

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Belgium is joining forces with UNICEF and UNFPA in Benin to tackle child marriage and sexual exploitation. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation Alexander De Croo today signed two programmes in Benin, related to the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Belgium will be cooperating with UNICEF to help combat child marriages. With the support of our country, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) will be setting up an information project aimed at young people and women, covering sexual education and sexual violence. Minister De Croo also announced that Belgium will release a total of 60 million euros over the next four years in support of UNICEF's work and another 36 million euros for UNFPA.

The UNFPA will use Belgian funds in Benin to run the project *'Learning about living in Benin'*. The aim is to inform young people and help combat sexual violence against girls using an e-learning platform, which is also accessible via mobile telephone. Our country will donate 1.5 million euros for this purpose.

Belgium will also provide 1.17 million euros to support UNICEF in tackling child marriage in Benin. The programme *Lutte contre le mariage des enfants au Benin* aims to give children and young people better access to justice and better protection from violence and sexual exploitation.

In Benin 35% of girls marry before their eighteenth birthday, and almost two out of ten girls have their first baby before reaching the age of fifteen.

Alexander De Croo: *"Girls who are forced to marry and become mothers at a young age miss out on many opportunities. They must leave school early and spend the rest of their life depending on others. The battle against sexual violence and child marriage is crucial if we are to help strengthen the position of girls and women. Belgium wishes to join UNICEF and UNFPA in supporting the struggle."*

Intense collaboration

With his agreement to two specific programmes in Benin, Minister De Croo also announced Belgium's intention to continue working intensely with UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, and UNFPA, the UN Population Fund, over the next four years. Belgium has volunteered to donate 60 million euros to UNICEF over the coming four years and a total of 36 million euros to help UNFPA. Children's rights together with sexual and reproductive health and rights are key priorities in Belgium's Development Cooperation policy.

Minister De Croo announced our country's commitment in the presence of Goedele Liekens and Axelle Red, Goodwill Ambassadors for UNFPA and UNICEF Belgium respectively. They are currently all together on an official visit to Benin and Senegal, which is focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Involvement from the wife of the Beninese president

Today their visits included a meeting with Claudine Tallon, the wife of the Beninese president Tallon. In early March she launched a foundation aimed at improving the position of girls and women in Benin. Her actions include a focus on better education for girls, tackling the deaths of mothers and children, and sexual violence.

As a country, Benin is the sixth most important partner country in Belgium's Development Cooperation. Next year, Belgium and Benin will agree on a new bilateral collaboration programme.