

Report on:

Building a Europe for and with children – towards a strategy for 2009-2011
Council of Europe Conference, Stockholm, 8-10 September 2008

Eurochild took part in this high level Council of Europe Conference held in Stockholm and its representative was a panellist discussing “Sustainable and Meaningful Children’s Participation” during the first day Workshops.

Main aims of both the Workshops and the plenary sessions were to give an insight to the Council’s new strategy for children’s participation and to enhance discussions among practitioners, policy makers and children themselves highlighting good practice examples and projects that could prove invaluable to implementing children’s participatory rights.

The discussion was lively and controversial as participants on the one hand shared the belief that children should participate in the decision making processes on issues affecting them, on the other hand disagreed as to what participation really means: is it an involvement of children in different events and occasions, is it “hearing the child” when only it comes to decide on serious matters affecting him/her or is it a horizontal implementation of children’s participation in all occasions and at all times?

It was suggested that children’s participation should only be, be it sincere, equal and productive. It was also suggested that we should all observe the three Rs of participation:
Respect = a commitment to human rights part of which are children’s rights

Routine = participation should occur everywhere, everyday, in every setting, at all occasions
Results = children’s participation must have an impact. Adults should not only “hear” children but “listen to them” too

Some other points of discussion were:

- The world needs a culture where all children are both heard and respected.
- Children are not citizens of tomorrow, they are citizens of today and Austria’s example of lowering the voting age to sixteen should be carefully examined and followed.
- Are we “preparing children for the future” or are we “shaping the future with them”?
- Children are rights bearers – we do not “give them their rights”, we do not “allow them to participate and express their views”, these rights are theirs to hold and exercise and thus we should recognise and respect them
- Participation cannot be separated from Provision and Protection rights – participation lies within all rights and it should be horizontally implemented
- To really implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child it is IMPERATIVE to enable and sustain children’s participation in the decision making processes – be them within the family, the school, the community or the cultural and political life.
- What do we mean by “meaningful participation”? To whom should it be meaningful? To children of course – not to adults! We cannot use the argument that children are not always in a position to provide sound and meaningful suggestions and opinions in order to hinder their participation, besides, not all adults provide sound and meaningful suggestions at all times!
- What do we mean by “informed participation”? Or would we rather say “guided” participation to suit adult expectations and soothe adult ears? We should provide the

necessary information to enable children's participation but we should accept the "different point of view" and the "different perspective" they might have.

- What is adult mentality regarding children in general? Do we not discriminate upon them just because they are of that specific age group? Don't we tend to look down upon their opinion and suggestions because we consider them "immature and unable to take responsible decisions"? What mentality do the educational systems promote? Do they incorporate children's rights – do they implement children's rights – do they help children develop their critical thinking, free will and negotiation skills?
- How is Democracy implemented if almost 1/3 of the population is missing?
- Is there a political will to really implement children's rights – all rights? Is there the political will to put children high on the agenda and put in place policies and practices that will enable children's participation? Is there the political will to educate adults in such a way as to recognise, respect and implement children's rights? Is there the political will to help break stereotypes and support peer-led organizations? Is there the political will to accept children as "actors" in all matters that affect them – and which doesn't?
- Do we sincerely want to involve children in all consultation processes? Do we really want children to be part of "our groups"?

Finally, the workshop concluded with some recommendations to the Council of Europe that hopefully will help develop the best possible strategy towards children's full participation:

1. It is time to use the data and the results of good practice examples we have at hand. There are plenty and surely enough to lead us to **concrete actions** that will promote children's participation
2. It is necessary to involve **all children** and not only focus on specific groups – even though we must make sure the most disadvantaged and excluded are also included
3. Funds should not only go to projects and research – it is time the Council and the EU **fund peer-led organisations** and give children the chance to participate and make a difference
4. Adults should recognise that **children have the right to decide if they wish to participate or if they wish not to** – just as they do for themselves! Yet, if they do, adults should **provide all necessary information and tools**
5. **Children's participation is NOT a project** – it is a process to be originated and maintained, first within the family, then in the educational systems, later in the community and on the local level and lastly on the national and international levels.
6. **There should be a strong cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union** – together they can really influence national policies towards the full implementation of children's rights.
7. The Council of Europe should **first ensure horizontal implementation of children's participatory rights (mainstreaming)** and then look into the possibility of developing an e-participation project (the Finnish Children's Parliament example).
8. The challenge lies mostly on **changing the mentality and culture around children's rights** and to educate adults to recognise, respect and implement them.
9. Events that **include both policy-makers and children** themselves should be more often organised (both by the CoE and the EU) as it is one way to make children's voices heard and respected.

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