains a business imperative** during the time of the COVID-19 crisis and during and after the recovery phase for the industry, along with safety, security and operation measures and protocols, independently of the current legal obligations in a given country.
- **Encourage the use of a holistic approach to sustainability by incorporating child protection as a component of business models and broader certification processes.** This includes: leveraging solutions that address the root causes of socio-economic vulnerabilities of children and families; conducting risks and impact analysis regarding children's rights – also when developing new products related to digital transformation and seamless travel solutions; following sustainable practices throughout supply chains; creating awareness among customers and local communities; providing regular trainings on child protection to all the staff and establishing codes of conduct, including through the adoption of the GSTC Criteria<sup>6</sup> and the six criteria of The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.<sup>7</sup>
- **Create protective environments for children** while developing experiential, community-based, rural and eco-tourism as an alternative to mass tourism – cooperate with local communities and CSOs to ensure that children are not used as “tourism attractions” and are protected.
- **Exclude orphanage tourism from tourism packages** as it is driving institutionalization that causes harm to children and along with some forms of voluntourism and un-vetted access to children puts them at risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited.<sup>8</sup>
- **Communicate with the customers** as tourism is a demand-driven industry. Redirect travelers and tourists to solutions that meaningfully help children and support communities; and respond to those that are already aware and are requesting companies to make ethical choices.

6. [Global Sustainable Tourism Council](#) (GSTC) Criteria Overview.

7. [The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism](#) (The Code).

8. For further information on this topic, please refer to ECPAT International. (2019, June). [Thematic Paper: Sexual exploitation of children and voluntourism and The Code's policy on voluntourism](#) and [orphanage tourism](#).

# CONCLUDING POINTS

Sustainability is holistic in its nature and needs to encompass management, socio-economic, cultural and environmental aspects. **Children's rights are a cross-cutting issue in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030, and as such, they need to be an intrinsic part and an equal co-principle of all development discourse and practice.** While contributing to social-economic recovery, travel and tourism needs to be developed with careful and constant attention to child protection as part of a sustainable and responsible perspective, in order to prevent the crime of trafficking and all forms of sexual exploitation.

**To protect children, intergovernmental bodies, governments, destinations, the**

**Travel & Tourism and hospitality sectors, as well as the ICT industry at global, regional and national levels have to proactively coordinate efforts across other sectors and act together with civil society organizations.**

The continuum of exploitation of children between the online and offline worlds needs to be addressed in an integrated manner, as digital images (including live-streaming) of sexual abuse of children, shared or accessed on the internet are the evidence of offline hands-on sexual abuse. Alongside, community dynamics need to be addressed by taking preventive measures and creating protective environments for children, to ensure that they do not become a "barter" for easing out from the crisis.

## Relevant links to inform action:

[www.protectingchildrenintourism.org](http://www.protectingchildrenintourism.org); [www.downtozeroplatform.com](http://www.downtozeroplatform.com)

## ORGANIZERS:



## PANELISTS:

