



**European Forum on Street Children 2008 held on 06.-07.10.2008 in Lisbon**

**Civil society representatives and political personalities from EU and national policy underline the role of civil society for building a Social Europe and urge Member States to prioritise street children in the European Year 2010 for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion**

The role of civil society as a catalyst for the social inclusion of street children cannot be overemphasized. Extreme poverty puts street children at risk of violence and abuses, prevents them from access to social services and to the labour market, as was stated in the draft Social Inclusion Report of the European Parliament Employment Committee dated 24.09.2008. In this context, the intervention of civil society plays a fundamental role in raising awareness, giving voice and concretely protecting the rights of children at risk and street children. Volunteers are key actors in this context: their legal, financial and professional working conditions, in particular their training must be carefully organised in order to ensure that they develop appropriate skills and deliver high quality services. Their role is a fundamental expression of active citizenship, as “we all share the responsibility to free them from the nightmare of life in the streets”, as Ms. De-Boer-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, stated during a debate on street children held on the 27.03.2007.

These issues were addressed and thoroughly analysed during the two-day conference “**Street Children as a challenge to social policy and the renewed Lisbon strategy: the role of the civil society as a catalyst for the social inclusion process for children at high risk and street children**”, jointly organised by the European Federation for Street Children (EFSC) and the Portuguese child care organisation Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC) on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> October 2008. The conference was supported by the EU programme PROGRESS.

The conference with more than 150 participants obtained a significant media coverage in the Portuguese television and newspapers, thanks to the participation of high level national politicians and personalities such as the former President of Portugal Mr. Ramalho Eanes and the Minister of Labour and Social Solidarity Mr. Vieira da Silva, representatives of the EU Institutions (Parliament, Commission and ECOSOC) and expert practitioners from the field (mostly EFSC member organisations).

The conference was articulated into five sections:

1. Civil society and social responsibility: European and national approaches;

2. Innovative approaches on civil society involvement in new and old member states;
3. Voluntary work in Europe in practice: legal financial and political framework conditions;
4. Civil society contributions to the social inclusion of street children: good practices and key challenges
5. A panel discussion addressing the topic: "Towards a European Year on Volunteering 2011: How can the cooperation of NGOs and public institutions be reinforced?"

Civil society was presented as a key actor of policy making in an era of globalisation, as "one cannot govern without the people" as Mr. Eanes stated. Anthony Simpson, Board member of EFSC, illustrated the growing European dimension of the phenomenon of street children: "Thus, what used to be a national level problem has become a European issue". Given this "extremely alarming situation", he asked for "a European wide approach with the close co-operation of the EU with the Member States and European networks of NGOs." In order to implement this, he asked for a "European framework to ensure favourable working conditions for volunteers and thus the active involvement of civil society in the inclusion process for high-risk children". Ms. Harkin, MEP emphasised the statement that "A policy for childhood is the work of the whole community" as well as a participatory "policy with" approach as opposed to a "policy for" one. Mr. Jarab of the Cabinet of Commissioner Špidla presented the adoption of the recent Recommendation on Active Inclusion, containing a set of common principles which member states are called upon to refer to in the elaboration of their social policies, as well as the opportunities for NGOs to get involved in the European Year to combat poverty and social Exclusion 2010.

Key themes of the discussion were the role of the European Union in social issues and in particular the drafting of a much-needed European Charter on Volunteering, setting formal obligations for Member States. Based on the principle of subsidiarity, the Charter should find a synthesis between the legally limited but politically relevant guideline capacities of the EU in social policy, and the sovereign powers of the Member States to set a favourable framework for voluntary work. Thus the EU should more effectively use its potential as an "engine" boosting a shared vision on volunteering and as a collector of best practices from which to draw guidelines for action. The elaboration of the Charter should go in parallel with the awareness-raising on the benefits of volunteering in those countries which are less sensitive to this issue. A significant awareness-raising effect could be achieved by announcing 2011 as the European Year on Volunteering. Mrs. Harkin, author of the eponym EP Written Declaration, ensured that pressure to achieving this goal is ongoing. Mr. da Cruz Fonseca, President of Caritas Portugal, suggested the creation of an EU training centre based on the common EU-wide values of volunteering and stated that the EU should set common guidelines for measuring the economic value of volunteering, which is significant in most countries. Ms. Cser, member of the European Economic and Social Committee, invited the civil society organisations present to "use" the EESC for raising their concerns at EU level.

The presentation of numerous case studies and innovative examples of civil society involvement, with particular focus on street children, stimulated the discussion about adequate training for volunteers, about setting standards for their selection and about finding ways for motivating them and ensure their continuous commitment through non-financial remuneration. It was particularly emphasized that strong efforts must be made within the New EU Member States to raise

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awareness of the importance of voluntary work for social cohesion and economic prosperity. Reinhold Müller, Director of EFSC stressed the urgent need to collect reliable and up-to-date figures and data on street children in the EU and called for a joint European effort in this direction in order to establish a statistical base as a pre-requisite for any systematic approach to the problem. He announced the project of a "European Report on Street Children" to be developed by EFSC and hopefully supported by the European Commission in order to compile such figures and data on street children within the EU Member States.

Besides the exchange on innovative methods on social re-integration of marginalized children in practice, most speakers and in particular Mrs. Maria Manuela Ramalho Eanes, President of IAC, highlighted the importance of transmitting love and affection to children, of family ties, prevention and re-establishment of family contexts for children at risk and street children as energies that feed social solidarity.

One major outcome of the conference was the adoption of a joint declaration on making civil society and the social inclusion of street children a priority issue of the European Year 2010 for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The declaration stresses the need to make strong efforts in order to reach the goal set by the European Parliament towards eradicating the phenomenon of street children by 2015. It recommends that the National Implementing Bodies for the Year 2010 provide civil society organisations working with street children with adequate resources to raise awareness on the living conditions of street children in the framework of the year, and ensure an adequate follow-up to those actions, while giving media prominence to the EP goal to eradicate the phenomenon by 2015. The declaration also calls on the EP to establish an Intergroup on Street Children and adopt a joint opinion to lead to the creation of an EU budget line to support the organisations working with this target group. It finally asks for better coordination between the European and national level to ensure sustainability and synergy-building to the actions taken in favour of street children.

The declaration was adopted by consensus at the conference in the presence of major political and civil society representatives. EFSC will strongly advocate jointly with IAC for making sure that this success will actually translate into better living conditions for street children Europe-wide.

The proceedings of the conference will be published. For further information and background material please contact Anna D'Ambrosio, EFSC Advocacy, Lobbying and Fundraising Officer: [anna.dambrosio@efsc-eu.org](mailto:anna.dambrosio@efsc-eu.org), or EFSC office: [info@efsc-eu.org](mailto:info@efsc-eu.org).



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