

6th Annual Conference of Eurochild
“Monitoring child well-being: better policy and practice”

(Cyprus. 11-13 November 2009)

Plenary Session I: Better indicators, better policy. Why measurement matters

(12 November 2009)

Speech of the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance of the Cyprus Republic,

Mrs. Sotiroula Charalambous:

**“Making children a policy priority – what tools have been developed to monitor
child well-being and how can this influence the policy agenda?”**

First of all, I would like to welcome our friends who came from abroad to participate in this important Conference and also to congratulate Eurochild and the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children for the excellent organisation of this event.

It has been said that “The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children”¹. Without a doubt, it is imperative to monitor and measure the conditions and factors that affect children, in order to not only design correct policies and practices for the healthy development of children, but also to assess the effectiveness of the policies and practices being implemented. This issue will be examined in depth during the Conference.

However, as mentioned in the programme of the Conference, the well-being of children is notoriously difficult to measure. Why? Because it is a multidimensional concept incorporating physical, psychological, financial and social dimensions.

Like all member-states of the European Union, Cyprus uses the indicators that have been determined within the framework of the EU process of social inclusion as a basic instrument for measuring poverty and social exclusion. Child

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

poverty in Cyprus is 7 percentage points below the EU average². By using the EU indicators, we ascertained in 2004 that single-parent families faced double the risk of poverty than the general population³. Since then, single-parent families have constituted a priority target group in all our Strategies for Social Inclusion. The risk of poverty among these families is gradually declining⁴ and in our latest Strategy we have included new measures and a quantitative target for further reduction by 2010 (to 30%). This is an example of how the indicators have influenced our policy agenda.

Of course, the low risk of poverty among children does not automatically safeguard their well-being. Regardless of income, children may be considered poor if they do not have choices and opportunities for normal development and inclusion in society – in other words, if their rights are being violated.

I would like to focus here on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the three groups of rights that concern:

1. The **provision of material goods** that safeguard the **survival** of children.
2. The **protection** of children.
3. The **participation** of children.

Globally, the traditional approach and relevant indicators give emphasis to the first group of rights. They focus on measuring **material goods** that safeguard **survival**. They also give emphasis to the **protection** of children, the second group of rights. Within this framework they often focus on measuring the “negative factors” in the lives of children, such as deprivation of family life, problematic behaviours etc. Of course, the non-existence of negative factors does not automatically safeguard the healthy development and well-being of children. As regards the third group of rights that concern participation, indicators are limited. Why?

² 12% in Cyprus in 2007, whereas the EU average was 19%.

³ Single-parent families: 35% in 2004. General population: 16% in 2004.

⁴ 35% in 2005, 34% in 2006, 33% in 2007.

The Convention defines children as legal subjects and not merely as objects of protection. According to the Convention, children have the right to be informed, to express their views and opinions on matters that concern them and to have those views and opinions taken into account. Therefore, **the active participation of children in the family, in the community and society at large, should not be optional but should constitute a natural part of everyday life.**

Despite this, the participation of children world-wide is often theoretical. What I mean by this is that the views of children may be sought, in accordance with the Convention, but they are only superficially taken into account. This is due to the perception of many adults that children are not yet mature or responsible. They are not yet citizens. This perception implies that children have limited abilities to take well-founded decisions and, therefore, gives priority to their protection by parents and society.

An important **challenge** is to replace prevailing perceptions about children with **a new vision** – a vision that recognises children as legal entities with their own rights and capabilities **to participate in society today, not tomorrow**. We adults tend to focus on factors that might affect children **in the future**. For example, studies associate growing up in single-parent families and step families with greater risk of low skills and low pay in the future. Children are able to speak about their situation **now**, they can tell us how they feel **now**. In order to measure children's well-being, it is vital to ascertain their own position. We must view children as **active partners in measuring their own well-being at all stages of childhood and not as objects of research**.

Newer understandings emphasise the importance of expanding the traditional approach in order to measure **the quality of life of all children in all its dimensions**. This presupposes the **development of indicators in new domains**, as well as the measurement of **“positive factors”**, such as **psycho-emotional satisfaction, self-esteem and participation**.

Some bodies⁵ have already promoted indicators in new domains for the measurement of children's well-being, such as:

- **relationships of children** with their families and peers,
- **subjective sense of well-being**,
- **active participation of children as citizens**,
- **activities of children**, including **cultural** activities,
- **personal skills of children**.

Society in Cyprus is, I would say, child-centred and children are high on the political agenda of the Government. The appointment of a Commissioner for the Protection of Children's Rights, in accordance with legislation enacted in 2007, is indicative of this. Although we have not developed national indicators to measure the well-being of children, we can see empirically that there is a strong **shift towards the participation of children**, which, as I mentioned previously, **is linked to their well-being**. I would like to give a few examples.

A pioneering event which took place in Cyprus in 2000 was the Council of Europe Closing Conference of the Programme for Children. At this Conference, Ministers **and** children worked side by side to agree on the conclusions – this would have been unheard of in the past.

Another characteristic example of children's participation in Cyprus is the Children's Parliament, which was introduced in 2000 by the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children, a member of Eurochild and co-organiser of today's Conference. The aim of the Children's Parliament is to encourage the **participation of children in decision-making processes on matters that concern them**.

⁵ E.g.

- UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2007), Report Card 7.
- Fundamental Rights Agency.
- Multi-National Project, "Measuring and Monitoring Children's Well-Being".

The **participation of children in community service** is displayed by the Association of Young Volunteers, which was established in 2001. The Association consists of children aged 4 to 18 years old who take on voluntary work and organise fund-raising and other events for charity. The fact that the Association started with 20 children from Nicosia and today numbers 3500 children from all districts, illustrates the desire of children to contribute to society.

In **schools**, children have the opportunity to express their views and take part in decision-making processes through their participation in independent student councils, administration boards, disciplinary boards and teachers' staff meetings. It should be noted that all schools of both primary and secondary education have independent, democratically elected student councils.

The importance we assign to the opinions and views of children is reflected in the modernisation of the Children's Law, which is being promoted by my Ministry. One of the basic principles on which the legislation is based is that the child should be given the opportunity to be heard in all administrative and legal proceedings that affect him/her and that due weight should be given to the child's views, according to his/her age and maturity.

With all that I have said, I am not claiming that the participation of children in decision-making processes has reached the desired level. On the contrary, what I would like to underline is the huge responsibility of all of us in the policy-making process; we should not act in the name of children's interests without the children.

I have shared some of my thoughts on children's well-being and now I would like to say a few words about the role of the EU. Our participation in the Social Open Method of Coordination and the contribution of representatives of the governmental and non-governmental sectors, the social partners and academic institutions in the formulation of our Strategies for Social Inclusion have certainly increased knowledge and awareness about poverty and social exclusion.

Because of the Government's sensitivity about children, we are especially pleased that the issue of child poverty and social exclusion has been chosen as a priority theme of the Social Open Method of Coordination since 2007. In response to the call for increasing public awareness, we organised a Seminar on 1 June 2007, on the Prevention of Social Exclusion of Children, which was attended by **all stakeholders** from both the governmental and non-governmental sectors.

We are in total agreement with the commitment of the European Social Protection Committee, on which we are of course represented, to develop European indicators for the measurement of child poverty **and well-being**. The work already carried out by the Indicators Sub-Group is indeed admirable. We look forward to the Final Report of the researchers commissioned by the European Committee for the identification of indicators that best reflect the multidimensional nature of child well-being. I understand that we will be informed about this work during the Conference.

I am certain that the contributions of the speakers, as well as the conclusions of the work-shops and the Conference in general will contribute to strengthening the political will of member-states. This political will is of crucial importance for strengthening both the Social Open Method of Coordination and the social dimension of the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy in a way that will promote the well-being of children.

Finally, I wish every success to the work of the Conference and a pleasant stay in Cyprus to all who have come from abroad.