

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE BELGIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE EU EXPERT CONFERENCE “EUROPE DE L’ENFANCE”

Antwerp - 9 september 2010

Introduction

The expert conference “Europe de l’Enfance” welcomes the fact that on this occasion we had the first real chance to meet and exchange between experts in the fields of children’s rights and youth. Moreover, we had an interesting mix of policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

The following key messages are the outcome of a process of plenary sessions and working group sessions on the three priority themes as identified by the Belgian EU Presidency: the European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children’s rights, the upcoming EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. The results of each workshop were described in a workshop report; this general report distills some key messages from across the different working groups.

The European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children’s rights: comparison and possible synergies

The expert conference welcomes the draft document of the Belgian EU Presidency Youth “*The European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children’s rights: State of Play*”, as well as the study of the Children’s Rights Knowledge Centre “*The European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children’s rights: comparison and possible synergies.*”

Five key messages came out of the working group sessions:

1. Deconstructing images of children and young people

The participants identified a rupture between the social constructions of ‘children’ and ‘young people’. We must be aware of the fact that children are often portrayed as dependent, whereas young people are in general seen as autonomous agents, responsible for their own acts. This dichotomous view is also to a certain extent reflected in the European Union policy agendas: the policy agendas on children’s rights tend to overemphasize a protectionist perspective, while the youth policy agendas focus on participation of young people. Especially given the fact that this rupture sometimes causes a problematic transition on the age of 18, the legal age limit of childhood, these one-sided approaches should be nuanced and counterbalanced.

2. What knowledge do we need?

The increased attention for evidence-based policy is welcomed, but at the same time raises the question on what kind of knowledge is exactly gathered and needed. The quest for evidence-based policy increases the will to measure, to monitor, to predict and to control the ideal development of children and young peoples’ lives. This explains the eagerness to base our policies on a set of indicators. The problem, however, is that there seems to be a tendency to collect information on ill-being of children and young people rather than on well-being. It was suggested that we need a more balanced combination of evidence, which implies that it is necessary to identify indicators grounded in the lived realities of children and young people in all their diversity, and not starting from the abstract adult perspective on the ideal outcomes.

3. The need for exchange and cooperation

The study of the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre reveals different shared thematic priorities and means of implementation, between the policy areas of children's rights and youth as well as across the policy levels of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. The participants showed great enthusiasm to further reflect on possibilities to exchange experiences and increase cooperation across the different policy areas and organizations. Above that, the conference emphasizes the need to guarantee more coherence between all policies in the different domains, also within one intergovernmental organization. Good practices particularly highlighted were the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth and the Ad Hoc Working Group on Child and Youth Participation of the Council of Europe.

4. The fight against child poverty: parental support or social change?

Poverty is a common thematic priority of the European and international policy agendas on both children's rights and youth. The fight against poverty is too often confused with caring for children living in poverty. However, poverty is essentially a structural and economic problem, which should be addressed through social change. Poverty is a lack of resources to live a decent life, whereas the attention seems to shift to an understanding of poverty as a lack of parental care. More parental support will not solve the problem of poverty.

5. Participation starts where children and young people are

The conference expressed the need for a more comprehensive view on the participation of children and young people. It was stressed that participation is not the same as consultation. Fundamental aspects of meaningful participation were said to include child-friendly information prior, during and after the participation process; a diversity of methods of participation which should start from the specific context, age and living conditions of the children and young people concerned. Participation in the broader sense of the word also refers to the alertness of policy makers to ask themselves the question if children and young people recognize themselves in the conducted policies.

Finally, it was acknowledged during the debate that children's rights are not the same as child policy. Children's rights are a framework of reference against which to evaluate all policies that affect children (rights-based approach).

Communication of the European Commission on the Rights of the Child (2011-2014)

1. The conference welcomed the initiative of the European Commission to draft a new communication on the rights of the child.
2. The European Commission gave an overview of the state of affairs of the drafting process of the new strategy.
3. A panel with representatives of NGOs came up with various critical and useful reflections. In contrast to the high expectations, the panel members expressed their disappointment with the methodology of the consultation process, more specifically with respect to the unfortunate timing, the difficult questions, the lack of preparation, and the lack of a child-friendly version of the consultation document. As regards content, the importance of mainstreaming was emphasized, as well as the need to shift the focus from the protection perspective to a more comprehensive view which also takes provision and participation into account. Moreover, the need for learning from and cooperating

with the youth sector was stressed. Reference was made to the structured dialogue in the field of youth, the renewed open method of coordination, the partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, the co-management system in the field of youth of the Council of Europe. Finally, it was clearly stated that the mapping study of the Belgian EU Presidency Youth can be a very useful reference document for further policy development.

4. In addition, the Conference would like to stress the need to clearly distinguish in the communication between four levels of policy making in the field of children's rights at EU level:
 - (i) policies to be implemented by the European Commission with respect to its internal functioning (mainstreaming, coordination and cooperation between the different DGs);
 - (ii) policies to be implemented by the European Commission in their support to the Member States;
 - (iii) policies to be implemented by the Member States internally;
 - (iv) EU external policy.Finally, the processes of impact assessment should be strengthened.

Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Introduction

- The parental freedom of choice is very important. The creation of ECEC services is part of a wider integrated policy that integrates parental leave and global family policies. Measurements are to be taken in order to provide a real accessibility of ECEC services, in respect of the parental freedom to choose whether or not to make use of them, with exception of those instances where the competent authorities, pursuant to applicable law and regulations, decide otherwise in the best interest of the child.
- These key-messages deal with political measures and efforts in the provision of services for promoting, supporting and encouraging early childhood development for all children from birth, to be defined as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Such ECEC services are aimed at every child and his family without drawing any distinctions, both in the family environment and in services providing education and care for young children and their families. Services means formal and regulated childcare in group and family settings.
- It's a policy from 2010 until 2020.
- The point of view is the child and its family.

Key Messages

1) Right of childcare

To guarantee a right for all children to access high-quality, diversified and integrated ECEC services.

2) Quantity of places in childcare

The workshop agreed:

- to orient policies in favour of the well-being of children and to consider these as an investment for the future and therefore aim 1.0% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) to ECEC for children under three year.
- to take a commitment to quantitatively develop a high-quality supply of education and care services taking due account of the real situation in all EU Member States..

- to guarantee the development of a quantitative supply of places in ECEC within a State-regulated framework, based on a pluri-annual development plan with progress indicators.

3) Quality of ECEC

The workshop agreed that quantity is not separable from quality.

The workshop also agreed:

- about the need for a range of interconnected initiatives and integrated policy ensuring educational, social and economic functions of ECEC.
- to develop public regulated and even public funded and controlled high quality ECEC services based on requirements on infrastructure, the adult to children ratio, the staff qualifications and the size of groups.
- to guarantee the quality of all facilities involved in the provision of ECEC services through a pluri-annual plan including progress indicators.
- to develop qualification criteria, educational systems and other learning frameworks with a view to issuing recommendations regarding professionalization.
- to contribute through these measures towards increasing social promotion of ECEC services and towards gender mix.

4) Accessibility

The workshop agreed to take measures which guarantee cultural and financial access and so guidance of child and his family to ECEC services for all children particularly children with special needs and children from families in a vulnerable and poverty situation.

Investing public funds must be related to promotion of accessibility.

5) Monitoring and evaluation every 5 years at least on the level of EU and each State member

The workshop agreed:

- To define necessary conditions for high-quality ECEC and to gather data.
- To develop research and to support networks.
- To support evaluation processes relating to the quality of services including public debate.