

Resolution 1850 (2011)¹

Final version

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

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Natural disasters and political crises are events which threaten lives and the very basis of existence of the population in the countries where they occur. Recent events have shown that these situations are not unusual and can occur, in one way or another, in any country: the famine in East Africa, the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, as 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 many reasons.

2. The member states of the Council of Europe are regularly called upon to share their know-how in crisis situations in various countries, to provide material support and thus to assume their responsibilities which derive 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 destitute and powerless in the exercise of government.

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 and 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, along with the resulting traumas. The two cases studied – Haiti and Afghanistan – show a number of shortcomings in international aid, which is sometimes insufficiently targeted and co-ordinated and is therefore liable to exacerbate rather than improve the situation of children.

4. The Assembly notes that in crisis situations many children are displaced, 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 identity documents in the course of their displacement, or simply never had any, even at birth. This lack of documentation and birth registration creates a risk of children being stateless and exacerbates their vulnerability.

5. 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 many countries. Intercountry adoption procedures in the host countries for these children should be tailored to ensure greater transparency and rigorous respect for the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (the Hague Adoption Convention), which stipulates that “intercountry adoptions [must be] made in the best

1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 25 November 2011 (see [Doc. 12783](#), report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Ms Hostalier; and [Doc. 12784](#), opinion of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mr Bugnon).



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.

6. Furthermore, the Assembly calls on member states to take account of the risk of mental and behavioural destabilisation of children linked to 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.

7. 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:

7.1. in any legislative and humanitarian action conducted at European and national levels, include a protection perspective and 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;

7.2. in connection with national legislative measures:

7.2.1. ratify, if they have not yet done so, the Hague Adoption Convention, and rigorously implement it;

7.2.2. 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;

7.2.3. promote, in countries affected by crises, the Hague Adoption 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);

7.2.4. 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;

7.2.5. 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;

7.2.6. 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;

7.2.7. support, in countries affected by crises, legal reforms and institutional strengthening to ensure that all children are registered at birth, and that 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;

7.3. as regards humanitarian actions conducted or supported by them:

7.3.1. 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 commissioned bodies respect human rights during their interventions;

7.3.2. support humanitarian organisations and specialist associations in a continuous and reliable manner, honour the financial pledges made and, when appropriate, disengage gradually in consultation with all the parties involved;

7.3.3. 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 as well as the labour market;

7.3.4. 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.