

EUROPEAN FORUM ON STREET CHILDREN 2012

Unaccompanied minors victims of violence:
*origins, manifestations and prevention strategies to overcome the “hidden”
phenomenon of children suffering in the shadow.*
A challenge to European and national child rights policies

Joint Declaration

The challenge of unaccompanied minors is growing, as a considerable number of third-country nationals below the age of 18 arrive on EU territory unaccompanied by a responsible adult, or are left unaccompanied after they have entered EU territory. It is a European-wide phenomenon, although it is recognised that some Member States are more affected than others. The reasons behind the arrival of this particularly vulnerable category of children are manifold: to escape from wars and conflicts, poverty or natural catastrophes, discrimination or persecution; to be sent by their family in the expectation of a better life or in order to access education and welfare; to join family members; as victims of trafficking destined for exploitation, etc.

Violence against children is in general a hidden phenomenon and this even more true for the most vulnerable group of unaccompanied children whose situation is marked by isolation, ignorance of their rights, deficient or lacking communication channels to social workers, youth authorities and justice as well as a lacking proper access to social services. But the well-being of children can only be achieved in a society which is free of violence, abuse and exploitation. Some categories of children, like unaccompanied children, are particularly vulnerable to violence and face greater risks to their lives and well being due to social, political and economic factors.

The EU is strongly committed to eliminating all forms of violence against children. As stated in the EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child, approximately 200 million children worldwide witness domestic violence annually, over 200 million children are subject to sexual violence and up to 2 million children are treated in hospitals for violence related injuries. Although there exist a legal recognition of the promotion and protection of the rights of the child at EU level and all EU Member States have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), still inequalities are growing and many policy challenges remain to be addressed in order to make sure that the rights enshrined in the UN CRC are realized for all children.

The lack of relevant data and statistics on unaccompanied minors and other most vulnerable groups of children, also due to the dynamic nature of current migration flows, represent a serious obstacle for the development and implementation of evidence-based policies and efficient interventions to prevent and protect the most vulnerable children against violence. Prevention of unsafe and illegal migration and trafficking of children is the first step for effectively tackling the issue of unaccompanied minors.

These considerations require that the issue must be comprehensively addressed by all EU Member States, and a fundamental and pro-active co-operation between origin and destination countries must be strengthened. At the same time, the local level of action and a close co-



operation between NGOs, local authorities, and locally-active institutions, as well as their adequate resourcing remains crucial in ensuring that the national-level policy statements make a concrete difference in children's lives.

In this framework, the European Federation for Street Children, its member organisations as well as all participants present at the European Forum for Street Children 2012 call on the urgent implementation of the following recommendations:

To the EU institutions, and in particular the European Commission

- Address as a matter of priority the situation and needs of **vulnerable children victims of violence**, such as unaccompanied minors, as a joint challenge of all European Member States in order to make the provisions of the EU Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors a reality;
- Adopt **higher standards of protection** for unaccompanied minors by adopting more comprehensive legislation on trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of children;
- Play a co-ordinating role in addressing the challenges of the mobility of separated children within the EU by **bringing together origin and destination countries**, building on the key experiences from existing inter-governmental agreements such as that between Italy and Romania in the protection of unaccompanied minors and minors in conflict with the law;
- Undertake a facilitator role towards a **comprehensive and co-ordinated data collection effort** EU-wide, in order to follow-up on the recommendation contained in the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child, to improve the collection of data regarding vulnerable children. This requires a fundamental multi-level co-operation ranging from the EU level, in order to ensure comparability among data; among Ministries at National level; and among all actors involved in child protection at local level;
- Activate specific measures of protection and guardianship and social re-inclusion programs through **targeted EU funding** also for unaccompanied foreign minors and vulnerable children inserted in the juvenile justice system for being in conflict with the law, and through a close and operative co-operation between the national Ministries of Justice and the NGOs operating in the protection of children in conflict with the law;
- Continue promoting the **development of child protection systems**, which link the services needed across all social sectors to prevent and respond to risks of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children;

To the EU Member States

- Strengthen the efforts to implement an **EU common approach** on the protection of unaccompanied minors, based on the respect of the rights of the child as set out in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UNCRC;
- Foster **cooperation between origin, transit and destination countries** based on principles of solidarity and sharing of responsibilities, as well as enhance cooperation with expert **civil society organisations** and **international organisations**;



- Appoint a **coordinator** at a high level of decision-making to unite and monitor effective positive action in contrast to violence against children in all its different forms.
- Continue the efforts to **integrate key aspects of migration in development cooperation**, in areas such as poverty reduction, education, health, labour policy, and human rights, in view of addressing the root causes of migration and to create an environment allowing children to grow up in their countries of origin with good prospects of personal development and decent standards of living;
- Contribute to empowering and protecting children when they are vulnerable by supporting the **exchange of best practices** and the improvement of training for guardians, public authorities and other actors who are in close contact with unaccompanied children;
- Ensure that **spending levels for social projects of child protection** are maintained in spite of the economic downturn, in order to protect those extremely excluded children who are most vulnerable to economic volatility.

To the Local Authorities

- Establish **networks** with NGOs, the private sector and all institutional actors involved in the promotion and protection of the rights of extremely excluded children, and ensure that children and their families are systematically consulted and involved with a view to achieving a sustainable improvement in their living conditions;
- Implement services of **social and cultural mediation**, intercultural and interdisciplinary education, focusing on the improvement capacity of the society to overcome cultural resistance and improve the effectiveness of any integration strategies for unaccompanied minors and other children at risk;
- Design and implement actions aiming at **reducing child poverty and violence against children** in urban areas and tackle the issue of early school failure and school abandonment;
- Support, disseminate and strengthen **innovative programmes and projects**, aiming to empower children to protect themselves and their peers against any form of violence and exploitation. Focus should be placed on initiatives of training, counselling, formal and informal support group mechanisms and innovative ideas for developing a protective environment for children.

VERONA, 12 October 2012

