

## THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

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### Resolution 392 (2015)<sup>1</sup> Championing children's rights in times of austerity

1. The prolonged economic crisis and resultant austerity measures have had a significant impact in many European States in areas of public policy and social welfare, including social programmes affecting children and their families, such as welfare support, education, social services, housing and health care.

2. As social protection systems have been undermined by cuts introduced in the name of austerity, children have been among the first to suffer. The rights of the child are too often overlooked as governments at all levels prioritise financial cutbacks over service provision and quality. Austerity measures have reduced the capacity of local and regional authorities to undertake welfare support programmes and essential services, undermining those that are intended to meet the needs of children or to protect children from exploitation and abuse.

3. The poorest children suffer disproportionately as a result of austerity measures. The incidence of child poverty in Europe has increased during the economic crisis. This sorry situation is exacerbated as public services that are essential for mitigating the negative impact of poverty on children's well-being have been reduced in many European States.

4. A particular concern is that public services that are vital for safeguarding a child's physical, mental and social development have been put at risk (education, health). Child labour has increased and protections for working age children have been reduced. Public services that offer children protection against harm are under threat. As a result, children are at greater risk of exploitation or abuse. Structures that support children's participation and advocacy of their rights have been undermined. Children are now less likely to contribute to decision making that affects their lives or be in a position to challenge decisions adverse to their interests. All of this puts children's rights in jeopardy and paints a worrying picture of the situation of children's rights generally in Europe.

5. Human rights should offer protection for those most likely to be discriminated against, excluded, or simply forgotten in times of economic crisis. Unfortunately, children's services appear to be amongst the easy targets for austerity measures and cutbacks, and children's rights suffer as a result. This is extremely troubling. As a social group children are vulnerable to violation of their fundamental rights. For some children in particular situations of increased vulnerability, the position is even worse. Sadly, not enough has been done in Europe to safeguard

children from regressive policies and service cutbacks that undermine rights and guarantees to which they are properly entitled.

6. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has assessed the effect of austerity measures in its Resolution 1884 (2012) on austerity measures – a danger for democracy and social rights, and Resolution 1886 (2012) on the impact of the economic crisis on local and regional authorities in Europe, respectively, as a danger for democracy and social rights and underlined the necessity of maintaining services, particularly to vulnerable populations, in times of austerity. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, in his Issue Paper (2014)<sup>2</sup> on *Safeguarding human rights in times of economic crisis*, drew attention to child poverty as an issue which is likely to have long-term effects, as Europe risks producing a “lost generation” of disillusioned young people, with potentially grave consequences for intergenerational solidarity, social cohesion and long-term political stability.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe recognises that local and regional authorities are key institutions as regards children's rights. They are responsible for a number of areas of public policy and programmes that directly or indirectly impact on children or their families.

8. Convinced that local and regional authorities are well placed to champion and promote children's rights in times of economic crisis and austerity measures through decisive action, in particular in relation to policy and decision making concerning essential services, the Congress calls on the local and regional authorities of the member States of the Council of Europe to take all legislative (where appropriate) or administrative steps within their capacities to:

a. adopt an integrated approach to the planning and delivery of children's services, ensuring that positive steps are taken to embed this approach in the exercise of all their functions;

b. deliver child-friendly services, ensuring, during the planning process, that services intended to benefit children are both sensitive and responsive to their needs;

c. identify children at risk of discrimination or exclusion by making use of appropriate indicators and assessment tools, and give priority to action mitigating the impact of structural discrimination, by ensuring adequate resources when considering budgetary allocation, working closely with civil society organisations, and ensuring that children in situations of increased vulnerability are well supported by quality public services;

d. undertake an impact assessment of children's rights (by embedding substantive and reasoned formal processes of evaluation as a key component of decision making pertaining to children's rights) and undertake, as regards children, open and transparent budgeting, paying particular attention to the need to maintain services for children at risk of compound disadvantage;

*e.* provide local and regional government employees with training on children's rights, paying particular attention to issues of discrimination, to children in situations of increased vulnerability and children at risk of exploitation and harm;

*f.* raise awareness of children's rights, not only amongst their own employees but also among the general public, parents, children and those working with children, and empower civil society organisations whose work benefits children;

*g.* deliver real accountability, insisting on openness and transparency in the exercise of local and regional authorities' policy and planning functions, by establishing or maintaining proper mechanisms for children to make complaints or raise concerns, and by providing channels for communication between children and their representatives and decision makers.

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1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 21 October 2015, 2nd Sitting (see Document [CG/2015\(29\)10FINAL](#), explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Johan van den Hout, Netherlands (R, SOC).