

Where now for children's rights in the EU?

On Tuesday 4th July the European Commission launched its first ever official document on child rights in EU internal and external policies. "*Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child*" has been a long time coming. Children's rights organisations were already being consulted about it over a year ago, and they have been calling for such a strategy document for much longer.

A lengthy process

The time taken to prepare this Communication is not really surprising. Although children's rights are mentioned in the European Charter on Fundamental Rights, and were in the draft EU Constitution that was voted out by the French and Dutch, the European Union is still on rather shaky ground when it comes to having any competence in this area. Getting a text that would not be immediately shouted down by Member States, fearful of the EU encroaching on their political territory, was always going to be tricky.

And then there was the question of how to deal with such a cross-cutting issue in an institution not renowned for inter-departmental cooperation. Anyone who knows the European Commission will recognise the political infighting that goes on between the different Directorate-Generals to get into the limelight. Giving leadership to Commissioner Frattini (Head of DG Justice, Freedom and Security) may have been a logical choice given his link to the Fundamental Rights agenda, but it didn't help the buy in from other departments where child rights are also a key issue (EU social affairs, external relations and development). Thankfully, the final document attributes the decision to launch this initiative to the Group of Commissioners of Fundamental Rights, Non-discrimination and Gender Equality, but we'll wait and see if this spirit of cooperation translates into joined-up follow-up action.

Empty words or real political commitment

Given the environment in which this Communication was drafted, we should not be so surprised by the end result. Its few concrete commitments – such as the creation of two six-digit telephone numbers for missing and sexually exploited children and support for the banking sector to combat the use of credit cards for the purchase of child pornography on the internet – would probably have happened anyway (lead by DG Justice, Freedom & Security). Aside from that there are vague commitments to collect more systematic data, carry out research on the implementation of child rights, launch a more comprehensive consultation, and mainstream children's rights into all EU actions. All this is very desirable, but what is worrying is the lack of any real explanation of how, when and with what resources this is actually going to happen. It will certainly not happen by simply designating a coordinator for the Rights of the Child and setting up an Inter-Services Group in the European Commission.

The annexes to the Communication do give some more detail of what is involved in the different policy options explored by the EU. The Communication itself is said to be based on 'option 4', optimistically entitled 'comprehensive and long-term strategy to effectively ensure children's rights'. The estimated cost of the actions is estimated at 3-4 million Euro in the first 2 years, but as yet there's not clear indication of where this money will come from.

Another as yet rather hazy proposal of the Communication is to set up a 'European Forum for the Rights of the Child'. Such a Forum is intended to bring together "all the relevant stakeholders" to exchange good practice, and design and monitor EU policies. In the Annex, they talk about 80 persons meeting three times a year costing between 200,000 -300,000 Euro a year. How to make this an effective decision-making tool, rather than just a talking shop, deserves much more thought.

Children's participation too gets a mention, principally through the planned 'Forum' and a web-based platform. But if the EU is to meet its commitment to "involve children in the decision-making process from 2007 onwards", it probably needs a more radical re-think of how the EU does business, rather than tokenistic gestures.

Calling for a Child Rights Commissioner, not a coordinator

But despite these weaknesses, it is important to remember that the very fact that the Commission has adopted this Communication is significant. Children's rights organisations have done the right thing to seize this opportunity and demand greater political commitment. In a joint press release Eurochild and the other child rights organisations called for the EU to appoint a Commissioner for child rights. Such a demand is unlikely to be realised, since it would imply setting up a complete department with several hundred staff - although when Bulgaria and Romania join the EU next year two new Commissioner dossiers will need to be created.

But the point being made is clear. A coordinator on child rights is not enough to bring about any significant change in the EU policy-making process. Mainstreaming children's rights is not an 'add-on', it is an integral part of policy making that requires that all policies which impact on children to consider compliance with the UNCRC from the very beginning. Children's rights commissioners or ombudsmen are becoming common place at national level. They have political authority and leverage across government departments to monitor and influence policies to ensure children's rights are fully respected. This is what's required at EU level, rather than a coordinator and an inter-service group that will simply report on existing activities and programmes.

Keeping the pressure up

The Communication "*Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child*" has created an opening. Children's rights organisations now need to keep up the pressure on the EU to make good its commitments and develop a strategy that has real measurable targets matched with the necessary resources. We need to continue to advocate for a figure-head with real political leverage to take forward children's rights across EU policies. Only with such political commitment can we will shift from the current piece-meal approach to a real mainstreaming of children's rights across EU internal and external policy.