

**International conference  
The role of international cooperation  
in tackling sexual violence against children  
29 - 30 November 2012, Rome (Italy)**

Speech by Johan VAN DEN HOUT, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Working Group 3 (Bilingual) – Promoting Communication and Education Policies and Strategies through international cooperation to raise awareness on the right of children to be protected against sexual violence

Ladies and gentlemen

The Council of Europe is tackling sexual violence against children at European level with its ONE in FIVE campaign and the Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, the so-called Lanzarote Convention. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has joined the campaign and is responsible for its local and regional dimensions.

Local and regional authorities have a key responsibility, along with national governments, to protect and promote citizens' human rights, and that includes safeguarding and promoting the safety and welfare of children and young people living in their areas. The services that are needed to help victims of sexual violence and abuse are provided, in the main, at the local level, which is the tier of governance closest to the victims. It is also at this level that preventive and awareness-raising measures can be most effective. So local and regional authorities are on the frontline of the fight to stop sexual violence against children and must be encouraged to develop and implement action plans and strategies to deal with and prevent future cases.

The Congress is a pan-European political assembly with 636 members. These members are all elected representatives from towns, cities and regions across the 47 Council of Europe member states. They may be regional or municipal councillors, mayors or presidents of regional authorities. Together, they represent over two hundred thousand authorities across the member states. One of our missions is to study the role of local and regional authorities faced with the major challenges of today's society. We make recommendations for concrete action - at local, regional and national levels - to local and regional councils and parliaments so they can ensure a swift response to these challenges.

This is why the Congress got involved in the ONE in FIVE campaign as combatting child sexual abuse and exploitation is one of these challenges. Research at local level from 2010, conducted in the United Kingdom, suggests however that action at local level is limited. It would seem that less than a quarter of local authorities in that member state have a strategy to protect children from sexual exploitation.<sup>1</sup> But as we know, evidence shows that sexual violence against children **is happening**, not only in the UK but also across each of the Council of Europe member states, although data collection methods are not always well enough developed to support this argument. The Congress' aim, therefore, is to promote the ONE in FIVE campaign and to raise awareness of the Lanzarote Convention among local and regional authorities so as to bring about the adoption of child-friendly services at these levels, to protect children and help prevent sexual violence within the community. To do this, the Congress Bureau adopted a Strategic Action Plan in 2011.

As part of its Strategic Action Plan and to guide local and regional authorities in this fight, the Congress has drawn up a **Pact of Towns and Regions to stop sexual violence against children**. The ultimate aim of local and regional authorities must be to prevent children from being abused and exploited. To do this, they should decide how best to run public sector agencies to ensure that children and young people are protected and supported, whilst actively pursuing the prosecution of perpetrators. Our pact, therefore, proposes a four-pronged approach of: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Participation - the four "Ps": to prevent abuse, protect victims, prosecute perpetrators while ensuring full participation for children.

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<sup>1</sup> What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? Jago et al, October 2011.

Our pact contains a list of actions that towns and regions may take in all four of these domains. Our aim is to get as many towns and regions as possible to sign up for the pact. We are aware that implementing the type of strategies and structures proposed by the Lanzarote Convention could require substantial investment. In a time of economic and financial crisis, when many local authorities are seeing their resources cut, we felt it necessary to also propose action that requires very little, if any public spending - after all, every small contribution helps. One such action could quite simply be to put a link on towns' homepages to the Council of Europe ONE in FIVE website.

As the governance level closest to the victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, local and regional authorities are best placed to set up structures which implicate all actors in the chain of care and ensure that the best support and assistance possible is given to children. They also have a duty to serve not only the needs of the child victims, but also the family system and the community as a whole. This is why our pact invites local and regional authorities to adopt the multidisciplinary approach promoted by the Lanzarote Convention and to develop coordinated structures, processes and mechanisms to tackle sexual violence against children.

I invite you to read the pact to find out what other actions it proposes, they include programmes to prevent child sexual abuse and violence and policies to raise awareness of children, people working with children, parents, families and carers. High quality professional training for all persons who have regular contact with children in their work, such as teachers, social workers, health professionals, is essential but also parents, families and carers can learn about how to recognise indicators of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

We are encouraging local and regional authorities to undertake awareness-raising actions targeted at the general public so they receive information on the phenomenon and on preventive measures which can be taken. And of course children themselves can be helped to protect themselves by learning about sexual abuse and violence, including the different types of violence and risky situations, so as to be able to make informed, safe and healthy choices.

We are currently developing an internet site for the pact. Representatives of the towns and regions who sign up will be invited to register on the Congress' online "Pact Platform". The site is being designed so that information on initiatives, structures and activities can be input by the towns themselves. This information will be available for consultation by all visitors to the site so it will be a good opportunity for towns to showcase their actions and also serve as a database of good practices. Initially, the site will operate in the 2 Council of Europe official languages – English and French - but ultimately, it will be possible to upload information in the user's language, it will then be readily accessible to – and hopefully will inspire - other towns and regions in the same country.

Political will is extremely important - particularly in these days of crisis when cost will always be an important factor. However, we must get the message across that whatever the cost involved, measures to stop sexual violence and abuse of children will always be cost-effective as they are an investment in a healthy community, based on the respect for human rights.

Our aim is to raise awareness of the pact with as many local and regional elected representatives from the two hundred thousand local and regional councils and parliaments as possible in the hope that they will, in turn, talk to their colleagues in the departments responsible for child health, welfare and safety. We are relying very much on our partners in the ONE in FIVE campaign to help us with this aim. We invite everyone – national campaign teams, national focal points, associations and NGOs working with children, associations of local and regional authorities, ministries, members of the Parliamentary Assembly's Network of Contact Parliamentarians, to help us raise awareness of the pact and to lobby for its implementation. Indeed, the pact is also open for signature by organisations working in this field and I invite you to join up!

Ladies and gentlemen, we all agree that sexual violence and abuse of children is a most heinous crime, it is up to us to combat it and I hope you will join in the Congress's action and make the local and regional dimensions of the ONE in FIVE campaign a big success.

Thank you for your attention.