

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 271 (2008)¹ The social reintegration of children living and/or working on the streets

1. The rapid social, economic and political transition undergone by many countries – especially in central and eastern Europe – has had a significant impact on large sections of the population and particularly on families and children. Increasing levels of unemployment, poverty and the breakdown of social welfare and security systems have put many children at risk. Of these children, one of the most strongly marginalised groups is that of “street children”.

2. The term “street children” refers to any children who live and/or work on the street. This group includes homeless children and unaccompanied foreign minors. It also includes those who, while nominally living with their parents or in a social welfare institution, are nevertheless in a situation where they are not directly protected or supervised by responsible adults.

3. The unprotected situation of these children greatly heightens their vulnerability and life on the streets puts them at serious risk of physical and sexual abuse, health problems and social adjustment difficulties. Their futures are seriously compromised by the inadequacy of their educational opportunities.

4. There is a lack of systematic information collected about the scale of the phenomenon, partly because, due to their very nature, these children do not fit clearly into statistical categories. Nevertheless, there is agreement that the phenomenon of street children in Europe in general has, in recent years, become an issue of major significance in a number of countries and a serious challenge to the towns and cities which must find ways to counteract the marginalisation and social exclusion of large numbers of children and young people.

5. The two fundamental questions which arise when analysing the problem of street children are: how best to prevent them from ending up on the street and how to help and support them when they do find themselves there.

6. Good practice across Europe shows that while the plight of these children is one that causes grave concern, local authorities are in a position to help them in a number of ways; the Congress consequently recommends that the local authorities of the member states of the Council of Europe give the issue of street children the priority and recognition their grave situation requires through the following actions:

a. Effective data collection

A common and efficient system should be established at municipal level for the collection and provision of

up-to-date data on street children regarding their numbers, characteristics, the main factors responsible for their situation and any successful measures leading to their social reintegration.

b. Integrated local action plans

A long-term municipal action plan for street children should be drawn up which, as far as possible, is informed by the views of the children themselves and:

i. is an integral part of a comprehensive municipal strategy aimed at the eradication of poverty, the provision of housing and the reduction of unemployment;

ii. clearly sets out the division of competences between the different public authorities involved in the field of child protection at the local level;

iii. includes vocational and life-learning courses designed to impart skills that will enable these children to break the cycle of poverty as well as the setting-up of specific job creation schemes for disadvantaged young people;

iv. provides the necessary protection, adequate health care services, education and other social services, including to children who lack proper identity documents or a place of residence;

v. provides recovery and social reintegration services for street children who are victims of physical, sexual and substance abuse;

vi. ensures that a viable alternative to the street or a difficult home environment exists for children at risk by:

– increasing the number of municipal day-care centres, emergency accommodation structures and other places which provide assistance (medical and psychological) and shelter to street children;

– allocating municipal premises for use free of charge or at preferential rates by relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations;

vii. provides preventative outreach and contact services, including child phone helplines and other early intervention techniques;

viii. establishes adequate mechanisms to receive complaints from street children about cases of abuse and violence;

ix. promotes reunification with families or other relatives when this is in the best interests of the child, taking into account the children’s own views;

x. includes alternative action to the detention of children begging on the streets.

c. Training

Targeted training should be provided, with a special emphasis on children’s human rights, for all professionals who come into contact with children on the streets (social workers, teachers, psychologists, police officers, etc.) and for all municipal administrative staff in the different

departments involved in child protection. This should be closely linked to staff evaluations and appraisals.

d. Concerted action and dialogue

Regular, constructive dialogue and co-ordination of actions should be encouraged by supporting the creation of local-level platforms and networks which would involve all relevant actors in the field of child protection from the municipal authorities (social services, schools, police, local judiciary, hospitals) as well as NGOs and actors from the private sector.

e. Partnerships

Local authorities should support (financially and otherwise) and be directly involved in local projects and activities set up by third parties in favour of street children, including job creation schemes, thereby substantially guaranteeing these initiatives' sustainability and potentially attracting more solid financial support from other key donors.

f. Adoption and promotion of a non-discriminatory, intercultural approach

An intercultural approach should be adopted, which could include:

- i. establishing public municipal lists of intercultural mediators available to help in situations requiring specialised linguistic or cultural experience;

- ii. creating a specialised section within the municipal police capable of adopting an intercultural approach, including language mediation, when dealing with street children;

- iii. counteracting and pre-empting the stereotyping (by the public, the media and by their own administration) of children living/working on the streets as either victims or offenders, by a judicious use of awareness-raising and targeted training.

7. The Congress applauds the role of the Council of Europe's Programme "Building a Europe for and with children" in co-ordinating the Organisation's activities concerning children and mainstreaming children's rights in Council of Europe policies. Noting that the programme's prime objective is to help decision makers and stakeholders set up and implement national strategies and policies to promote children's rights and prevent violence against children, the Congress asks its Committee on Social Cohesion to contribute to this programme in the framework of its work on violence against children.

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)6RES, draft resolution presented by I. Henttonen (Finland, L, ILDG), rapporteur).