

**Summary Report on the Symposium on
*Street children and youth as a priority of the EU's social inclusion policy for the new
Member States in Central and Eastern Europe*
organised by the European Network on Street Children Worldwide (ENSCW) on
9-10 December 2004, Brussels**

The ENSCW Symposium aimed to analyse to what extent excluded children and street children have to be considered as a priority within the joint initiatives of the European Commission and the new EU Member States in Eastern Europe in the framework of the EU's new social inclusion policy. Furthermore, the seminar aimed at an analysis of the approaches of the EU, the relevant authorities of the Member States and the NGOs working in the field towards this growing problem in Eastern Europe. A particular interest of the seminar was to bring together the actors from these different levels in order to analyse the present situation in the light of their perceptions, to facilitate the exchange of information and best practice on this topic and to create permanent networking links between them in order to ensure a better co-ordinated and sustainable joint action in the future.

James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, confirmed in a video message the World Bank's commitment to supporting ENSCW initiatives in favour of street children and excluded children, claiming a proper partnership between official institutions and civil society, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to fight against this phenomenon as well as against poverty as one of the most crucial problems of the century.

Street children are considered as a particularly vulnerable group which needs tailor-made solutions and major attention in European policy development preventing poverty and social exclusion. With this objective in mind, the European Network on Street Children Worldwide has brought together the relevant players in this field such as qualified officials from the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament, representatives of the concerned governments and of the NGOs involved with street children from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation and the Slovak Republic. In addition, representatives of the World Bank and the Council of Europe attended.

The symposium revealed that the number of street children cannot easily be estimated. Figures range from 5,000 to over 9,000 or to 60,000 according to the international press in Romania. In the Czech Republic 17,000 social services' clients out of 40,673 were young people under 15 years of age. In Poland, according to the police, in 2002 there were 5,625 children who had run away from home (4,042 were under 15) and 6,662 who had run away from residential care institutions to go back to the streets.

It is difficult to agree on one general definition of street children commonly used by specialists working on this field. The contexts in the different countries vary too greatly for this. One difficulty of definition is the fact that most street children in Eastern Europe maintain some relations with their family and sometimes even with school.

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According to the organisations attending the symposium, the main reasons for children living in the streets are still low family income, bad emotional relationships and a society that is not sufficiently child-oriented, with a social system that does not provide modern intervention strategies and does not offer appropriate opportunities for the re-integration of children at risk. Poverty is often associated with violence from one or both parents, with the death of a parent or of both, re-marriage of a parent or their living with another partner. Children are most at risk of poverty in these cases. Care institutions often do not offer appropriate solutions: in Poland for example, according to police statistics, there were 6,662 children who ran away from residential care institutions in 2002 and went back to the streets. The largest group of street children were between 12 and 16 years old (about 60%). According to Roelie Post, who is in charge of street children in Romania at the European Commission's DG Enlargement, children are still too often put in care institutions without investigating the cause. Child protection is the responsibility of the States and their social systems, which are currently not responding sufficiently to the necessary requirements.

The lack of reliable and official statistics regarding the number of street children was stressed several times. An urgent problem, in view of the creation of an effective EU social inclusive policy in this field, is the compilation of comparable data on child poverty across the EU. Zbigniew Zaleski, a Member of the European Parliament, asked NGOs and governments for more detailed figures in order to raise the attention of the entire political assembly on this crucial issue. He supported the creation of a proper unit in the European Commission dealing with issues of children's rights. Alain Brun (Head of the Unit on Fundamental Rights in the European Commission) confirmed the importance of this issue, declaring that "the rights of children should have an important place on the agenda of the future European Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna".

The analysis of the National Action Plans on social inclusion (NAPs/incl) 2004-2006 submitted by the 10 new Member States and compiled by the European Commission (to be published in early 2005) confirms that the poverty risk appears to be higher when faced by children and young people, and the high level of poverty and social exclusion experienced by children is widely recognised as a key challenge in most Member States. This is stressed by strategic approaches, objectives and targets set and the measures adopted in the NAPs/incl. in many of the Member States. The accession countries of Romania and Bulgaria showed a high level of attention of both NGOs and governments to the issue of street children policies and legislation, confirming that they do not underestimate this alarming recent problem.

From the discussion the following points emerged which will be taken into consideration at European and national level to strengthen the inclusive social policies of the new Member States regarding the situation of street children:

1. Implementing and developing NAPs/incl. at social and municipal level: inclusion at local and regional level; multidisciplinary approach, putting together all actors to discuss problems, list common goals and shared actions (teachers, social workers, representatives of the local authorities, experts, etc.); strengthening the capacity building at municipal level.

2. Mainstreaming acknowledgement of the needs for an integrated and multi-dimensional strategy (considering factors such as education, health, communication, information) into the NAPs/incl., because the scale of what is proposed is mostly considered insufficient by the European Commission to make a decisive impact on the eradication of child poverty and social exclusion.
3. Ensuring a post-evaluation procedure to check the results in view of ongoing or changing strategies and actions and their sustainability.
4. Both local governments and State governments must develop a better communication including the NGOs intervening in the field.
5. Ensuring better participation in EU assistance programmes (the European Social Fund in particular) by both creating specific strands for children's support projects and facilitating application procedures. For example, the 6th Framework Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration activities (2002-2006) should also foresee projects on children and not only on the reconciliation of family and work.
6. Providing new reliable data and elaborating clearer definitions and targets on street children.

The attending NGOs and experts agreed on the following priorities concerning the improvement of the intervention and inclusion strategies:

1. Mobile Youth Work staff development and qualification in connection with the networking and designing of life-oriented curricula for non-formal education and training.
2. Creating specific quality standards for work and training.
3. Exploiting new information and communication technologies to carry out childcare activities, organise public campaigns and distribute information within the networks.
4. Using young voluntary workers who are more acceptable to youngsters, even if the management of the organisation has to be directed by professionals.
5. Exploiting the European Structural Funds directed to the new Member States concerning child policies in a more professional and effective way.
6. Creating networks and round table discussions to enhance co-operation and partnership at local, regional and national level with the participation of NGOs working in the "old" EU Member States.
7. Being involved in lobbying and advocacy activities to apply political pressure through the media and the use of the Networks in the National, European and International institutions.
8. Monitoring children's participation in the development of support strategies and methods - the need to avoid any political exploitation.
9. Supporting campaigns to convince young people to register or use identification documents, otherwise they deprive themselves of some principal rights, such as the right to education, work, social assistance, due legal process, vote, etc.

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10. Co-ordinating future actions by joint strategies to influence the next round of EU National Action Plans on social inclusion compiled by governments in 2006 in favour of the rights of the most excluded children.

Taking into consideration the results of this symposium, the ENSCW appeals to the European institutions and national authorities involved in the shaping of a new social inclusion framework in Europe to enhance the following steps:

- *Adoption of a report on street children in Europe by the European Parliament;*
- *Ensuring the topic of excluded children's rights to become a working priority of the new European Agency of Fundamental Rights (to be set up in 2007);*
- *Mainstreaming the relevant policies, programmes and finance instruments for the new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe with minimum standards for the protection of the rights and the improvement of the living conditions of children at risk;*
- *Ensuring that the Member States (following the new objectives on children's rights contained in the new Constitutional Treaty of the EU) develop proactive policies and legislation in favour of better protection of excluded children's rights;*
- *Systematic consultation of the NGOs committed to the street children's cause by the government authorities, particularly in the new Member States, in the process of establishing the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion compiled by the governments in 2006 for the European Commission;*
- *Creation of a permanent inter-parliamentary committee group on excluded children and street children in the European Parliament;*
- *Creation of a unit for Children's rights in the European Commission.*

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