Madame Chair, Members of the European Parliament,

The European Children’s Network would like to thank you for inviting us to this hearing. The European Children’s Network, EURONET, represents a coalition of transnational and national children’s rights NGOs from the majority of the EU Member States. Together we campaign at European level for the rights and interests of children, framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A EURONET briefing for MEPs and a set of recommendations from the NGO Action Group on the EU’s Child Rights Strategy, in which EURONET is involved, is included in your dossier.

I would like to raise 5 main points with you:

1. Firstly, an EU children’s rights strategy is necessary.

Children have their own needs, interests and rights. This may seem an obvious point. But until recently, they have been dealt with in EU policy making mainly as dependents of working parents – where they are a potential obstacle to free movement. The impact of these policies on children themselves may have been good or bad, but it’s not been a primary consideration.

This is no longer satisfactory.

A whole range of EU laws and policies affect children, whether directly or indirectly:
Internal market, criminal justice, immigration policies, health, media and consumer policies affect children. Strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion and discrimination of ethnic minorities such as the Roma also affect children. International trade negotiations and development cooperation policies affect children.

There are also a growing number of challenges posing risks to children which cross national borders - such as threats associated with the internet, child trafficking, or the need to prevent sex offenders from crossing borders to work with children. EU cooperation in these fields has happened in a piecemeal manner and never in a systematic way.
And along with nearly every country in the world, all the EU’s Member States have ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or ‘UNCRC’, which is the global reference point for children’s rights.

So why has it taken us so long to start making sure that what the EU does has a positive impact on children, and that we’re not missing opportunities to do more?

The EU needs a coherent and systematic approach to considering children’s best interests when it develops policies and programmes.

A children’s rights strategy is essential to make this happen especially while there is still no legal base for children’s rights in the EU Treaty.

The proposed strategy which we’re discussing today is a really positive development which EURONET has been campaigning for over a number of years. This could be a momentous step for children’s rights in Europe, and is a huge advance in recognising 100 million children as citizens of Europe in their own right - and not just as part of women’s policies, employment policies or family policies.

EURONET is really pleased that so many Committees are involved in this hearing today and so many MEPs are interested in and committed to children’s rights. This is a great starting point. The European Parliament’s involvement is crucial and we hope that you will play an active role in ensuring this strategy is successfully developed and implemented – maybe through the creation of a Joint Group or Intergroup on Children’s Rights.

2. My second point is that mainstreaming of children’s rights must really make a difference for children and not just remain words.

I’ve been asked to talk about ‘mainstreaming’, which sounds like just more jargon. But mainstreaming – or a better wording would be “child-proofing” of EU actions – is about doing what I’ve just been talking about.

It’s about taking a child rights perspective into account in all EU policy making.

And it’s up to all of us to make sure this really happens; that it does not just become one more bureaucratic process with no real impact on the lives of children. This is a danger if we do not all watch out!
We welcome in this respect the Commission’s proposal to carry out an impact study during the next two years.

There is already a wealth of experience which the EU can draw upon, for example, the EU’s gender mainstreaming process and fundamental rights impact assessment. There are also plenty of good examples at national level, including impact assessments on environment and race equality, which can be learned from.

Start with child proofing at the beginning of all EU policy making. Best practices have shown that child proofing can help ensure the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, It can prevent policies infringing on children’s rights, which is particularly important for policy and legislation not specifically concerning children, for example on immigration and asylum. The process can also bring about co-ordination between different departments, and ensure that policies have the desired outcome.

There is no excuse for effective mainstreaming and impact assessments not to be put in place, and EURONET will continue campaigning to make sure it does.

3. The third point I want to make is to give a few pointers to make sure that “child-proofing” or mainstreaming is successful.

- **Talk to children themselves.** Making rights-based policies means involving the people those policies are going to affect from the beginning. They have the best knowledge about their lives and experiences and what they say must be listened to and taken into account. Meaningful child participation is a core child rights principle, based on the UNCRC.

- **The participation** of other relevant stakeholders with expertise is also necessary, such as civil society organisations and the Council of Europe.

- **And also a proper process** must be put in place to ensure that participation of children and others is effective and meaningful and that child sensitive indicators are developed.

- **The European Forum on the Rights of the Child** is a real opportunity to make mainstreaming a dynamic and participative process. It needs democratic governance, to work in a transparent way and be independent of the Commission. We’re still waiting for an indication of how this is going to happen.
• The European Forum should **feed into EU policy making**
  discuss issues on the EU agenda and monitor the “child-proofing” of EU policies.

• The newly set up **Fundamental Rights Agency** can also play a key role in the child-proofing of EU legislation and in monitoring the implementation of children’s rights in the EU. The Agency needs to cooperate with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe.

Together the participation of the key stakeholders, the European Forum and the Fundamental Rights Agency can lead to real and tangible outcomes for children in Europe, which is what mainstreaming should result in.

Outcomes could include: ending child poverty and social exclusion, no children living in institutions, no asylum-seeking children being detained, or an EU commitment to meeting the UN Violence Study targets of ending violence against children in all settings. Many more recommendations can be found in last year’s EURONET report giving an overview of children’s rights in the EU. The success of mainstreaming should be measured against these goals, based on the UNCRC.

**4. My fourth point is that political will is key to making the European strategy on children’s rights a success**

As with any strategy, the success of the process which has been set in motion will depend on the commitment of all stakeholders in making it a reality.

Political will to put the right processes in place also means to resource it properly, including financial and human resources. A properly resourced children’s rights unit in the Commission and properly trained officials are crucial for the strategy to become a meaningful part of the EU framework; as well as clear accountability by a Commissioner with specific responsibility for children’s rights.

Political will is also needed to ensure a legal base for children’s rights in any newly negotiated EU Treaty.

All the EU institutions, including the Commission, which should be leading, the Member States and crucially the European Parliament, as the democratically elected body, have a role to play in making sure this happens.
5. Finally, I want to emphasise that: MEPs can help make sure the European strategy on children’s rights is a success

EURONET welcomes the strong interest and commitment among MEPs.

We urge Members of the European Parliament to adopt a strong report in which they welcome the steps taken so far. But also keep playing an ongoing active role in ensuring that the necessary processes are put in place for the mainstreaming of children’s rights, the setting up of the European Forum and the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the meaningful participation of children themselves. You also have a key role in allocating the necessary human and financial resources.

Ultimately, its success will be judged not only by its tangible impact on EU policies, but by its effect on all children affected by EU actions both within Europe and beyond.

Mieke Schuurman
Secretary General
European Children’s Network
EURONET