

Speaker Briefing Note

"SPORT AND CHILD TRAFFICKING: POLICY RESPONSES AND STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE IN THE EU CONTEXT"

High-level Roundtable Hosted by

The European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights

January 29th, 2026, Time (10h00 – 12h00)

Room: ASP 5G1, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, 1047 Brussels

Speaker	H.E. Prof. Michel Veuthey
Position	Ambassador
Organization	Sovereign Order of Malta
Date & Time	Thursday, January 29, 2026
Event Time	10h00 - 12h00
Location / Access	ASP 5G1, European Parliament
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Consultation Facilitators	Ms. Julia Govinden, CEO United Through Sport (Remote)

	Ms. Sky Lily Lee, Campaign Manager Mission 89 (In person)
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (10:40-11:20, ~2-3min response per question)

QUESTION 1: Based on the Order's humanitarian work in trafficking prevention and victim protection, what are the critical gaps in current frameworks for identifying and protecting trafficked athletes?

There is a profound gap in victim identification mechanisms adapted to the sports context. Anti-trafficking frameworks still rely heavily on the stereotype of the “perfect victim”, associating trafficking primarily with poverty, gender, migration status, or extreme social vulnerability. While these indicators are relevant, they are insufficient in sport. As a result, many victims are overlooked, particularly athletes who appear economically stable, socially privileged, or male. Humanitarian practice emphasizes listening to lived experience and recognizing power imbalances rather than surface-level vulnerability. Yet in sport, ambition, performance pressure, and dependency on coaches or sponsors are rarely recognized as risk factors. This leads to systematic misidentification and protection failures. This gap was clearly illustrated by the testimony of John-Michael Lander, a survivor of sexual exploitation in youth sport, who spoke during the webinar for the launch of the Mission 89 global thematic report on sport trafficking. As a white, middle-class male athlete in the United States, he did not fit prevailing assumptions of a trafficking victim and did not initially identify himself as such. His aspiration to reach the Olympic level was exploited by trusted professionals who offered sponsorship and career opportunities, gradually isolating and controlling him under the guise of normal sporting practices.

There is also limited awareness and insufficient training within sports institutions. Coaches, medical staff, agents, and administrators are rarely trained to recognize trafficking indicators or abuse of power. Without trauma-informed training, exploitative practices are normalized and left unchallenged.

Athletes often lack safe, independent, and accessible reporting mechanisms. Complaint systems are frequently internal to sports organizations, creating fear of retaliation, career damage, or exclusion. This discourages disclosure and prevents early intervention.

Even when victims are identified, legal and protective frameworks remain weak. Athletes may not be formally recognized as trafficking victims, limiting their access to protection, remedies, and long-term support.

There are major regulatory and enforcement gaps in transnational recruitment and sport-related labour chains. Cross-border athlete recruitment, training academies, and major sporting events remain insufficiently monitored. In the EU and beyond, there is a lack of coordinated investigations, dedicated reporting mechanisms, and oversight of teams, personnel, and migrant workers involved in sport-related activities.

QUESTION 2: How can humanitarian organizations and sports institutions collaborate more effectively to strengthen prevention and protection mechanisms for vulnerable young athletes?

Humanitarian organizations and sports institutions can collaborate more effectively by combining their respective strengths: humanitarian actors' proximity to vulnerable populations and sports institutions' direct influence over athletic environments.

Collaboration should focus on embedding humanitarian expertise directly within sporting settings, especially at points of contact with young athletes. One practical and effective approach is the deployment of trained medical and social professionals at sporting events, training camps, and competitions. These professionals should not only provide medical assistance but also be trained to recognize early indicators of abuse, trafficking, or exploitation, understand sport-specific risk factors, and inform athletes about safe and independent reporting mechanisms. Their presence enables early detection and timely referral in situations that often remain invisible within competitive sports environments.

The Sovereign Order of Malta is well positioned to support this approach. National associations, such as the French Order of Malta, already deploy first-aid and medical teams at major sporting events. With targeted training on human trafficking, exploitation in sport, and victim identification, these teams could play a critical role in prevention, early detection, and referral to appropriate protection services.

At the EU level, this effort could be further strengthened through enhanced coordination and support from DG ECHO, ensuring coherence with broader humanitarian protection frameworks. As a cornerstone of European humanitarian policy, DG ECH, supported by a €1.9 billion budget, has a unique capacity to reinforce such initiatives. Continuing to allocate dedicated funding for humanitarian projects including addressing child victims of trafficking therefore remains essential.

Second, effective collaboration must prioritize prevention among migrant and displaced populations, who are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation through sport-related recruitment pathways. Humanitarian organizations have direct, trusted access to these populations along the entire migration route, from countries of origin, through transit and border areas, to host and destination countries.

Through its international humanitarian network, including Malteser International and national relief corps, the Order of Malta supports refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants in around 30 countries worldwide, providing medical, psychosocial, legal, and integration assistance. This continuous presence places humanitarian actors in a unique position to deliver early preventive information about risks of exploitation, including less visible forms such as trafficking through sports academies, informal agents, or false promises of athletic careers. Prevention is most effective before exploitation occurs, when individuals still have the capacity to make informed choices.

A concrete example is the deployment, since 2008, of medical teams from the Italian Relief Corps of the Order of Malta on Italian Coast Guard vessels in the Mediterranean. During search-and-rescue operations, these teams assist migrants at moments of extreme vulnerability, creating crucial opportunities to identify risk factors, raise awareness, and refer at-risk individuals to

protection mechanisms. Similar preventive actions take place through healthcare, education, and reintegration programmes in countries of origin and transit.

Finally, Collaboration must be institutionalized and sustained. This requires formal partnerships and clear protocols between sports institutions and humanitarian actors; joint training and capacity-building programmes; improved data collection, risk mapping, and early warning systems; and a commitment to long-term protection, recovery, and reintegration for victims. EU-level coordination, particularly through DG ECHO and related instruments, can play a key role in supporting these efforts and ensuring consistency across borders.

In sum, by linking sports governance structures with humanitarian actors already present on the ground, prevention and protection efforts can move upstream, addressing vulnerabilities before young athletes are drawn into exploitative situations.