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What Europe can do for children in the aftermath of natural disasters and crisis situations: the examples of Haiti and Afghanistan

Report[1]
Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee
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Summary

Natural disasters and political crises occur frequently all over the world. Even though not always directly concerned, the member states of the Council of Europe should take up their responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance and promote the protection of human rights, in particular in cases where social, economic and cultural interdependencies exist. This responsibility is notably called upon when it comes to the situation of children, whose fundamental rights, physical integrity and development are particularly at risk in situations of instability, and who should therefore be the special focus of any national and international policy in this field.

The examples of Haiti and Afghanistan serve to illustrate how European action to help children in the aftermath of crisis situations and natural disasters could be improved. At legislative level, member states should ensure that their legislation does not inadvertently facilitate further human rights violations, for example in the framework of intercountry adoption procedures. Member states should also support relevant reforms in the countries concerned and improve the efficiency of humanitarian assistance through co-ordinated action which fully respects the local culture. Countries concerned should be supported in rebuilding their governance structures, including child protection mechanisms, which often requires reliable international support over a sustained period of time.

1. Reference to committee: Bureau decision, Reference 3646 of 29 January 2010.

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A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Natural disasters and political crises are events that pose a threat to the lives and to the very basis of existence of the population in the country concerned. Recent events have shown that these situations are not unusual and can occur, in one way or another, in a variety of countries: the famine in East Africa, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, was well as the recent and ongoing political crises in the Arab world and the crisis which has been affecting Afghanistan for many years now. Children are worst hit by these crises, for a wide variety of reasons.

2. The member states of the Council of Europe are regularly called upon to contribute their know-how in crisis situations in these distant countries, to provide material support and thus to shoulder the responsibility which derives not only from their international commitments but also from the many forms of economic and social interdependence with these countries. The assistance is usually provided in a highly complex context, with the arrival of many international and European governmental and non-governmental organisations in countries which are at that time mostly helpless and devoid of means of governance.

3. The Parliamentary Assembly is particularly worried about the situation of children in the context of natural disasters or political crises, where not even the provision of basic services (housing, food, health care, hygiene and education) can be ensured. Moreover, in these situations of instability and collapse of the rule of law, children often face many attacks on their personal integrity, such as physical and sexual violence, abduction and various types of exploitation. The two cases studied, Haiti and Afghanistan, have shown a number of lacunae in international aid provision, which is sometimes insufficiently targeted and co-ordinated and is therefore liable to exacerbate rather than improve the situation of children.

4. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member states to acknowledge that their national policies in specific fields, such as intercountry adoption, can directly influence the fate of children in countries in crisis. The “demand” from European families for young children to adopt has been pinpointed as one of the factors encouraging child trafficking activities in distant countries. Intercountry adoption procedures in the host countries for these children should be tailored to ensure greater transparency and rigorous respect for the 1993 Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption (the Hague Convention), which stipulates that “intercountry adoptions [must be] made in the best interests of the child” and that “each State should take, as a matter of priority, appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the care of his or her family of origin”. The same principles must be promoted in countries of origin affected by natural or political crises.

5. Furthermore, the Assembly calls on member states to take account of the risk of mental and behavioural destabilisation of children caused by eating and clothing habits and lifestyles imported during abrupt, ephemeral mass emergency interventions. Although such actions provide the requisite immediate assistance, they often leave an enormous vacuum and dashed hopes if they are short-lived. Emergency intervention programmes must therefore be targeted, respect local culture and lifestyles and be part of a continuous action supporting a definitive return to normality.

6. In the light of the situation of children in Haiti and Afghanistan, the Assembly calls on the member states to adopt the following measures in order to support countries affected by the consequences of a natural disaster or a political crisis:

6.1. in any legislative and humanitarian action conducted at European and national levels, recognise and promote childhood as a factor of particular vulnerability in order to ensure that assistance to third countries results in appropriate responses to the real needs of children and that it respects their culture of origin as well as international rules;

6.2. in connection with national legislative measures:

6.2.1. ratify, if they have not yet done so, the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption, and fully implement it;

6.2.2. review their national legislation and procedures on intercountry adoption, and suspend intercountry adoption with countries in crisis until the child protection mechanisms are once again operational, in order to avoid encouraging child trafficking;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 16 September 2011.

6.2.3. promote, in countries affected by crises, the Hague Convention and the recommendations set out in the report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery (particularly as regards Haiti, where "*restavek*", a form of domestic exploitation of children, is practised);

6.2.4. support, in countries affected by crises, legislative, judicial and institutional reforms geared to introducing effective mechanisms for the protection of children against all risks: abduction, trafficking, physical and sexual violence, placement in illegal or non-supervised accommodation structures, wrongful intercountry adoption or other forms of exploitation;

6.3. as regards humanitarian action conducted or supported by them:

6.3.1. promote the introduction of specifications for all humanitarian actions supported by national budgets in order to ensure that child protection is prioritised and that the bodies mandated respect human rights during their interventions;

6.3.2. support humanitarian organisations and specialist associations in a continuous and reliable manner, guaranteeing the honouring of financial pledges made and disengaging gradually in consultation with all the parties involved;

6.3.3. support national players not only in the most urgent responses to the crisis, but also, in the medium term, in restoring government structures, public authorities and economic development, vital basic services (including education), the main infrastructures and the labour market;

6.3.4. take account of the specific national contexts and the particular challenges arising in crisis situations, such as specific needs of populations in remote geographical areas or the need to help national and local partners to restore their own management capacities as quickly as possible.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Hostalier, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. This report deals principally with the situation in Haiti one year after the terrible earthquake of 12 January 2010. The people of Haiti, and the children in particular, need Europe's support more than ever before as they are still suffering the lasting consequences of the greatest disaster the country has known for centuries. A few days after the Haiti earthquake, I suggested that the Parliamentary Assembly should turn its attention to the subject of this report, considering that the evaluation of the way in which Europe, as well as member states and European non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intervened to assist the people of Haiti could serve as an example to follow or to improve upon in case of a future comparable situation. The example of Afghanistan was added at a later stage in the report in order to address the situation of a country which has been in crisis for decades. Even if the context of conflict, or indeed war, means that the situation is different, the fate of the children is just as tragic, and the recommendations on intervention have many similarities. Therefore, the specific situation of children there will only be illustrated by some selected items of information (see paragraphs 21 and 22).

2. According to a report presented by UNICEF in January 2011,[3] 220 000 people lost their lives in the earthquake in Haiti and countless families were devastated, 750 000 children being directly affected. In January 2011, more than 600 000 persons, including 230 000 children, were still homeless and living in camps, where it was impossible to give them proper health care, education and protection and where many people had no access to drinking water or the most basic sanitation and hygiene. Moreover, towards the end of 2010 and until 2011, their situation was further worsened by the outbreak of cholera in October 2010, Hurricane Thomas in November 2010 and the political upheaval surrounding the presidential election in March 2011.

3. The earthquake in Haiti brought about a highly complex situation – a natural disaster struck and weakened a country which was already in a state of extreme poverty and had to face other crises immediately afterwards. Helping such a country represents a special challenge to the international community, not only as regards emergency action but also in helping the country get back on its feet and develop new infrastructures, economic activities and plans for the future. Therefore, one year after the natural disaster in Haiti, it was important to take stock of the successes and failures of international action to assist the Haitian people, and especially children.

4. Natural disasters and political crises are events that pose a threat to the lives and the very basis of existence of the population in the country concerned. Both occur quite regularly, as we have had occasion to see not just in Haiti but also in East Africa, the Arab world, Japan, and for much longer now in Afghanistan, to mention only a few examples. Even if some of these countries are very distant from us, the member states of the Council of Europe are called upon to assist them. They must share their know-how in crisis situations, provide material support and shoulder the responsibility which derives from the many forms of economic and social interdependence with the countries concerned.

5. Through this report, some lines of action to be followed by the member states of the Council of Europe shall be suggested in order to give the best possible help to the children of Haiti and of Afghanistan, as well as to the children of countries that may be hit by natural disasters or crisis situations in the future. The suggestions put forward are based on expert opinions given at a hearing organised by the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee in Paris on 23 March 2011, which was attended by representatives of the United Nations, UNICEF and the humanitarian associations Médecins du Monde and Action Against Hunger.[4] Their oral contributions have been drawn upon for the purposes of this report, and I thank them warmly for having shared their great expertise with our committee. The various written materials they have also provided, such as the report on the human rights situation in Haiti submitted to the United Nations General Assembly in June 2011, have made it possible to enrich the analysis. Lastly, this report includes information which I personally

3. UNICEF: "The children of Haiti. One year on – The long road from relief to recovery", Geneva, January 2011, www.unicef.org.

4. For the declassified minutes of the hearing, see document AS/Soc (2011) PV 2 add 2. Participants included: Mr Michel Forst, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Haiti; Mr Pierre Poupard, Senior Emergency Co-ordinator, UNICEF headquarters; Ms Isabelle Moussard-Carlsen, Desk Officer in charge of the mission in Haiti, Action contre la faim (Action Against Hunger); and Mr Pierre Salignon, Director General for Humanitarian Action, Médecins du Monde France (Doctors of the World). Any information for which no source is indicated has been supplied by one of these experts.

gleaned during my two visits to Haiti and Afghanistan, which I conducted at my own expense in April and July 2011 respectively and during which I met many experts and affected families. All the recommendations set out in this report are therefore based on information collected *in situ*.

2. The situation of children in Haiti and in Afghanistan and action needed

2.1. Dangers posing a threat to children in Haiti

6. Even before the earthquake, there were special problems in Haiti affecting the rights and protection of children: a high rate of mother-and-infant mortality; unequal access to health care; vulnerability of children to chronic malnutrition, sexual assault and violence; the existence of organised networks of human trafficking and domestic exploitation; and 50 000 children placed in institutions. The earthquake exacerbated that situation and revealed the "silent crisis" of this country which is amongst the poorest in the world, which was less prepared than others for such a disaster, and which had always had particularly weak child protection mechanisms.

7. In situations of crisis, whatever their cause, children are invariably the most vulnerable members of society, in particular when they are separated from their family and their usual surroundings. In Haiti, for this reason, children were greatly exposed to the violence present on the streets and in temporary camps, and to criminal activities which already existed before but grew more serious with the public disorder caused by the earthquake. Because of the large number of isolated and even orphaned children, and of mass movements of population inside the country, the risks of children being abducted for trafficking and exploitation, illegal adoption or violent treatment have persisted for a long period after the catastrophe and still seem to exist. In this connection, the United Nations teams are still worried by allegations of child trafficking on the frontier with the Dominican Republic.

8. One of the biggest childcare problems in Haiti remains the large number of illegal or undeclared childcare institutions. Often children are placed in them by their families with the laudable intention of ensuring better care for them, but are then at risk of being exploited for commercial or trafficking purposes. Another specific issue severely affecting children's rights is that of *restaveks* (meaning "stay with" in Creole). As a rule, it means placing the children of poor families from rural areas with better-off urban families in the hope that they will enjoy a better life. What often happens in practice, however, is that the children are exploited by being forced to perform arduous domestic tasks, they do not attend school and are subjected to physical or sexual violence, isolation and under-nourishment. According to UNICEF estimates, this was the fate of 173 000 Haitian children in 2007, which represents over 8% of the country's 5 to 17 year olds. If children are to be spared this fate, it is indispensable to help the state of Haiti establish a veritable population census, the principle of compulsory school attendance and a more effective control of placement facilities with strict rules that leave no margin whatsoever for corruption.

9. As regards international adoption, steps must be taken to ensure that Haitian children are not removed from their country without the foreign host families fulfilling comprehensive and transparent legal formalities. International adoption is not a humanitarian gesture and, as stipulated in the Hague Convention, must be seen only as a last resort when all alternatives inside the country have been explored and where the competent authorities have established that the child has no parents or guardian. In the case of Haiti, it is for the Haitian authorities in particular, with support from the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) to put strong machinery in place for this purpose.

10. According to the association Médecins du Monde, which is an approved adoption agency, international adoption in relation to Haiti had already encountered "predatory" mechanisms prior to the crisis, since the "demand" for children to adopt has always far exceeded the "supply". The search for young children has always fuelled the circuits of corruption, and this has been even more the case since the earthquake. Thus more than 2 000 fast-tracked cases of adoption had been recorded by 31 May 2010, and thousands of attempted exits via the Dominican Republic have been foiled. Some European countries, like France, have decided to halt incoming adoptions (except for cases legally processed before the earthquake), despite strong pressure from the adopting families. Legislative developments in the matter, aimed at better protection for children, are awaited in Haiti, but no progress will be possible until such time as the state reverts to normal functioning.

11. One of the main problems also facing children in Haiti is that of access to education. According to UNESCO, only one child in five had access to public schooling before the earthquake of 12 January 2010. Thus a large section of the population was denied education because parents could not afford to pay the enrolment fees. In the meantime, UNESCO has undertaken to support the Haitian minister of national

education and vocational training in implementing the plan recommended by the national education covenant. Among other things, Haiti would like to provide free quality education, from 2015 onwards, for all children aged between 6 and 12.[5] Similar efforts are being made by UNICEF, which hoped to rebuild 200 semi-permanent schools across the country by the end of June 2011.[6] According to UNICEF, the role of education must moreover not be underestimated: after a crisis, access to schooling should be restored as rapidly as possible for as many children as possible, so as to give them a sense of normality and of belonging to a community that provides reassurance.

12. In crisis situations such as the one in Haiti, children are often exposed to a chain of hazards that begins with the loss of or protracted separation from the reference adult and continues with physical and psychological threats such as malnutrition, limited access to health care or education, as well as exposure to various forms of violence. Obviously, the younger the child is when submitted to such conditions, the more dramatic are the consequences. Furthermore, a "paradox" can be observed in Haiti: whereas the child is often considered "king" in official parlance, the reality is otherwise and one must note that children are not only poorly protected but are sometimes used as a resource for trafficking of various types. Many children were already victims of exploitation before the January 2010 earthquake. The complexity of a crisis situation, such as the one in Haiti, makes children even more vulnerable than in "normal" times.

2.2. Factors which exacerbate the situation or increase its complexity

13. First of all, the relative inability of the Haitian Government and the local authorities to respond to the consequences of the earthquake made the situation worse. Most of the ministries had been destroyed, many civil servants were dead or incapable of working, and in the general "chaos", the basic social services could no longer reach rural populations. This made the widespread chronic poverty amongst them much worse and reduced the vital economic base (then confined to the capital). Moreover, emergency situations must be co-ordinated against a background of the utmost neutrality and impartiality and try to reach out to the entire population that needs help, which is sometimes rendered difficult by an excessively rapid turnover of humanitarian personnel on the ground who make do with what others have left behind.

14. The "thematic cluster" approach to crisis management under the aegis of the United Nations (examples: nutrition, health, water, sanitation and hygiene, education, etc.) has proved generally effective. However, it has been difficult to clearly reach the objectives foreseen for these "clusters", due to the multitude of challenges and their interaction – humanitarian, but also economic and geopolitical challenges – as well as due to the inter-agency competition, the number of humanitarian players involved and their diversity (public, private, military, NGOs, etc.). Moreover, the complexity of the situation has been further compounded by the fact that multinational relief has been completed by bilateral co-operation. Lastly, due to the lack of a reliable institutional framework, the efficacy of humanitarian action has been affected by corruption and other criminal activities.

15. The outbreak of cholera in the second half of 2010 also contributed to exacerbating the humanitarian situation. However, thanks to the rapid intervention of international organisations, it was possible to control the disease fairly quickly. In early 2011, the cholera epidemic began to decline, but does not appear to have been entirely eradicated, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

16. As regards children in particular, a post-disaster "baby boom" is frequently observed 9 to 10 months after a violent event causing the deaths of numerous children. According to some humanitarian associations, this has also been the case in Haiti. Besides the material situations already described, the psychological state of many mothers makes it impossible for them to care for their children properly or take advantage of the consultations and support available to them, leaving the children in an even more vulnerable situation.

17. One of the major difficulties in crisis situations lies in organising ongoing humanitarian relief. One year after the earthquake, a very large number of people were still living in precarious conditions, under tarpaulins or in tents. After the emergency responses aimed at meeting the population's primary needs, the huge challenge of rebuilding the stricken areas is still there. On the other hand, as long as field workers do not know where the displaced persons are to be accommodated in the long run, it will be impossible for them to deploy actions aimed at revitalising and developing the country. In February 2010, the number of displaced persons in the country was estimated at 467 000, most of them in the province of Artibonite. Faced with this situation,

5. UNESCO: "The UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti, Michaëlle Jean, calls for urgent overhaul of education system", press release, 14 February 2011, www.unesco.org.
6. UNICEF: "UNICEF supports the reconstruction of schools in Haiti", article by Benjamin Steinlechner, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 8 April 2011, www.unicef.org.

good co-ordination between international humanitarian agencies and with the national and local authorities was all the more important. Likewise, the reconstruction of Port-au-Prince calls for a true urban policy based on reliable cadastral data.

18. Another difficulty in the case of Haiti is actually releasing the international funds made available. On 31 March 2010, in New York, more than 50 countries and multilateral organisations pledged US$9.8 billion in aid for the reconstruction of Haiti in the medium and long term. One year after the earthquake, rebuilding projects representing expenditure of only US$3.1 billion had been decided on by the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission, and only half that amount had actually been disbursed.

2.3. The lessons to be learnt

19. In Haiti, UNICEF and other specialised organisations such as Médecins du Monde and Action Against Hunger, which were consulted for the purposes of this report, have done excellent work in the areas of documentation, identification of isolated children, family reunification, housing, care provision and protection. UNICEF's response has taken the form of activities in four areas ("clusters"): water, hygiene and sanitation; education; protection of children; and health and nutrition. For example, over 720 000 children have been supported in this way for re-enrolment in school; out of 5 144 children separated from their families it has been possible to reunite 1 363, while others have been placed in supervised centres, and 1.9 million children have been vaccinated against six diseases. The monetary value of UNICEF action up to January 2011 alone has been estimated at US$350 million (though with only 85% of funding being ensured).

20. In the framework of this mobilisation of the international community to deal with crisis situations, the reports of experts are useful in identifying the broad challenges that need to be taken up:

– mechanisms of governance able to provide coherent and effective humanitarian responses;

– decentralised actions to reach the poorest and most vulnerable people (children and mothers) in remote areas;

– greater flexibility of the international organisations (UNICEF and others) in rapidly adapting operations to new contexts;

– rapid restoration of national managerial capabilities;

– convincing national partners that the idea is not to establish a "reign" of international NGOs but to provide real support in a spirit of confidence, and involving the national authorities as "leader", or at least participant, in all action undertaken;

– restoration of dialogue and confidence within "communities", which constitute huge resources but which, in a case like Haiti, have first to be re-established after being weakened by thirty years of dictatorship;

– involvement of the private sector.

2.4. A second example: Afghanistan

21. The situation of children in Afghanistan is just as tragic as in Haiti, according to the main indicators: with 45% of the population below the age of 15, child mortality stands at over 15% and one in four children dies before the age of 5. While children's rights had been disregarded while the Taliban were in power (up until 2001), the situation of children in 2011 remains unstable and is deteriorating in line with the pauperisation of society, even in the major towns and cities. Even though Afghanistan has ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC), most of the rights specific to children are not being respected, a situation further exacerbated in areas exposed to conflict, where children are often forcibly conscripted to take part in the fighting. Indeed, the problems for children persist in the fields of security, access to education and vocational training, health (including for their mothers) and poverty and general living conditions. The specific risks to Afghan children, many of whom have had to fend for themselves from an early age, include those linked to life on the street, domestic accidents, but also targeted attacks on their personal integrity such as sexual abuse of boys and forced marriage, which can often be considered as domestic rape, for girls. Access to education remains difficult, particularly for girls, even though enormous efforts have led to the schooling of some 7 million children in September 2011 (leaving up to 4.5 million still not attending school).

22. The international responses to these problems have come up against similar difficulties to those in Haiti, but on an even larger scale. Despite the political goodwill shown by the Afghan Government as well as all the agencies operating in the country, international assistance lacks coherency and transparency. The lack of clarity and co-ordination in any European policy is particularly worrying: some countries which have had

special relations with Afghanistan for many years (like France, Germany, Turkey and the United Kingdom) are conducting their own separate actions, while virtually all the European countries have been involved in the military coalition and the efforts to rebuild the country. Co-ordination of the different players involved is also needed: some agencies such as UNICEF have the requisite expertise but often lack the means of action, while other state or non-governmental organisations may have the resources but lack the expertise or fail to co-ordinate their actions, which sometimes renders them ineffective. Moreover, many NGOs have withdrawn from Afghanistan since 2006 for security reasons.

3. Action required of the international community

23. In the light of the situations studied for the present report, it becomes evident that, in order to protect children effectively in crisis situations, the following actions are vital:

– recognising childhood as a factor of particular vulnerability, so as to provide appropriate responses while differentiating between age brackets (under 5, school age, (pre-)adolescence);

– ensuring access to a suitable diet and good quality water, proper conditions of hygiene and sanitation, physical and mental health provision, protection against various forms of abuse and violence, and ongoing schooling;

– setting up special services for women who have just given birth and are breast-feeding, as proposed by the Action Against Hunger association (distribution of artificial milk and high-protein diet supplements, special tents for mothers and babies, etc.).

24. According to the experts consulted in the context of this report, future international action in Haiti and in other regions hit by crisis should aim to protect children better by means of the following measures:

– with regard to international standards, ratification of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, and strict application of the recommendations made in the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery;

– support in the framework of legislative and judicial reforms designed to put in place effective machinery to combat all the risks to which children are already exposed in “normal” times, but even more so in crisis situations – abduction, trafficking, violence and sexual assault, placement in illegal and unsupervised reception facilities, abusive international adoption and the Haitian practice of *restavek*;

– ongoing support for the action of UNICEF and other specialised organisations, *inter alia*, by ensuring that financial pledges are honoured.

25. As a general rule, and regardless of the specific situation of children, the following principles should be observed in order to ensure maximum effectiveness of medium-term aid:

– support for national agencies, not only in the most urgent responses to the crisis but also in restoring essential basic services and the principal infrastructures and finding income-producing solutions, as well as reinforcing the Haitian state and extricating it from chronic political instability;

– a guarantee of high-quality, lasting intervention followed by gradual disengagement;

– respect for human rights in the context of intervention by the international organisations themselves in order to safeguard their long-term credibility.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

26. The future action required of the member states of the Council of Europe entails legislative activities to a lesser extent only. It is mainly of a political nature, aimed at greater international co-ordination to deal with natural disasters and political crises. Only through coherent, targeted action on the part of the international community can effective help be given to children in crisis situations. The examples of Haiti and Afghanistan, particularly the information gathered at the hearing of experts and during my rapporteur missions, back up this argument.

27. Children face a great many dangers in crisis situations. In countries like Haiti, laws and mechanisms designed to ensure their full and complete protection are often lacking. In such circumstances, the member states of the Council of Europe must first take emergency action while applying their own high standards of democracy and human rights in the framework of the immediate aid given. This relates, for example, to the

rules governing international adoption, transparent financial flows and supervision of the actions of humanitarian personnel. In the medium term, it is also Europe's responsibility to assist in strengthening the rule of law and legislation in the countries concerned.

28. In particular fields, the member states of the Council of Europe may also be called upon to strengthen their own legislation or legal machinery, for example in the area of international adoption: in the absence of secure procedures *in situ*, some European countries such as Austria, France and Germany have, for a certain period of time, suspended adoption on their territory of children from Haiti by way of international adoption.

29. The two examples of Haiti and Afghanistan once again show that the highest standards in matters of child protection are far from being respected in all countries. It is also incumbent on Council of Europe member states to promote these standards wherever they can, while respecting the social and cultural contexts of the individual countries.

30. Overall, the protection of children against threats to their integrity (abduction, trafficking, physical and sexual violence, exploitation for domestic work, etc.) should constitute a priority of national and international action. The specific needs of children and their right to particular protection must not be "overlooked" in the mass of other problems needing to be tackled at the same time, but on the contrary it should be a permanent "constant" of any humanitarian action undertaken.