



Eurochildⁱ response to the European Commission Consultation on the future “EU2020” Strategy

January 2010

Eurochild welcomes the public consultation on the EU-2020 strategy. Nonetheless we are concerned with the lack of emphasis on the social dimension. There are no proposals on how the strategy will deliver social inclusion objectives or on how the social Open Method of Coordination will be strengthened. The latest SPC report¹ shows growth and employment have not automatically lead to reduce social exclusion and poverty. We call upon the European Commission and Member States to include a strong social pillar in the new strategy, along with an economic, employment and environmental pillars. The [Spring Alliance manifesto](#)², which Eurochild signs up to, outlines main areas for EU action.

We also regret the short consultation period which further distances the EU from European citizens. We urge the European Commission to postpone adoption of the EU2020 strategy to allow proper consideration of all stakeholder concerns.

We urge the EC to give due attention to children in its strategy, both as citizens today, but also as the population group who, more than any other, will inherit future challenges such as the growing public debt, climate change and demographic ageing. In particular we highlight:

1. The future well-being of the EU depends on **building children’s well-being today**. Still high levels of child poverty and inequality across the EU deprive many children from accessing their rights and realising their potential. The EU needs to move to a more equal and cohesive society – and the best place to start building is by investing in children and eradicating child poverty.
2. Eurochild urges EU leaders to **recognize children as fully fledged European citizens**. All EU member states have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which should be seen as the foundation for all policy affecting children and young people. The promotion of children’s rights is now embedded in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU2020 strategy is the first opportunity to take account of this new development and mainstream child rights into EU policies and get a systematic, comprehensive approach to children’s rights as a political priority.
3. Eurochild believes fiercely in the right of every child to enjoy a happy childhood. Achievement of this goal also makes economic sense. **Wise public investment in**

¹ Social protection Committee (2009), Growth, jobs and social progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy.

² Spring Alliance Manifesto: www.springalliance.eu

children and families can be expected to reap long-term benefits in terms of savings on social and health costs, improved productivity, a more cohesive society and increased active citizenship. Accessible, affordable and high quality services, in particular for families with young children, will help lift children out of poverty and ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

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Specifically we have major concerns about the direction and gaps in the consultation document.

A 'better future' cannot be created by jobs and growth alone

If a sustainable social market economy is to be, as stated by President Barroso³, "*the route to a better future for us, our children and for the wider world*" the vision for 2020 should be one where **education, labour market and economic policies must demonstrably contribute to social cohesion**. People and planet should be the overarching objectives of a future EU strategy. The document states that "*social, economic and environmental objectives must go hand-in-hand*". But the current proposal for action does not depart significantly from the previous growth and jobs paradigm.

Right challenges – wrong solutions

The EU2020 working document recognises the long-term social and demographic challenges faced by Europe. Disappointingly the solutions proposed focus on raising employment rates and modernising social protection systems. The overarching political direction of Europe must aspire to realisation of every individual's human rights. The challenge of an increasing immigrant population demands a more inclusive European society, zero tolerance of discrimination and equal opportunities – not just jobs and a modern social protection system. Child poverty is a challenge that requires action across a whole range of fronts – education, health, housing, environment – among others. A human rights approach would encapsulate this vision. The working paper does not.

"Creating value by basing growth on knowledge" misses the point

In today's society knowledge alone is far from sufficient to achieve social and economic progress. Arguably skills such as communication, empathy, resilience, ability to build positive social relations, flexibility are as important. We ignore these softer skills at our peril. Past drive for economic growth and knowledge has created a more polarised society and a dramatic rise in mental health problems across the EU. Depression and mental health is hugely costly to the public purse. We need to invest in education, training and life-long learning not only as a means of generating knowledge or preparing people for the labour market. Education is a key tool for personal development and more cohesive societies. We support the statement: "*education is one of the most effective ways of fighting inequality and poverty*" and welcome the warning against cutting spending in education during the current financial crisis. Nonetheless we urge the EC to look at the broader role of education and learning in society.

A 2020 vision should emphasise early years' education and care

Many EU policy documents make reference to the importance of investment in early years education and care. Eurochild regrets this is not mentioned in the EU2020 strategy and considers it a missed opportunity. Education starts at birth. In fact a child's experience before compulsory schooling is probably *the* most influential over long-term emotional, cognitive and social outcomes and can have a long-term impact on children's future choices. Children who exit compulsory education prematurely, who do not go onto further education, or who do not have the skills to enter the labour market, are far more likely to be those who have experienced early disadvantage.

³ [Political Guidelines for the next Commission](#), José Manuel Barroso, September 2009

The Barcelona targets on child care set a clear precedent for EU leadership in this field, although Eurochild regrets their overriding focus on child care as a means of promoting female labour market participation. The EU2020 agenda should re-frame this policy agenda on the best interest of the child. Investment in early years' services can potentially reap long-term benefits in terms of higher productivity and reduced social and health costs. It also creates new employment opportunities. Recent research⁴ conducted in the UK shows a return of €5 is expected to be generated for every Euro invested in a children's centre, with benefits forecast to accrue a range of stakeholders including not only children but also parents, community, and the state.

Potential for job creation in health and social services not mentioned

In his political guidelines President Barroso highlighted the "...*big growth potential for "white jobs (in health care and social services for children...)*". Eurochild regrets that this is not recalled in the consultation document. Investment in children, and in particular in early childhood, has the potential to create many new jobs in addition to enhancing the skills and quality of life of children.

Social inclusion is much more than having a job

Eurochild is concerned the priority on '*empowering people in inclusive societies*' gives over-riding focus to employment. Whilst we agree a job is a crucial safeguard against poverty and social exclusion, there are other **important aspects to social inclusion and cohesion such as participation in society, feeling good about one's environment, relationships, access to services**. Flexicurity and greater mobility, as advocated in the consultation document, will not benefit low educated, low skilled workers dependant on precarious work contracts and with unsociable working hours. In fact promoting workers mobility without ensuring work pay can exacerbate inequalities in the EU when the EU is already facing growing numbers of in-work poor. In some countries, large numbers of children are being left behind by parents who migrate for employment and can suffer long term consequences for their well-being and social integration.

The current strategy risks further distancing EU citizens

Finally, as stated in the consultation paper, developing the EU2020 vision will need the active support of stakeholders such as social partners and civil society. Eurochild agrees it is paramount engaging civil society as a pre-requisite for citizens to engage with the European project. This includes engaging with children and young people. We therefore believe **strengthening civil dialogue** should be a key priority of the coming 10 year strategy, with social partners and civil society addressed on a equal basis. In fact, whilst dialogue with social partners is rooted in the Treaty this is not the case with civil dialogue. Special attention is therefore warranted for how civil society can be strengthened as a key interlocutor for policy development and implementation at European and national level.

The EU 2020 strategy cannot risk suffering the same shortcomings of Lisbon. The strategy would benefit from **clear targets and a benchmarking framework**, with progress being assessed against sound monitoring and evaluation processes on the implementation of the goals of the strategy. This would lead to more engagement of Member States, greater convergence of objectives and better coordination between EU and national, regional and local levels. The EU 2020 strategy needs to be accompanied by new targets and indicators that reflect citizens' overall well-being⁵.

⁴ Backing the Future: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/backing-future>

⁵ See Stiglitz report : [Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf)

Equally important is a **strong back up by the EU budget**. The reform for the next budgeting cycle should bear in mind the political priorities established both at EU and national levels and, as recommended by President Barroso in its political guidelines, *“move towards an approach based on solidarity, burden-sharing and equity which is comprehensive and shared by all”*.

Child well-being and respect for children’s rights is a litmus test for a vision of Europe where employment and the economy are at the service of social progress and overall well-being. Eurochild calls EU leaders to develop a forward looking strategy that puts ‘people and planet’, and especially children, at its heart.

ⁱ Eurochild is an active network of 83 organisations working across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people. Our work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are co-funded by the European Commission through the PROGRESS Programme. www.eurochild.org