

# **Spring Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**

## **Speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

### ***Debate on street children***

*Strasbourg, 27 March 2007*

Mr President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking you for your kind words about my personal involvement in this campaign.

I am frequently asked to provide numbers on this or that violation of human rights. How many women are victims of domestic violence, how many people are subject to human trafficking, how many children are abandoned to live on the street.

I understand the insistence on facts, because it is important to have an idea of the magnitude of the problem we are dealing with, so I will therefore try, whenever possible to get the statistics beforehand. But every time I do, there is a distressing thought in the back of my mind – statistics, after all, are abstract but human suffering is not. The abstractness often works as a hypocritical anesthetic which numbs our feelings, our compassion – and often also our reactions.

It is somehow easier to ignore a number, however big, than a photo of a single abandoned, frightened and suffering child.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the problem of street children. They are being ignored, ignored in their suffering and ignored in their numbers. They are invisible for those who do not want to see them.

So I will start with statistics, but I would like us to bear this thought. The United Nations estimate the number of street children worldwide to be 150 million, and rising daily. 150 million is more than the population of France and Germany combined. And every single one of these 150 million children has a face, has a name, and has a daily nightmare to live through.

The fact is that the phenomenon of street children is global and escalating. Poverty, family disintegration due to health or death, neglect, abuse or abandonment, and social unrest are all common triggers for a child's life on the streets. Reasons for which children find themselves on the street are diverse, but they have one thing in common – they are preventable – or at least they should be, in any civilized society worthy of its

name. Street children can be seen as begging, washing and parking cars, selling merchandise, performing household work, collecting waste products, loading and unloading merchandise, stealing, and engaging in forced prostitution.

Children live on the streets of every country and virtually every city in the world today, including in Europe, yet they remain largely invisible.

Children living in the streets are stigmatised, they are branded as delinquents when they are often victims of abuse and exploitation and exposed to all kinds of dangers.

If all children are vulnerable, growing up in the streets throws a child in outright helplessness.

Street children are exposed to the worst forms of violations of their human rights. They may be killed, exploited, abused and tortured. They have no private or family life, no security, no protection against discrimination. They live in a nightmare, even if for some of them the life before the street may not have been much better.

This is something which is of direct concern to the Council of Europe - and I am very happy to hear what you've just said, Mr President, in this respect - who is committed to the protection of the rights and well-being of all children, and especially the most vulnerable ones.

If we look at our legal texts, the European Social Charter is probably the best available instrument we have in the Council of Europe to promote the protection of street children.

The Charter establishes the rights of children and young persons to social, legal and economic protection and obliges governments to protect children and young persons against negligence, violence and exploitation. Under the protocol which came into force in 1998, complaints of violations of the Charter may be lodged with the European Committee on Social Rights. Certain organisations, such as NGOs enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe, are entitled to lodge complaints with this committee, and that is of course hugely important, because street children are unlikely to be able to do so themselves and this is why we are also focussing on prevention dealing with social and family situation which may expose children to living on the street.

I would like to mention another text of the Council of Europe. Our recent Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings is another very important legal instrument in this respect. It recognises that all forms of trafficking in human beings are a violation of human rights and requires states to protect its victims, whether men, women or children. It applies to all forms of exploitation but provides for specific measures for children victims of trafficking, adapted to their needs. Hopefully very soon, the Council of Europe legal arsenal will be reinforced with a new Convention for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse. This new

and innovative instrument will focus on prevention and harmonisation of criminal law. It will also set standards for child-friendly judicial procedures.

We want to prevent the predators who prey on children from finding a safe haven.

All parts of the Council of Europe are involved in our collective effort to promote children's rights and eradicate violence against children. The Programme "Building a Europe for and with Children" is helping member states to live up to their international commitments, to mainstream children perspective into policy, to raise awareness about children's rights, and to ensure a European follow-up of the recommendations in the UN Study on violence against children, the preparation of which has been facilitated for the European region by the Council of Europe.

Local authorities can tremendously contribute to this process. The important added value of local and regional authorities lies in their closeness to the citizens. They can act effectively and concretely - where it matters and when it matters.

They can play a leading role in providing help and protection – a shelter which is not a prison in disguise. Local authorities can help to change attitudes and perceptions of citizens and officials - and especially policemen - by informing and raising awareness of children's problems, rights and needs.

People must know – and accept – that street children are victims, not criminals, and that we all share the responsibility to free them from the nightmare of life in the streets.

Local and regional authorities can help immensely by opening up to these children, listening to them, give them a voice and make them visible. They can help by giving them a chance for a better future through education which can break the vicious cycle of poverty, and by giving them access to health care to heal the scars, both physical and psychological.

I should like to thank the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe for placing this important subject on the agenda of their session today. Many of you are already doing exceptional things to help street children in your immediate environment, but this debate is an opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas, and reinforce our common resolve to help these children and give them hope and a real chance for a decent start in their lives.

The protection of children rights is my personal priority as Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, for a number of reasons. I strongly believe that rights of a human being should not vary in proportion with their age.

Children are not mini persons with mini rights. Our attitudes to children define who we are. A society which fails its children, is a society which has failed itself.

Thank you.