



## ***Improving the well-being of young children in Europe: the role of early years services***

**Seminar, European Parliament, Brussels, 8 April 2008**

### **Background Paper <sup>i</sup>**

#### **About Eurochild**

Eurochild is an international NGO actively networking in and across 28 European countries. Our work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, aiming at improving the quality of life and empowering children and young people.

The Brussels-based Secretariat monitors policy developments and advocates at EU level, producing, developing and sharing information with European institutions, international organisations, other NGO networks, and especially within our membership, supporting and developing their capacity.

Co-funded by the European Commission under the PROGRESS programme, our work focuses particularly on combating social exclusion and poverty. Eurochild has been producing since 2004 reports analysing the National Action Plans on social inclusion (NAPs/ Inclusion) and is closely following the developments on the EU's social agenda and the planned EU strategy on the rights of the child.

In this context, and aiming at further strengthening our work, Eurochild has set up three thematic working groups on issues of specific concern to members: Early Years Education and Care and its role in mitigating poverty and educational disadvantage; Family and Parenting Support; Participation of Children and Young People in decision-making processes which affect their lives.

The groups gather members and external experts to discuss developments at national and EU level. Position papers in each thematic area will be produced to support advocacy activities.

#### **Early Years Thematic Working Group**

The Early Years Thematic Working Group has been established by Eurochild to consider policies and practice in this key area, recognising its significance to the rights of children and to ensuring the quality of childhood for Europe's children. The establishment of the group follows a seminar held in Malta as part of Eurochild's 2007 annual conference. The Malta seminar heard from a wide range of experts from member organisations, on the issues that are arising at a national and

local level. Disparities in provision mean that in some countries children have an entitlement to services but in many levels are inadequate – particularly, but not only, for children under the age of three. The low level of formal services for under threes means that children in this age group may be ‘invisible’. Many services – as well as schools themselves- lack a ‘whole child’ approach and as a result opportunities to improve child health, promote social inclusion, and develop an understanding of citizenship are being neglected. Workforce requirements also vary widely, impeding mobility of labour at an EU level.

Overall the seminar concluded that early years policies need to be prioritised at EU level. It was agreed that the Barcelona targets set in 2002 provide, by themselves, too narrow a basis for member states and the forthcoming review of these should lead to the adoption of a wider ranging framework for member states which recognises the importance of a holistic approach. Through its thematic working group on early years Eurochild can contribute from its collective internal expertise and that of its special advisors.

### **Early years’ education and care**

The term “early years education and care” used in many countries to describe pre-school services is an ongoing reminder of their history: developed as separate services to meet the separate functions of care and education. Divided resources and different staffing groups contributed to the marginalisation of early years services over a long period. Its impact is still evident in many countries and its legacy is still visible at an EU level.

Across the EU a good school education is seen as a universal right. But EU policy has been more reticent on entitlements to pre-school services. For many years, the EU focused on ‘childcare services’ for working parents, although its own network, the European Childcare Network, advised that “the Commission should recognise in its own workings and in development of policy that in today’s Europe care, learning and other needs of children and families are inseparable and therefore require an integrated and coordinated approach” (**The EC Childcare Network 1986-1996: a decade of achievement, 1996**).

A Council Recommendation on Child Care, agreed in 1992, made reference to the need for ‘coherence’ between services but in 2002, member states agreed only the ‘Barcelona’ targets<sup>ii</sup> for ‘childcare’ places for working parents. The narrow labour market approach was justified on the grounds of an absence of a legal competence for direct involvement with policies concerning children and families. Moreover, five years after the targets were set only 5 member states have met the target of childcare places for 33% of children aged 0-3 and only 8 the 90% target for children aged 3-6 years.

### **The Barcelona Targets**

The Barcelona targets have been useful in setting clear performance standards for European countries that aspire to provide a sufficient volume of children's services. Such standards illustrate what can and should be expected from developed economies and what the leading countries have achieved. Although they do not address the issue of the quality of services, they provide at least a measure of how governments are performing vis-à-vis their labour markets and indicate some concern for the situation of working women in their countries.

Since the agreement of the Barcelona targets, developments both within member states and at an EU level now point to the need for a wider approach to be taken to this policy area. In fact, the Barcelona targets overlook many of the essential (qualitative) elements of sound early childhood policy, for example:

- The need to regard young children as citizens with rights to protection, infant health care, and early education and care services;
- The need to provide a social context in which early childhood services can be effective;
- The need to adopt an inclusive concept of services, in particular from pre-natal to 3 years;
- The need to engage parents in all aspects of rearing their children;
- The need to give attention to the training, pay and working conditions of staff, particularly in the childcare sector...

## The changing environment

**At an international level**, significant developments include the publication of the OECD Starting Strong review of early childhood education and care in 20 OECD countries. This examined the social, economic, conceptual and research factors that influence early childhood policy. Fourteen of the countries which have taken part are European. A follow-up review, Starting Strong II, published in 2006, describes the progress made in the participating countries and identifies the key elements in a successful early childhood education and care policy. It emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to the organisation and delivery of services for young children in a way which enables them to meet a variety of purposes: social, economic, educational and cultural.

The **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** has spelled out in General Comment 7 how signatories of the Convention (all European countries) should interpret the Convention with regard to young children (United Nations, Geneva, CRC, 2006). It urges countries that have ratified the Convention:

- **To engage in capacity building for young children**, in particular, in policy areas such as resource allocation; investment in public early childhood services and infrastructure; data collection and management; research on young children; training for rights in early childhood, and international assistance;
- **To construct a positive agenda for all young children**, giving in particular, close attention to young children in need of special protection.
- **To recognize that young children are holders of all the rights enshrined in the CRC**, including the right to education.
- **To construct high-quality, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant programmes.**
- **To pay attention to central features of child rearing and early childhood development**, including the notions:
  - That young children form strong emotional attachments to their parents or other caregivers from whom they seek and require nurturance, care, guidance and protection in ways that are respectful of their individuality and growing capacities.
  - That parents are the first educators of young children. The Committee invites State parties to provide appropriate assistance to parents in the performance of their child-rearing role. They should create programmes that complement the parental role, in so far as possible, in partnership with parents.
  - That young children make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they inhabit, learning progressively from their activities and their interactions with others, children as well as adults.

- That the goal of education is “to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence” and that this must be achieved in ways that are child-centred, child-friendly and reflect the inherent dignity of the child.
- That within early education, attention should be given to the child’s right to rest, leisure and play.
- That young children’s experiences of growth and development are powerfully shaped by cultural beliefs about their needs and proper treatment, and about their active role in family and community.
- To apply without restriction the four general principles of the CRC to all young children, viz. the right to life, survival and development; the right to non-discrimination; the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children; and respect for the views and feelings of the child.

**At European level**, the EU is beginning to take a wider approach to early years policies as children and the rights of the child become more important and visible. The new EU reform treaty includes provision in Article 3 for the protection of the rights of the child and a report on childcare is currently being drawn up by the European Commission – the review of the Barcelona targets. A 2006 EC Communication, **Towards an EU Strategy on the rights of the child** proposed “a comprehensive strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in internal and external policies”. In January this year the European Parliament adopted its official position in response to this EC Communication.

Furthermore, the current EC consultation on 21st century schools highlights the disparities in the provision of early learning and points to the evidence that early, high-quality, pre-school programmes that focus on learning and personal and social competences “have long-lasting benefits for pupils’ achievement and socialisation at school and in later life, especially for the most disadvantaged, particularly if they are followed up with interventions such as support for language learning and social adjustment”.

In 2006 the European magazine, *Children in Europe*, published a discussion paper <sup>iii</sup> which argues the case for establishing some common principles for the developments of these services. The magazine, published by a network of organisations and publishers, in 14 EU countries and consulted on through this extensive network, proposed ten principles. These include access as an entitlement for all children, affordability, a holistic and pedagogical approach, participation as an essential value, coherence, recognition and respect for diversity and a valued workforce. These are proposed as the basis for a European approach which it suggests could be regarded as goals to strive for but which, in the view of *Children in Europe*, could and should be implemented by 2020. The final policy paper is being published on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2008.

**At a national and regional level**, there is much greater awareness of the need for a wider approach to early years services – extending beyond economic and equality issues. However many countries are still far from achieving this goal and would benefit from an EU framework which supports a holistic ‘whole child’ approach and which recognises the wide range of benefits services can offer in not only providing childcare for parents in paid employment but in offering stimulating, safe, environments which can encourage learning and healthy life styles, promote inclusion and develop an understanding of citizenship. In addition, all countries would benefit from a programme of research and the dissemination of effective models and practice at an EU level.

## **New social and economic challenges for Europe**

In parallel to these positive developments, new social and economic challenges have also arisen for European countries, which will have a strong impact on early childhood policy in future years.

- Firstly, there has been a significant increase in the demand for children's services. In parallel, as the long waiting lists for childcare in many countries demonstrate, European families are clamouring for more organised childcare. The carers in the traditional extended family – grandparents, female family members and neighbours – now go to work when job opportunities are present and are often no longer available for informal child care.
- A second challenge is the growth or stagnation of child poverty in all but a handful of countries. The situation is further complicated by the growth of in-work female poverty within European countries, particularly of lone mothers who may have the major or sole responsibility for rearing their children. These women are often obliged to engage in low-paid, part-time work, generally in feminised sectors.
- A third challenge is that of diversity and change in population structures. Tensions from demographic change are already evident right across Europe, even in countries with strong democratic traditions. Community early childhood services in Europe must play a key role in providing protection and inclusion to children and families from diverse backgrounds, and in overcoming intolerance and racism.

## **Key Issues for consideration**

In the context of the EU Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) on social inclusion, the following are proposed as key issues for consideration in maximising the potential of the EU policy process to add value to national, regional, and local initiatives.

- *Intensify cross-national research and partnerships* with the aim of learning with each other and of identifying effective practice in key areas of early childhood policy and organisation.
- *Develop broad principles and orientations for the early childhood field in Europe.* For example:
  - *adopt selected principles of action, such as respect for diversity or the principle of equity, which would ensure equality of educational opportunity and equivalent outcomes for all children, paying particular attention to children from disadvantaged backgrounds;*
  - *base early childhood services on the fundamental values of European democracy, as illustrated, for example, in the Swedish Curriculum for Pre-school (Lpfö, 1998):*
  - *adopt an entitlement and child's rights approach, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.*
- *Identify key policy objectives for the early childhood field across Europe* and develop specific indicators and benchmarks to measure progress toward these objectives. For example:
  - *improve the social context of young children's lives in Europe;*
  - *welcome more effectively new population groups into European society, with special attention to providing at community level, health, family and early childhood services for immigrant families;*

- *develop European policy orientations for infant and family services in the period pre-natal to 18 months;*
- *facilitate European cross-national exchange and movement in the early childhood field through financing more cross-border research encouraging more university exchanges and through greater attention to equivalences in diplomas and professional profiling.*
- *Monitor results through appropriate cross-European data collection and research.*

## **Conclusion**

The review of the Barcelona targets by the European Commission provides an important opportunity to respond to new economic and social challenges and developments in our understanding of this important policy area as a result of recent research and international reviews. It offers the prospect of developing an effective framework and appropriate targets which reflect the need for a coherent and holistic approach to the development of early years services.

It also offers the opportunity to support, not only comparative EU research but also the development and dissemination of innovative models and services that reflect these wider policy goals for young children and which promote learning between Member States. This should encompass not only models for services but also professional development.

Eurochild, April 2008

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<sup>i</sup> This paper has been produced by Eurochild in conjunction with John Bennet, expert advisor on early years, based on a paper produced in March 2008: *Beyond Barcelona, toward principles and goals for early childhood services in Europe*

<sup>ii</sup> Barcelona, European Council, March 2002

<sup>iii</sup> *Children in Europe* discussion paper, *Statement of values for services for children 0-10*, 2007 <http://www.childrenineurope.org/en>