

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 253 (2008)¹ The social reintegration of children living and/or working on the streets

1. Poverty, unemployment, family problems or abuse are the main factors that lead children to live or work on the streets.

2. While in most European countries there are no accurate figures of the number of children concerned due to the lack of a systematic collection of data, it is clear that the scale of the phenomenon is both alarming and on the increase in Europe's cities.

3. Some children live and work with their families on the streets, others have intermittent contact with a home environment, while others, such as unaccompanied foreign minors, must often fend for themselves.

4. The one thing all street children have in common is that they are at risk of exploitation, violence, sexual abuse, chemical addiction and numerous human rights violations. Sometimes they are at risk from the very authorities who are charged with protecting them.

5. The challenge facing public authorities is multifaceted: they should act as positive role models, changing the way citizens perceive street children and the way their staff interact with them; enforce the respect of their human rights, making sure they are not simply treated as delinquents or criminals; provide them with security; and give them a future.

6. Furthermore, experience has shown that working with street children to identify their needs and priorities and involving them as active participants in their own development rather than as passive beneficiaries of assistance means the policies and programmes that are developed will have more long-term success.

7. Investing in the well-being of children is the best guarantee for the equitable and sustainable development of our communities. It is therefore becoming increasingly urgent to find ways to deal with these large numbers of marginalised and socially excluded children and young people, both for their sake and for that of the social cohesion of the wider community.

8. The Congress calls on member states of the Council of Europe to prioritise the issue of street children by using a double approach that addresses the reasons street children take to the streets, while substantially improving the lives

of those already there, and to this end it recommends that they:

a. co-ordinate the collection of objective, up-to-date national data on the phenomenon of street children by relevant actors at local and national levels to achieve an accurate, country-wide, and eventually European, overview of the phenomenon: its root causes, scale, characteristics, successful reintegration measures, etc., with a view to:

i. developing indicators on the impact of national social policies on street children; and

ii. informing and re-defining national and European policy;

b. include within their planned or existing national action plans on the protection of children, specific policies for street children with a strong emphasis on prevention, taking into consideration, as far as possible, the views of the children themselves, and these should:

i. set out unequivocally the division of competences between the different public authorities involved in the field of child protection at state level and between them and the local and regional level;

ii. provide municipalities with state land, premises or funding to increase, *inter alia*, the number of shelters or centres providing accommodation and assistance to street children;

iii. ensure that all street children, including those without identity documents or a place of residence, are legally entitled and have access to protection, health care, social services, abuse recovery programmes, legal aid and food as well as education and training to help them find safer ways of earning money;

iv. promote collaborative work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the field;

v. promote reunification with families or other relatives when this is in the best interests of the child, taking into account the child's own views;

c. ensure targeted training, with a special emphasis on children's human rights, for all professionals who come into contact with children on the streets as well as for all government staff involved in child protection;

d. consider the establishment of a children's ombudsperson or mediator, preferably with intercultural skills, to investigate violation of children's human rights and violence against children, including, in particular, those on the street;

e. avoid the stereotyping (by the public, the media and by their own administration) of children living/working on the streets as either victims or offenders, through awareness-raising and an intercultural approach;

f. adopt a more systematic approach to tackling the phenomenon of parents working abroad and the new form of child neglect this can entail.

9. The Congress commends the work of the Council of Europe's Programme "Building a Europe for and with children" and encourages the Committee of Ministers to continue to mainstream children's rights through all Council of Europe policy areas and to task its programme with

undertaking further work on strategic approaches at all governance levels on the eradication of violence against children and the promotion of their rights.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 28 May 2008 and adopted by the Congress on 29 May 2008, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPL(15)6REC, draft recommendation presented by I. Henttonen (Finland, L, ILDG), rapporteur).