

**Report on the European Parliament hearing on an
EU Strategy for Children's Rights held on
17th April 2007, Brussels**

On 17th April, the European Parliament held a public hearing on an EU strategy for children's rights. The meeting was co-organised by the Civil Liberties' Committee and seven other committees to help prepare Parliament's response to the Commission communication "Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child". Representatives of EU institutions, international organisations and NGOs shared their views with MEPs.

EU policy makers must acknowledge children as individuals, heed their concerns, and protect their rights. This was the main conclusion of the hearing which also noted that violence in all its forms, including bullying, child abuse, and sexual abuse, is what worries children most, according to experts and children themselves.

Mieke Schuurman, Secretary General of the European Children's Network (EURONET), spoke about the importance of "child-proofing" all EU policy from the beginning. "A whole range of EU laws and policies affect children, whether directly or indirectly" said Ms. Schuurman, "The EU needs a coherent and systematic approach to considering children's best interests when it develops policies and programmes. A children's rights strategy is essential to make this happen especially while there is still no legal base for children's rights in the EU Treaty."

The need to mainstream consideration of children's needs in EU policies was also stressed by Civil Liberties Committee Chairman, Jean-Marie Cavada; It is "important to take stock of the children's rights situation in the European Union, to take account of children's rights systematically in our policies, in our strategies and in our programmes", he said.

Although all EU member states have ratified the UN Convention on the rights of the child and explicitly recognise their rights, they are not mentioned in the EU Treaties. MEP Glenys Kinnock noted that "children are not additions, have their own rights but are often powerless, voiceless, seldom consulted". There is a need to focus on "how to make sure children have the opportunity to claim their rights," rather than only seeing children as passive victims, she added. Several speakers also emphasised the point that children have rights that need to be addressed now rather than always seeing them as "the future".

Civil Liberties Committee rapporteur, Roberta Angelilli, hoped that the strategy being developed would not merely be a strategy "against", but instead would be "a positive strategy, which will affirm the fundamental positive rights of children and young people".

In the EU children face poverty, social exclusion, violence and racism. Children currently account for a fifth of the population. Ms. Santos Pais, Director of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, reminded the audience that "in spite of the progress made, the lives of millions of children continue to be marked by poverty", adding that even in some EU Member States, children are twice as likely as adults to

be victims of poverty. Ms. Santos Pais welcomed the step towards an EU strategy: "Children may now systematically be considered as a self-standing concern in European Union budgets, policies, laws and programmes", she said.

The EU needs "a global strategy" to tackle all problems related to children, acknowledged Commission Vice-President Franco Frattini, who announced that the first European Forum on children's rights, co-organised by the Commission and the Council Presidency, will be held on 4 June in Berlin. The meeting is one of the activities proposed alongside the future strategy, along with the following objectives:

- A single hotline for lost or kidnapped children
- Support for the banking sector to combat credit card use on internet child pornography sites
- Involving children in the decision-making process
- Providing information on children's rights in a child-friendly manner
- Enhancing the EU's active role in international forums to promote the rights of the child.

Commissioner Frattini, who is in charge of the dossier said that "children should no longer be addressees of policies but protagonists".

The importance of involving children in shaping decisions, within and beyond the EU was repeatedly raised at the hearing. "Their main concern is violence, in all its manifestations: bullying, child abuse, and sexual abuse", said Clare Feinstein of the international NGO Save The Children, reporting on an online consultation of 7-17 year-olds, using their child-friendly version of the Commission paper.

Other concerns included discrimination and social exclusion, the effects of alcohol and drugs and child poverty. Young people are aware that they can "help adults to understand issues important to children" and had even asked to be "directly involved in decision making", said Ms Feinstein, suggesting that this could be done through a child rights specialist unit set up to assist EU lawmakers on a permanent basis.

"Young people have far too little influence on the decision making process. We are still lacking understanding of their problems", agreed the Culture Committee's rapporteur, Lissy Gröner.

The EU also needs to take a more child-focused approach in its dealings with third countries, said Deepali Sood, speaking on behalf of the NGO Plan International. Ms. Sood presented the findings of a similar online consultation of children and young people in developing countries. "I urge the EU institutions to listen to what the children have said and focus on these issues while formulating its external policies", she said. Like their EU counterparts, third country children listed concerns about poverty, sexual abuse and violence, but added others about unclean water, inadequate medical services and malnutrition. They too asked to be heard when adults take decisions.

Hitting a child is a sign of, and (for the child itself) a lesson in, contempt for the rights of the small and the weak, said UN expert Paulo Pinheiro. Despite commitments to protect children's rights, violence against children persists "in every region of the world", and so does acceptance of it, he said. Many types of violence – in the home or at school – are not even recognized as such. This is one of the reasons why Mr.

Pinheiro, in his UN report, advocates the "prohibition of all types of violence against children" by 2009 – with no exceptions. Hearing the children's voice directly is important, Mr. Pinheiro added. We want to have children involved in our meetings and consultations, he said, "not as an ornament, but as a real voice".

Maja Eriksson, a member of the former Network of Experts on Fundamental rights, said that very few victims of child pornography and sexual abuse are given access to justice. She also pointed out that corporal punishment in the family is not prohibited by law in some Member States, such as Spain and Luxembourg.

Christa Stolle, Secretary General of "Terre des Femmes", spoke about violence against girls, particularly about genital mutilation and honour killings. She explained that the practice is still common in many parts of the world beyond the African continent: some 19,000 women have suffered genital mutilation in Germany, she said.

It is a common misconception that child poverty only occurs in developing countries, said Executive Director of Aflatoun/Child Savings International, Jerroo Billimora. In fact, one in five children in the EU lives below the poverty line. While children at risk were manifestations of the problem, child poverty was its root, she noted, calling on the EU to make child poverty one of its priorities. In order to tackle child poverty head on, she said - and several MEPs agreed - social, but more importantly, financial education should be made part of the school curriculum in Member States. Furthermore, Ms Billimora asked for a budget for such a financial education. "We will not be creating mini-capitalists, but children who have actually got freedom from the cycle of poverty and do not need the aid of the state", she concluded.

For the Parliament's report in 22 languages, go to:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/story_page/015-5255-107-04-16-902-20070412STO05241-2007-17-04-2007/default_en.htm