Final Report

European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs

Brussels
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The subject of Children is not dealt with as such by the European Union. Nevertheless, the Union does mention Children in a whole range of its programmes. This is what struck the Ministers responsible for Children of the various Member States, on 20th November 2000 in Paris and on 9th November 2001 in Brussels.

During the latter meeting, initiated by the Ministers for Children's Affairs of the three Communities of Belgium, the foundations were laid for a European network of Children's watchdogs which study the situation of children and the rights they are given, in accordance with the International Convention of the United Nations.

During the Spanish presidency in the 1st half of 2002, in May 2002 to be precise, a crucial meeting will be held: the extraordinary session of the United Nations for Children, postponed following the attacks on New York. We would like to send our very best wishes for success to our Spanish colleague. We are sure that fresh steps will be taken towards an across-the-board concern for children within the European Union as well as towards a more effective participation of children in the debates on the future of the Union. It is they, after all, who will be most affected by it.

Please find enclosed the conclusions of the second European meeting of Ministers responsible for Children. We hope you find them interesting reading.

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Conclusions
European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC)

(Brussels, Palais d'Egmont, 9th November 2001)

1
The special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on children

Whereas the tragic terrorist attacks on New York, on 11 September 2001, have prevented the planned special session on children taking place;

Whereas UNICEF made significant efforts to prepare a draft outcome document with a Declaration and an Action Plan that could be adopted at the special session;

1.1.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) reaffirms its commitment to a draft outcome document that would be submitted to the forthcoming special session.

1.2.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) wishes stress, that given the postponement of the special session until May 2002, that all activities planned for the special session are maintained, in particular the preceding "Children's Forum"

1.3.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) further urges the countries participating in the special session to ratify and implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflicts and, on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, without delay. These constitute the basic legal standards in the promotion and the protection of children's rights.

1.4.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) reaffirms its wish that all states parties to the Convention should take all appropriate measures to develop sustainable health systems and social services and to ensure access to such systems and services without discrimination. It urges them to pay particular attention to prenatal and post-natal health care, to reproductive and sexual health, and to the special needs of adolescents.

The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) recommends that special attention is given to the social, medical and educational aspects of the protection of mothers and children, as well as to their protection against violence, abuse and discrimination. It believes that attention paid to parents must widen and encompass the family in all its forms and that parents must be supported through the organisation of services, the number and the quality of which should be adapted to needs and available resources.
Particular attention should be given to the right to education for girls, and moreover to ensuring that children and women from disadvantaged populations have equal access to the above-mentioned services.

1.5.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) reaffirms its commitment to efforts to eradicate poverty and its negative effects on children, to reduce economic disparities, and to set up social and economic policies to meet the needs of children and families in all its forms.

2
The mainstreaming of children's rights into the policies that affect them

Whereas more and more initiatives, programs and policies pursued by the European Union affect, or have a direct impact, on children, for example:

- on 31 March 1992 The Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation on childcare.
- The European Strategy for employment 2001, in point 18, explicitly refers to children.
- The European Council of Nice (November 2000) has singled out four generic objectives to fight poverty and social exclusion, objectives 1.1 a) and 3 b) referring to children.
- The issue of children in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is mentioned in two of the four joint objectives of the open method for co-ordination (OMC) Poverty and Exclusion.
- In the field of justice and home affairs an EU document, ratified in 1996, refers to children that are the victims of parental abduction.
- There is a reference to children in the recommendations on the future of the audio-visual sector and the Media program.

2.1.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) recommends the introduction of mainstreaming of children's policies and the rights of the child in all policies of the Union. Without creating a new competence for children's policy in the European Union, it would appear that taking better consideration of the Rights of the Child would help Europe become closer to its citizens.

2.2.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) recalls the importance of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, in particular article 24, which highlights the need for better consideration of the Rights of the Child in European policies.

2.3.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) requests the European Union to devote particular attention to the situation of children, their future and the respect of their rights as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It believes that the competent authorities and specialised bodies answerable to the member States in the field of Childhood as well as organisations working with children should contribute to defining and implementing programs and policies affecting them.
2.4.
In order to ensure respect of the best interests of the child in the decision-making processes of the European Union, The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) request the European Commission to ensure continuous follow up.

2.5.
The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) underlines the importance of a specific consideration for children in the national plans implemented by the member States, particularly those concerning employment and fighting social exclusion.

The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) urges the Council of the European Union to devote particular attention to the best interests of the child. Amongst other things, it recommends that the Employment and Social Affairs Council devotes special attention to the issue of quality markers in the field of reconciliation of family life and professional activities; as well as the Justice and Home Affairs Council with regards to its competencies.
3. The network of study centres for Children's rights and policies

Taking into account:
- The European meeting of the Ministers in charge of Childhood (Paris, 20 November 2000),
- the meetings of the permanent group "Childhood's Europe" (Paris, 18 December 2000; Stockholm, 6 April 2001; Brussels, 5 October 2001),
- the seminar of Study Centres for Childhood and assimilated bodies (Brussels, 26 and 27 October 2001).

3.1. The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) supports the development, on a voluntary basis, of a European network of study centres for children's rights and policies, taking into account existing networks.

It notes the initiative taken by the Belgian Presidency and the forthcoming Spanish Presidency. [see last page]

4. The effective participation of children in debates and in decisions affecting them

4.1. The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) notes the positive results of various children's participation initiatives in the member States of the Union, as well as those in formal structures, such as Youth Councils, and more generally, within civil society (urban life, rural life, environment, transport, school).

4.2. The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) also wishes to highlight "good practices" in the field of effective participation of children, initiated within the framework of the preparation of the next special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on Children: Berlin Conference (May 2001), Children's Forum planned aside the next special session, etc.

4.3. In the light of these good practices at national and international levels, the European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) calls on the European authorities (Council, Commission, Parliament) to study the modalities of effective participation of children in the decision-making processes at European Union level. The European Meeting of Ministers for Children's Affairs (EMMC) refers in particular to the resolution related to youth participation adopted on 8 February 1999 by the Council and the Ministers of Youth.