***UN Virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights***

***Concept Note: side session***

**Organiser**: ECPAT International [www.ecpat.org](http://www.ecpat.org)

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| **Title of the session** | **Rethinking the restart of tourism in the Asia-Pacific region while managing adverse impacts on child rights** |
| **Short description of what the session is about** | Among the multitude of challenges at the intersection of business and human rights, urgent action is needed to protect children from all forms of violence, in particular in the view of the restart of tourism after COVID-19 pandemic. As the world responds to the pandemic, push factors that facilitate or lead to violence, including the sexual exploitation of children both online and offline are intensifying, or are expected to increase. It’s time now, to rethink inclusive and sustainable development in the region that can be achieved only if key stakeholders act together to prevent, mitigate, and remediate risks to child protection. |
| **Session objectives** | To have key stakeholders representing governments, the travel & tourism industry, as well as civil society organizations take stock of the key challenges, including implications of the pandemic, versus progress made up to date in respect to child protection ([www.protectingchildrenintourism.org](http://www.protectingchildrenintourism.org); [www.downtozeroplatform.com](http://www.downtozeroplatform.com)) and to discuss the recovery phase for the travel and tourism sector in the Asia-Pacific region. The discussion will help to plan, coordinate and influence others about what steps to take to restart tourism in a sustainable way, with child protection in focus. |
| **Key discussion questions** | * What are the most urgent and critical challenges, and key risks to children’s rights view the impact of COVID-19? * What solutions can companies implement to address these, now and during the phase of the recovery, considering the current “survival mode” for the travel and tourism sector itself? * What actions are there and need to be taken by governments and regional intergovernmental bodies to create an environment where businesses is able to effectively protect children’s rights? |
| **Speakers and moderators** | * Lucia Soleti, Chief Child Protection, UNICEF Cambodia * Dr. Rinchen Chophel, Director General, South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) * Marie-Laure Lemineur, Deputy Executive Director for Programs, ECPAT International * Roi Ariel, General Manager, Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) * Bertie Alexander Lawson, CEO, Sampan Travel, Myanmar (member of The Code)   Moderator: Gabriela Kühn, Head of Programme, Child Protection in Travel and Tourism, ECPAT International |
| **Format of the session** | An interactive discussion with Q&A. It will focus on identifying recurring and new challenges to integrating a mix of mandatory and voluntary, national and international, measures to protect children from all forms of violence including sexual exploitation, in the view of the recovery phase of the travel and tourism industry in the Asia-Pacific region.  During the Q&A sessions, participants will be encouraged to suggest actions and solutions to make the tourism better when it restarts, in terms of inclusion of child protection as part of sustainable measures.  Closing reflections on the way forward will be provided by the speakers. |
| **Background to the discussion** | The impact of COVID-19 is making economies suffer. Millions of people around the world have already lost their jobs, whilst global stock markets plunged to levels similar or worst to those during previous global crisis. In such times, already marginalised groups tend to carry most of the burden of the consequences. When people are financially struggling, children tend to become more isolated and less linked to supportive networks, and all forms of violence affecting children increase, this includes sexual exploitation. Children living in remote areas and in refugee settings are at the highest risk, and as offenders hunt for easy victims, marginalised children are more likely to be targeted.  It is estimated that up to 100 million jobs are at immediate risk in the travel and tourism industry due to the pandemic, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). Asia-Pacific is expected to be the most heavily impacted. This dramatically increases the economic vulnerability of families, in particular in countries which depend on income from tourism. As of today, civil society organisations and law enforcement have seen signs that indicate an increase in sexual crimes against children online during the COVID-19 outbreak with sexual offenders being more active exchanging tips and seeking to groom children. When it becomes more difficult for offenders to operate where they normally do, some tend to migrate elsewhere, often online, which poses additional risks.  It is well documented that both domestic and international offenders sexually exploit children. They are not only “tourists” but also long term expats, people who work abroad and others who live in a country for extended periods. Some do use the Internet to get in contact with children prior to travelling and eventually meet with them offline. Some are also grooming children online, to whom they will travel when the pandemic is over. There is also a risk that offenders located on-site groom local families ‘offline’ affected by the crisis to exploit their children.  During the crisis local people are losing their jobs and as a result the vulnerability of the children increases. With families in more needs due to the crisis, the circumstances are and will be there to allow both foreign and domestic offenders to gain their trust to access their victims more easily than ever before. Increasing economic vulnerability – in particular in the countries in the Asia-Pacific region that are the most dependent on tourism industry – will likely lead to increases in all forms of sexual exploitation of children.  Additionally, during the recovery time for the industry, the T&T sector is expected to increase facilitation of travel that will involve removing or simplifying visas and introducing technologies for seamless travel. This is likely to result in lessened control over travelling child sex offenders and child protection policies by all-travel and tourism related industry that may be focusing first on regaining profits.  In this context, businesses as well as governments that are catalysts for respect for human rights, must prepare and continue to show their commitment to respecting children rights in the Asia-Pacific region more than ever before. |