

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 241 (2008)¹ Child in the city

1. Children's place in society, their protection, development and role as citizens are major preoccupations for elected representatives throughout Europe. Concerns about their health and safety could lead to a progressive withdrawal of children from urban public spaces thereby depriving them from fully experiencing their town or city and preventing them from becoming fully fledged citizens.

2. There is a close connection between sustainable development and building towns and cities adapted to the differing needs of children, young people and their families. Places where environmental protection is a reality, where economic and social disparities are addressed and where cultural diversity is welcomed are places which create the combined conditions necessary for a better world in which children can live now and in the future.

3. Paradoxically, although the vast majority of Europeans now live in urban areas, town and city centres are not seen as attractive places to bring up families. This has meant that families with the means to do so are moving out of city centres, leading to urban sprawl and therefore increased automobile dependency.

4. This trend is reinforced by current demographic changes characterised by the ageing of the urban population and an increase in the number of childless households and single people. This situation limits intergenerational communication and poses a threat to the long-term vitality of urban centres, since young families play an important role in the social cohesion and economic activity of a town or city.

5. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe notes that the authorities at local and regional level are responsible for many of the policies which have a major impact on children's lives. There is a need to provide local authorities with the means to develop an urban environment where the decision to have a child is made easier and which provides favourable conditions for raising a family. Towns and cities need to become places where children can flourish.

6. Reconciling work and family life is of benefit to all generations. Caring responsibilities – whether for children, parents, relatives or the sick – call for a flexible working environment which allows people to reconcile their personal and professional responsibilities. The paradigm shift necessary for this requires strong political leadership and reinforced partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

7. Local authorities have a major role to play in creating the necessary conditions regarding the natural and built environment to facilitate the mobility and activities of children.

The isolation of inhabitants should be reduced and opportunities developed to enhance interaction between generations, cultures and different social groups. Children should be able to explore their locality independently and through play, in absolute safety.

8. A desire for guaranteed total protection currently pervades our attitudes towards children. While safety issues are crucial for parents and elected representatives alike, the risk-safety balance has shifted more towards safety in recent years. Policy makers, the economic sector and parents have adopted an extremely cautious approach. Media coverage of particular events probably reinforces the feelings of insecurity.

9. The Congress believes that all levels of governance have a responsibility to ensure a democratic and inclusive society where children enjoy their rightful place in family, community and social life, as recommended by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Strong political will is required to ensure that children are treated as fully fledged citizens and included in the decision-making processes on issues which affect their lives and their locality.

10. The Congress welcomes the Council of Europe programme "Building a Europe for and with children" and is pleased to be able to contribute to this programme through relevant innovative events taking place at local and regional levels. It notes with satisfaction that this programme ensures European follow-up to the United Nations Secretary-General's study on violence against children (2006), calling on governments to "encourage and assist local and municipal governments to reduce risk factors in the physical environment. Well-lit and safe public places available for children, including safe routes for children and adolescents to travel through their communities, should be included in urban planning".

11. In the light of the above, the Congress calls on the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to invite its member states to:

a. ensure that the rights of children are promoted and protected in legislation and in regulatory frameworks and that child-impact assessments are undertaken to evaluate policies on children's protection and well-being and, in this respect, to support the development of appropriate advice and advocacy services, as well as complaints procedures;

b. develop policies, involving all levels of governance, to implement integrated mobility solutions which encourage public transportation and "soft" mobility and which improve the protection and security of all users, particularly the most vulnerable such as children;

c. adapt spatial planning and urban development legislation to respond to the needs and interests of children and to encourage them to explore the built environment and understand how their town or city functions, including:

i. setting minimum standards regarding the amount of land that should be reserved for open spaces and playgrounds so that play and sports areas are systematically included in urban development projects;

ii. developing norms regarding street furniture and public spaces which take children and parents into account as they move around the town or city and which reduce the specific constraints and obstacles they face;

iii. ensuring that the risk-safety balance is taken into account with regard to safety norms for street furniture and playground equipment and avoiding installation and renewal conditions that manufacturers unduly pressurise local authorities to accept and which are too restrictive;

d. develop a national housing and accommodation policy which includes the right to housing as a fundamental-principle and which offers high-quality, affordable housing in urban centres for young and reconstituted families;

e. favour strategies to reconcile work and family life in employment legislation and draw up policies based on partnerships between all levels of governance and all stakeholders in the fields of the economy, health, education, transport and housing;

f. reinforce citizenship education in school programmes and encourage children's participation in democratic life at school and in consultation processes on urban and environmental planning.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 29 May 2008, 3rd Sitting (see Document CG(15)9REC, draft recommendation presented by S. Kalev (Estonia, L, NR), rapporteur).