STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE WORK OF L'EUROPE DE L'ENFANCE

Paper for the L'Europe de l'Enfance meeting of 2 May 2006 in Vienna presented by Simone Ek, President EURONET

The European Children’s Network, EURONET, would like to present to the members of the L'Europe de l'Enfance group its position on a strategy for the future work of the group. EURONET believes that L'Europe de l'Enfance is a welcome initiative which could be explored and developed to a far greater extent than it is at the moment.

EURONET has participated in all meetings of the group since the Belgium Presidency hosted the meeting in November 2001. EURONET has participated in different ways - by providing papers on different subjects discussed at the meetings, delivering speeches and taking part in discussions. Therefore EURONET believes that it can make a valuable contribution to the discussion on strategies for the future work of the group designed to improve fulfilment of the rights of the child in Europe.

Terms of Reference:
The L’Europe de l’Enfance group was established on 20 November 2000, International Children’s Rights Day, by the French EU Presidency. At the first meeting Ministers responsible for childhood participated in the meeting. Since 2001 successive Presidencies have invited Ministers and/or senior civil servants to meet, exchange experiences and to cooperate together on an informal basis (outside the formal EU framework).

The initiative set out to:

- Better understand the living conditions of children in Europe, the policies and the best practices followed;
- Develop comparative studies;
- Develop common investigating and operational methods of approach in order to fight a growing number of transnational phenomena with a negative impact on children, such as unaccompanied foreign migrant children, paedophilia, sex tourism, illegal and dangerous information on the internet, etc.

In this context it was felt that the group should meet to exchange best practices and strategies in the field of children’s rights within the EU and in relation to implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The aim of the group was to mainstream children’s rights in all EU policies.

However the group cannot adopt binding declarations and L’Europe de l’Enfance does not an official status in the EU structure. Although meetings are organised at a Ministerial Level or at a senior civil servant level they are held on an informal basis.
In order to support the L'Europe de l'Enfance it was agreed between ministers that a scientific body should be established to develop studies, exchange information and undertake comparison of childhood and adolescence. To this end, a European Network of Centres and Observatories on Childhood was officially launched in Florence on 24 January 2003, under the acronym “ChildONEurope”. Its aims are:

- Exchange of knowledge and information on laws, policies, programmes, statistics, studies, research, best practices regarding childhood and adolescence;
- Exchange of knowledge on methodology and indicators in order to obtain comparability of information;
- Comparative analysis on specific subjects.

**EURONET Recommendations on the future strategy for “L’Europe de l’Enfance”**

On the basis of several developments in the EU it is timely and important to establish L'Europe de l'Enfance on a more formal basis. These developments can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the Commission Communication on Children’s Rights, which is being drafted on the initiative of Commissioner Franco Frattini, Vice-President of the Commission responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security, and which will be presented to the Commissioners on 14 June 2006. Secondly, children's rights have been included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which is often referred to by the different EU institutions, including the Court of Justice. Thirdly, the EU has to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as ratified by all EU Member States.

In the light of these developments in the EU, EURONET makes the following recommendations:

- **More formal meetings with clear outcomes**
  Meetings need to be planned on a more formal basis and clarity is needed both on what the meetings hope to achieve and how outcomes can be efficiently assessed. Until now meetings have taken place on an ad hoc basis. There is a need for systematic follow-up on issues discussed at previous the meetings instead of having a different agenda for each meeting.

- **High-level Participation with at least one meeting at ministerial level per year.**
  The current situation is that informal meetings take place which do not oblige the Member States to attend or implement decisions. This can result in disjointed discussions on some issues within a group that may or may not be fully representative of the Union. Member States have also different expectations on the outcomes of the meetings, making it difficult to assess progress. Member States should reaffirm and support their support for the L’Europe de l’Enfance meetings, as this group is in an ideal position to champion cooperation on European children’s rights issues – a task that will become even more important with the implementation of the EC Communication on Children’s Rights.

All Member State Ministers with primary responsibility for children should meet at least once per year to discuss issues of common concern at EU level and across the Member States. The Commissioner with the responsibility for children (or an EU focal point or “Special Representative for Children”) should also attend to ensure co-ordination with the Commission’s agenda.
• **Regular meetings of senior civil servants with a link to Commission activities**

Senior civil servants from the Member States should meet regularly to exchange information on and discuss EU children’s policy, through the L’Europe de l’Enfance initiative. EU officials with responsibilities for children should be invited in order to encourage close linkage with the Commission’s activities. Links should also be established with the Council of Europe’s ‘Building a Future For and With Children’ action programme and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and its concluding observations.

• **A clear long-term strategy for the L’Europe de l’Enfance**

On the basis of current and longer-term developments in the EU in the field of children’s rights the L’Europe de l’Enfance group should develop a clear strategy for children’s rights and set up a list of subjects that they would like to discuss and cooperate upon. Many decisions taken by the EU affect the lives of children directly or indirectly and many issues of concern to children are transnational in nature. For example in the field of social protection, media and internet, health, justice, environment, asylum and migration legislation, etc. EURONET’s 2006 report “What about us? Children’s Rights in the European Union: next steps” gives a complete overview of the internal policies and legislations of the EU affecting children and we suggest to take this as a basis for deciding on the issues that the group should have on its long-term agenda. Part of the strategy should also include the involvement of the group in the work on the Communication on the Rights of the Child and to the White Paper on Children’s Rights that will follow within the next two years.

• **Develop stronger links with the European Institutions**

Cooperation with Commissioner(s) responsible for children’s issues, Commission civil servants responsible for children’s rights in the different DGs, and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency is recommended. If the proposed Children’s Unit is established then cooperation with it should be given a high priority.

Cooperation with the European Parliament is also recommended. This could be done by establishing contacts with the MEP Alliance for Children’s Rights in the European Parliament and with the Intergroup on Family and Protection of Childhood. In many legislative areas affecting children the EP has powers to amend and co-decide. In particular in the field of budget the EP is the authority together with the Council of Ministers. This could be a yet unexplored field of cooperation. Cooperation with national parliaments is also recommended.

• **Establish links to the new UN Human Rights Council**

The L’Europe de l’Enfance group should establish links with the newly to establish UN Human Rights Council, replacing the UN Commission on Human Rights being established in June 2006. The UN Human Rights Council is called upon by Children’s Rights NGOs to be working for an agenda including the implementation of children’s rights. In this respect, EURONET supports the call for action by the NGO subgroup on the Human Rights Council to ask for political will to be mobilised and concrete actions to be taken to implement children’s rights.

EURONET is looking forward to further cooperation with the L’Europe de l’Enfance group and we are at your disposal for further information.

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