

**Press Release N° 020/2019****African Union Continental Consultation on Combatting Online Child Sexual Exploitation**

**Addis Ababa, March 06 2019:** The African Union's First Continental Consultation on combatting Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) opened on 6 March 2019 at the African Union Conference Centre under the theme "Protecting Children from Abuse in the Digital world".

The three day conference is part of a new project run by the Department of Social to "strengthen regional and national capacity and action against OCSE in Africa" which is being implemented with financial support from the UK Home Office through the Commonwealth Grant.

The principal objective of the continental consultation is to sensitize representatives from all the 55 African Union Member States on threats of Online Child Sexual Exploitation as an emerging cybercrime, and to mobilize political and country commitment to address the challenge. The consultation is expected to come up with recommendations which will be considered by African Ministers of health, Population and Drug Control at their Specialized Technical Committee meeting scheduled to take place in Sham El Sheik, Egypt in July 2019. Member States are also expected to make firm commitments to address OCSE at country level acknowledging the relevance of the WePROTECT Global Alliance Model National Response (MNR). The WePROTECT Global Alliance (WPGA ) is an international movement dedicated to ending the sexual exploitation of children online. The AU itself is a Member of the WPGA and is supportive of the MNR and sees it as one of the very best tools available to develop a national response to OCSE.

In her welcome remarks to delegates, African Union Commission Director of Social Affairs, Madame Cisse Mariama Mohamed noted that Internet usage in African countries has increased by more than 20% compared to 2017 compared to 2010. This increase in internet usage had come with it a greater risk of children being vulnerable and sexually exploited online.

However, there is limited awareness and understanding amongst government and policy makers within Africa while some do not see OCSE as a priority and have limited capabilities to tackle the issue effectively. OCSE refers to crimes committed by offenders who are using ICT and/or the Internet to facilitate the sexual abuse of children.

“No one can deny that the Internet has been an extraordinary catalyst for innovation, education, and economic growth in the region, and perhaps none will benefit more from it than our children. But while we are rejoicing that this increase in internet usage has boosted social and economic development, the downside is that it has led to greater risk of our children being sexually exploited online”, said Madame Cisse.



She added that the rise of information and communication technologies had made it easier and more efficient for sex offenders to produce, access, and distribute child sexual abuse materials; find like-minded offenders; groom children; while reducing the risk of detection. Online child sexual exploitation of children is expanding across the globe in line with development of Internet connectivity. “It is a challenge that calls us to action and that is why we are gathered here today”. She added.

INTERPOL Director of Organized and Emerging Crime and also WePROTECT Global Alliance Board Member, Mr Paul Stansfield, lauded the African Union Commission for leading the way to a coordinated continental response to OCSE.

Mr Stansfield noted that children and young people represented more than one third (1/3) of the world’s 3 billion internet users.

“This is incredible statistics and it is no wonder we are witnessing increasingly creative, innovative and informed generations harnessing the power of technology, the presence of 800 million minors online – many of them whom are unsupervised has made it easier for perpetrators to access them and profit from their exploitation and abuse” Mr. Stansfield said.

He added that even though threats of OCSE were multiple and continued to evolve, social media should be used to network, or keep in touch with families and friends. “we should celebrate the clear benefits of these platforms but we must not ignore the scale of harm they facilitate, providing the same means to exploiters, users and groomers of the youngest and most vulnerable” concluded Mr. Stansfield.

UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the African Union, Mr. Jason Grimes, called African Union Member States to action at the continental, regional and national level to tackle online sexual exploitation. “The combination of rapidly increasing internet usage, limited regulation, and limited awareness of the threat could lead to an explosive growth in

online child sexual exploitation in Africa in coming years, as we have unfortunately seen in other parts of the world, tackling online sexual exploitation is a UK Government priority” he stated.

The consultation brought together high level representatives from Member States Government Departments and Agencies namely: Law Enforcement Units with a mandate to investigate OCSE/Cybercrime; Ministry in Charge of Children Issues; and Ministry of Justice and Departments under the State Law office providing advice and litigation to children in conflict with the law and those in contact with the law either as witnesses or victims;

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