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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

Opinion¹

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population

Rapporteur: Mr André BUGNON, Switzerland, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population welcomes the report by the rapporteur of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, Ms Françoise Hostalier, for having highlighted the particular problems faced by children in the aftermath of natural disasters and crisis situations. Whilst emphasising its full support for the draft resolution, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population proposes the following amendments, in order to further highlight certain points.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 3, after the words “various types of exploitation”, add the words “, along with the traumas that result from these”.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 3, insert the following paragraph:

“The Assembly notes that many displaced children are separated from their families or become orphans. Some end up in institutions or have to live in precarious conditions on the street or in camps. Many lose civil documents in the course of this displacement, or simply never had any, even at birth. This lack of documentation and birth registration then creates a risk of children being stateless and exacerbates their vulnerability.”

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 6.1, after the words “at European and national levels,”, insert the words “include a protection perspective and”.

1. Reference to committee: Reference 3646 of 29 January 2010. Reporting committee: Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee. See [Doc. 12783](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 3 October 2011.



Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.4, add the following sub-paragraph:

“support, in countries affected by crises, efforts to address family separation through family tracing and reunification and take all necessary steps for the return or resettlement of displaced people;”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.4, add the following sub-paragraph:

“promote, in countries affected by crises, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness;”.

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6.2.4, add the following sub-paragraph:

“support, in countries affected by crises, legal reforms and institutional strengthening to ensure that all children are registered at birth, and an adequate civil registration system is accessible to all sectors of the population, particularly as regards Haiti, where many children are not registered at birth and risk being stateless;”.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Bugnon, rapporteur for opinion

1. The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population considers it extremely important to include a protection perspective in all humanitarian assistance provided or supported by the member states of the Council of Europe. This protection perspective is essential because the provision of assistance cannot be presumed to be a neutral activity affecting everyone equally in the same way. It therefore welcomes the provision contained in the draft resolution, which recognises and promotes childhood as a factor of particular vulnerability. This protection perspective assists in addressing serious and sustained protection violations against particularly vulnerable groups, such as children who are the worst hit by the crisis.

2. Natural disasters and political crises often lead to displacement of massive parts of the population, including children. The Haitian earthquake displaced more than 2 million people and separated thousands of families. An unknown number of persons remain outside the country. For the large number of unaccompanied and orphaned children the situation is especially difficult, since the state institutions cannot yet ensure adequate protection or care. Most of these children are either placed in institutions or have to live in precarious conditions on the street or in camps, exacerbating their vulnerability to physical and sexual violence, trafficking and all kinds of exploitation. The member states of the Council of Europe should strengthen their efforts in assisting national authorities to address separation through family tracing and reunification and support the definite return or resettlement of displaced persons.

3. Furthermore, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population is particularly concerned about the risk of statelessness of children born in Haiti, due to a lack of birth registration and institutional deficiencies in civil registration in general. It is estimated that between 20% and 40% of children born in Haiti are not registered at birth. The earthquake exacerbated problems related to civil identity documentation. It is likely that hundreds of thousands of displaced persons could have lost their identity documents, including birth certificates. The inability to prove identity or citizenship has made it difficult for children to receive assistance or access education and health care. Without adequate birth and civil registration systems in place, many children are vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking and illegal adoption. The member states should assist national actors in Haiti in addressing this situation.

4. The war in Afghanistan has changed the lives of many children, leaving them in widespread poverty, hardship and insecurity and suffering deep and lasting psychological trauma. In 2011, the difficult situation for children persists due to a continued lack of access to essential services and the most basic fundamentals, including food, shelter, education (particularly for girls), health care and the prospects for a better future. Other risks for children include forced labour and trafficking, early and forced marriage or domestic and sexual violence. Many children find themselves on the street or decide to leave the country. According to Eurostat, 5 900 unaccompanied minors were seeking asylum within the European Union in 2009. Further humanitarian action and co-ordination between all actors providing international aid, including the member states of the Council of Europe, is needed to improve the situation in Afghanistan.