Introduction

The Child Rights Action Group (CRAG)\(^1\) has had representatives on the Steering Group of the European Forum since its inception. Five years have passed since the first Forum and we feel it is a good moment to reflect on the role of the European Forum and the Steering Group. We remain committed to this process, but strongly recommend we re-evaluate the role and functioning of the Forum and Steering Group if we are going to continue to be associated with it.

Evaluation of current practice

A recent EC evaluation of the impact of EU actions on child rights\(^2\), and the **European Forum** in particular, highlighted that the Forum has been an important moment to profile the EC’s commitment to child rights, but that it had limited follow-up and consequently little or no impact on policy. Also it concluded the role of external stakeholders in the Forum was unclear and it did not fulfil its declared objective of “advising & assisting the EC on the design of policies and legislation”. In our experience, the Forum struggled to find the balance between internal and external policy, and to identify the most relevant stakeholders to invite, in particular from Member States, given the wide range of policy areas discussed. At some Forums workshops were held, but the outputs of those discussions did not feed into any concrete process. At other Forums a long list of high-level speakers meant very little opportunity for interaction between the participants.

The **Steering Group** has also struggled to find its place, from its original aspirations to be an advisory group to the EC it has not been convened for long periods, and when it did meet there were few opportunities to engage in the planning of the Forum beyond commenting on ideas for themes or proposing speakers. While we appreciated the opportunity to input, it was generally felt that this was a missed opportunity to bring key child rights actors together to only comment on a meeting that has had mixed success.

**Child participation** has been discussed in 3 European Forums. From the draft TORs for the European Forum it is clear that the original intention was to hold children’s forums in parallel with adult consultations. The CRAG provided detailed guidance as to how this could be realized and implemented, however it soon became clear that the EC did not feel it had the capacity to take this forward. Lessons learned have shown that the EC is likely better placed to link to existing children’s networks and organisation to ensure children’s voices are heard, than to try to facilitate children’s

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1 The CRAG is an informal grouping of NGOs who have committed to working together on the follow up and implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

2 Evaluation report was shared with the Steering Group in 2011.
participation themselves on a regular basis. There is a strong commitment to children’s participation in the 2006 Communication “Toward a Strategy on the Rights of the Child” as well as the 2011 Communication “EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child”. Finding an appropriate strategy for meeting this commitment should be a priority for the EC.

**Recommendations**

CRAG remains committed to working with the European Commission and other external child rights stakeholders on the implementation of the 2006 and 2011 Communications; however we have several specific recommendations which we feel would improve the impact and effectiveness of the European Forum and Steering Group in particular.

**European Forum on the Rights of the Child**

- The Forum remains an important moment to show high-level (i.e. Commissioners) support for child rights issues, and should be maintained as a key moment to take stock of developments, celebrate progress and raise profile of key issues in the EC child rights agenda.
- The Forum should be clearly linked to the EU Agenda on Child Rights and its implementation. It should address priority action areas and the mainstreaming of child rights across EU internal and external policies. The role of external stakeholders should be clear, and there must be a follow-up.
- Working –level meetings on specific issues as part of the Forum would also be welcome but they should again be linked to on-going work programme with clear follow-up.
- The Forum is clearly not the sole means of consultation with external stakeholders. It is recommended that the steering group takes on a stronger advisory role.

**Steering Group**

- The Steering Group should revert to their original vision “to be an “Advisory group” to the Commission for further design of policies and legislative actions”. The original draft TOR suggested this as the role of the Forum, but it is not an appropriate platform for consultation with external stakeholders on the implementation of the EU Agenda more broadly. The Steering Group, however, is well-placed to do so, due to its broad representation of children’s rights stakeholders and experts from Member States, international and regional inter-governmental bodies, children’s ombudsmen and NGOs. It is going beyond information exchange and provides expert advice on current and future EU action.
- The Steering Group should have a mandate to ensure that external stakeholders contribute to their expertise to the implementation of the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child and other EU initiatives on children’s rights. The Forum can be one item on the agenda of the meeting in order to help that it is strategically placed within the broader framework of the EC work programme.
Child Participation

- With regards to the Forum, we believe children’s participation is desirable, but must be linked to organisations and networks that engage in meaningful participation of children at regional, national or local level. These organisations have responsibility to select the participating children & ensure proper preparation & follow-up. Ideally the topics for the Forum will be decided well in advance (6 months) in order to identify appropriate means of involving children if is considered appropriate by the Steering Group.

- More generally it is important the EC and Steering Group consider how to meet the obligations set out in the EU Agenda on child participation and awareness raising, in particular the requirement that “the EU take children’s views into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity”\(^3\). We believe it would be useful to develop a strategy to facilitate meaningful child participation in EU decision-making. Such a strategy could include enabling consultations with children on specific EU policies but it should by no means be limited to this (and indeed direct children’s consultations may not be realistic or appropriate in many EU level policy or legislative areas). Instead we would see a strategy supporting existing participation structures to inform & gather opinions of children and young people in Europe as well as giving them resources and tools to raise awareness on children’s rights. Further Eurobarometer surveys could also be useful.

- In addition, the EC and the Steering Group should also help stimulating child participation at the national level in order to ensure that the EU process in this area, especially the key requirements of the Communication on the Rights of the Child are implemented in the closest possible co-operation with the Member States, and to ensure that children’s voices are heard by all relevant policy makers. This also includes supporting the development of child-friendly activities, for example through national platforms for input and exchange, blogs, material for websites, etc.

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\(^3\) EC 2011, EU Agenda, p13