European Anti-Bullying Network: A Policy Paper

The European Anti-bullying Network (EAN) was set up in 2014 and comprises 22 members (civil society organizations, public institutions and schools) from 14 European countries, actively involved in and committed to the combat against bullying and cyberbullying.

1. The Issue.

The various definitions of bullying are subject to academic controversy, but all steadily contain a series of characteristics:

- a physical, psychological and/or verbal intimidation or aggression,
- based on an unequal power balance between the person(s) displaying a behaviour of bullying and the victim, real or perceived as such,
- inflicted by repetition,
- with the intent to harm and/or frighten the victim.

Bullying is a complex notion and takes various forms, such as physical violence, verbal intimidation and relational aggression. In general, physical bullying seems to be somehow on the decrease, unlike emotional bullying. Over the last couple of decades, cyberbullying has emerged and taken worrying proportions, as a direct consequence of lightning fast developments of technology and marketing in the digital world and, hence, the near to unlimited access of children to digital communication means. An additional challenge is that cyberbullying is even more difficult to detect than classical forms of bullying and that it is far more invasive into the victim's life, as it is continuous and capable of reaching a vast audience very quickly.

There is a movement to broaden the notion of bullying from its individual and small group dimension to include gender, cultural and political differences as a driving force for large group physical, verbal or relational aggression, such as exclusion and slandering. However, this is considered problematic by some researchers.

Politically there is discussion whether bullying is to be considered as one of the expressions of violence or a distinct phenomenon, requiring distinct policies and public attention. EAN pleads for the latter approach, given the particularities of context and the need for specific policy measures.

Whatever energy these controversies around definitions may deserve and receive, actors in society and policy makers should by no means be distracted from the overwhelming reality that bullying has grown into a major public issue, requiring an

urgent, comprehensive and coherent response on the side of grass-root society, public instances and policy makers alike. For, although awareness and preparedness to combat bullying has increased substantially, many children are still confronted with the phenomenon, often with devastating and lasting effects on their physical and/or mental health and integrity.

2. The Impact.

** on all people directly or indirectly involved: victims, perpetrators and bystanders.*

In essence, all parties involved in bullying, victims, person(s) displaying a behaviour of bullying and bystanders consciously or unknowingly witnessing situations of bullying, undergo serious negative effects, also in their life as adults.

The negative spiral involving lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic complaints and diminishing academic performance are among the obvious consequences for children falling victim to bullying. Bullying notoriously also leads in extreme cases to suicide ideation and suicide of children. The phenomenon is scientifically known as bullycide.

Bullying children also undergo negative effects of their bullying behavior, and are even bound to get burdened with a lifetime feeling of guilt in case their actions have led to dramatic and irreversible consequences for their victim. The long-term pattern of bullies often includes antisocial behavior in adult life, poor emotional bonding capability, family violence, substance abuse and delinquency, all to a substantial extent resulting from blurred values and behavioral norms, which had probably also been at the root of their childhood bullying behavior.

As to **bystanders**, adults and children alike, who have been witnessing a situation of bullying without intervening, one can easily imagine the feelings of guilt with which they remain burdened in case the bullying spins out of control and takes a dramatically ugly turn.

** …. everywhere and in all societies.*

The adverse impact of bullying is not only widespread over individuals, far beyond the direct victims: it is crucial to realize that bullying is a universal phenomenon, increasingly so because of the rapid development of cyberbullying and relational bullying in general. No society is free of this problem, no matter how well its social care system and solidarity culture are developed, regardless how influential religion and cultural values are upon daily life, whatever principles the educational model is based on. This in itself offers sufficient reason for cross-border cooperation and networking among actors, public and other, by exchanging good practices and elaborating common strategies to combat the phenomenon of bullying.

This universality constitutes the 'raison d'être' of a common European response, as embodied in the European Anti-bullying Network (EAN).

3. The European Antibullying Network (EAN): a Framework of Response.

The European Anti-bullying Network's action field is essentially composed of four pillars:

a - Capacity building: increase the capacity of EAN members and key non-member organizations to prevent bullying.
b - Method Development: stimulate and support the empowerment of young people, adults and institutions to prevent bullying and to respond to bullying.
c - Awareness-raising: raise awareness of the need to combat bullying as a specific form of violence and the possibilities to do this, including by the development and promotion of a certification process for anti-bullying policies of schools.
d - Advocacy: monitor national and European policies on bullying and stimulate and support higher impact strategies.

4. EAN's Call for Responsible Leadership at All Levels.

It is in its above-mentioned mission context that EAN calls upon

a - policy makers at European, national and subnational levels, genuinely in the spirit of the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, to establish specific anti-bullying legislation which, among other things,

* wherever relevant, links public financial support to the adherence to adequate antibullying policies and codes of conduct,
* creates a legal environment of attributing responsibility for acts of bullying, reaching beyond general manifestations of harassment and discrimination based on race, gender, religion, national origin and disability, and concerning person(s) displaying a behaviour of bullying and other indirectly involved persons and instances,
* elaborates a judicial framework, specifically aimed at the protection of victims of bullying and the sensitization and atonement of person(s) displaying a behaviour of bullying,
* sets up referral procedures which enhance a smooth synergy among providers bound to play a role in handling cases of bullying and/or assisting victims;

b – managing instances and actors in the fields of education, healthcare, wellness care, digital safety, law enforcement, association life and all other relevant areas of endeavor, each at their respective level of competence, to conduct awareness raising activities and training sessions in order to build capabilities of preventing and identifying cases of bullying in a timely way and of handling concrete situations of bullying once identified. The educative task of awareness-building is not limited to the obvious categories of parents and teaching staff: personnel and volunteers in youth associations, sports clubs and other structures of community life need to be (made) aware of their educative responsibilities in the combat against bullying.

c – school networks and individual schools

* to develop anti-bullying policies in the form of long-term and sustained prevention programs based on a whole-school approach, involving not only students and educative staff, but also parents, who are proven to be a crucially important factor for success,
* in this spirit of a 'whole-school approach', to embrace the notion of certification of schools, based on an evaluation of the establishment and effective implementation of a code of conduct to stamp out bullying from the school environment, including cyberbullying among students when physically away from the school premises.

5. Strengths and Shortcomings in Europe.

The Council of Europe and the European Union share a vision in which peace, conflict resolution, democracy and equality are central topics. Both have legal and social strategies to implement these values. In the European union there is a substantial budget for anti-bullying projects, which will only grow with the expansion of the Erasmus+ program.

However, a few shortcomings in the European strategy are to be pointed out.

- The Council of Europe and the European Union DO not have competence in the educational area. The principle of subsidiarity limits its scope, as the content of education is considered to be a national or subnational competence. However, the safety in schools is also part of the education system even though it has little to do with the content of education. The European Union could be more proactive in this area, based on its numerous safety regulations.
- In the area of funding, the focus is often on sharing of good practices. While this is useful, it does raise the question which good practices are best practices and why. Some projects and initiatives like the NESET-reviews provide a meta-analysis which helps to get an overview. But it seems that such guides to better impact are not yet shared well enough to guide new policies on the national or European level.
- The number of European projects funded for anti-bullying projects is extensive. It is so high that it falls outside the scope of the ABC-project to review them properly. This raises the question whether there is a development in these projects or whether they repeat each other.

More specifically, EAN recommends to the European Union

1. to review funded projects which focus on, or include bullying. The result of such a review should be to help focus future anti-bullying projects to go beyond sharing of subjective good practices and become part of a more systematic development program to combat bullying in Europe;
2. to explore the potential for European level guidelines for social safety and inclusion in schools, agreed on by Member States, strengthening the

strategies to combat early school-leaving, gender-based violence and social exclusion;

3. to set up an ongoing European campaign to stimulate awareness of bullying and structural ways to combat it. The choice of an EU-"Day Against Bullying" could be a focal point in such an annual campaign and have a recurrently mobilizing effect.
4. Part of such a campaign could be the development of a clearing house of projects and methods. In this effort, the EU and EAN could collaborate and also involve other organizations which are already working on a similar global database, for instance in the context of the World Anti-bullying Forum.
5. A European campaign should also develop a European "map" of national anti-bullying policies and related best practices, and establish a mechanism of country assessments to stimulate national dialogue and cooperation to enhance such policies. In this effort, the EU and EAN could team up with organizations which are already working on this type of mapping.
6. The EU should consider developing a coherent view on how to deal with political hate speech and exclusion. Tendencies to legitimize ideological and political hate speech and systematic social exclusion of social groups should be more concretely recognized as a serious threat to anti-bullying, violence and in general, human rights and democracy.

6. EAN's Quest to Contribute.

EAN and its member organizations are aware of the huge challenge implied in its broad call for action, as described above. EAN's membership is widely spread out over the entire European continent and consequently brings together anti-bullying approaches and strategies which have been designed in accordance with and respectful of local conditions of culture and society. EAN considers this to be a valuable asset in view of a cooperation with institutions, public and non-governmental, to work towards objectives of Responsible Leadership as described above.

More specifically, but not exclusively, EAN signals the active involvement of itself and its members in the EU supported Anti Bullying Certification (ABC) Project, aimed at the development of a certification process to support schools in bringing about an effective anti-bullying policy, which stimulates the school's ownership of measures how to deal with bullying: schools are to make the appropriate specific policy choices themselves. The certification process also involves self-assessment by the school and external audit, and ultimately leads up to the award of a label. EAN considers that this ABC process is bound to provide a concrete and practical way forward to pursue the objective of certification in the spirit of the recommended 'whole school approach'.