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INTRODUCTION Towards A Living Education

by Christopher Clouder

CEO, European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education
and Director, Botin Platform for Innovation in Education.

Those of us who work in the field of education and childcare should take Vaclav Havel's wise words into consideration in all our practices and theories:

*"The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility."*¹

We are living in an age of great opportunity as well as deep insecurity and although we can see future problems hovering over the horizon we cannot claim to be prescient in knowing exactly what they will be and what challenges they will present to our children.

It is significant that a threshold of civilisation and human evolution was crossed in 2009 when, for the first time, half of the world's population were living in cities. Already this dramatic increase in the pace of urbanisation has made an impact on childhood and will deeply affect future generations in as yet unspecified and challenging ways. In the vast mega-cities, now expanding at an unprecedented rate, the experience of daily life of its citizens is changing. Their lives will change even more so as these cities merge into mega-regions that will be home to more than 100 million people – an endless city perhaps stretching over hundreds of kilometres. The mega-city's inhabitants are having to learn to live in confined spaces far from the world of nature, surrounded by constant movement and dealing with the pressures of consumerism, poverty, pollution, economic disparities, inequality, marginalisation and limited resources. As more and more of us live in mega-cities and mega-regions this will inevitably create new challenges and people will be forced to find new solutions to the art of living together. The transition to such high-density living will inevitably have an effect on the experience of being a child in such an environment. Hence the childhoods of the past are not those of the present, nor will these, in turn, be the childhoods of the future. Just as there are many different kinds of childhoods, so we have to respect the diversity of views of what childhood is, how children develop, and the social consequences of such ideas and ideals. As Janusz Korczak emphasised,

*[Children] "should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be: the "unknown person" inside each of them is the hope for the future."*²

We are increasingly conscious that as adults we are unfinished and that the concept of life long learning applies to all aspects of our lives. As educators we are also unfinished and constantly learning, just as our children are also unfinished. However, we must recognise that this does not give us the ability and prescience to determine their future nor to prophesy what they will face and how they will live.

*"Being a new generation, the children also symbolise and embody the future. And because their development occurs in a much faster-moving world, which holds fewer certainties than it probably did for previous generations, my observation is that the future becomes a present more quickly, even for small children."*³

This awareness serves to exacerbate our doubts and creates endless questions about what the future may have in store for our children, but nevertheless we have to provide the foundations in terms of both education and upbringing and act according to our beliefs about what it means to be a human being.

Governments across the world react to these changes in childhood and educational thought by imposing regimes of increasing surveillance of the outcomes of educational practice. This, in itself, is welcome, in that questions of childhood become questions of policy that can stand central in the deliberations of educational policy makers. We can see an increased interest in curriculum development, accountability, testing and standardisation based on the supposition that by raising the expected measurable standards of learning, better educational practices, and therefore more successful outcomes, can be generated. However justified this assumption might be (because there is an obvious need for statistical evidence and analysis) at the same time we have to be cognisant of the fact that children cannot be standardised, that they have a right to their own individuality, their own way in life and growth.

*"If young people are to succeed as thinkers, as learners, and as humans who make valuable contributions to society, more must be known about them than their scores on standardised measures of achievement."*⁴

Our views on education and childhood actually tell us a lot about ourselves and our tendency to look for certainties in our troubled and fast-changing world. The fact that so many countries see the need to reform their educational systems shows that they are willing to question the practices and traditions of the past and that some form of renaissance is necessary if we are to meet the needs of the contemporary child.

*"The traditional organisation of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that forces us to reconsider what we do in schools."*⁵

In his autobiography *"Report to Greco"* Nikos Katzantzakis gives a beautiful picture of what it meant to be a young child living in a rich world of imagination at the end of the 19th Century. He describes being told stories by his grandmother and this gave him what he called a 'yeasty childhood'. He describes how this disposition towards fascination and curiosity led him on voyages of imaginative exploration *"I lived, spoke and moved in a fairy-tale which I myself created every moment, carving out parts in it to allow me to pass. I never saw the same thing twice, because I gave it a new face each time and made it unrecognisable. Thus the world's virginity renewed itself at every moment."* His grandmother once told him about a mermaid who was a sister of Alexander the Great and, who out of concern for his well-being, constantly asked passing mariners if he was well, to which the standard reply was *"He's alive, my lady, alive and flourishing"*. Thus the sailors avoided a thrashing of her tail, which would have sunk the ship. One day his mother took him down to the sea and looking out he saw some women swimming. In his mind he assumed them to be mermaids and that below the waist, invisible beneath the waves, they were fish. The women beckoned and shouted at him but because of the sounds of the waves he could not hear what they were saying, so he replied *"He's alive, alive and flourishing"*. Whereupon the women started laughing at him. He felt ashamed and humiliated and he turned his back on the sea with the sudden realisation that these were just women. This painful episode is etched on his memory and serves as a reminder that we learn through our mistakes as well as our successes, and that coming to terms with reality is not necessarily a straightforward or pain-free process. Yet looking back on this memory he continues, *"I thank God that this refreshing childhood vision still lives inside me in all its fullness of colour and sound. This is what keeps my mind untouched by wastage, keeps it from withering and running dry. It is a sacred drop of immortal water which prevents me from dying. When I wish to speak of the sea, woman, or God in my writing, I gaze down into my breast and listen carefully to what the child in me says ... I become a child again to enable myself to view the world always for the first time, with virgin eyes."*⁶

This is an example of what Loris Malaguzzi calls 'the rich child' who possesses extraordinary strengths and capacities. It is this creative capacity that is potentially in all of us and that is framed in our childhoods. Over the centuries in the western world we have had prevalent views on childhood that have had deep impact on how we have raised our children. Our conceptions of childhood and youth are fluid and exist in particular political, social and economic contexts. Over the last four centuries we have travelled from Locke's *'tabula rasa'*, through Rousseau's golden age of innocence to Piaget's scientific biological child. We have come finally to the 20th Century image of the child as being educated to become a labour market supply factor. All these conceptions still play a part in how we approach education and upbringing in the 21st Century. Now neurobiological research is throwing up a new picture of how we learn. Accordingly, Dahlberg argues that today's child can be seen as being the co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture, *"We have choices to make about who we think the child is, and these choices have enormous significance since our construction of the child and early childhood are productive, by which we mean that*

*they determine the institutions we provide for the children and the pedagogical work that adults and children undertake in these institutions."*⁷

Mary Jane Drummond takes this argument further in her paper *Assessment in the Early Years*⁸ where she compares the prevalent attitude as exemplified in Zigler's influential and tellingly titled book *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education* (2006) where we can come across such statements as *"We all agree that the primary goal of preschool education is school readiness"*⁹ and *"The purpose of preschool, after all, is school readiness"*¹⁰. In this book it is noted that when children exhibit behavioural difficulties, that are severe enough for them to be excluded from programmes, that they are basically to blame for being unable to negotiate the social and behavioural demands made on them and not having learnt the appropriate skills of self-control, paying attention, working independently and ignoring distractions. Drummond terms this as the deficit approach, in contrast to Malaguzzi's concept: *"If a school for young children has to be preparatory and provide continuity with the elementary school, then we as educators are already prisoners of a model that ends up as a funnel. I think, moreover that the funnel is a detestable object ... Its purpose is to narrow down what is big into what is small. This choking device is against nature."*¹¹

A telling example of this funnel, often inadvertent and well-meaning, is given by the contemporary Brazilian poet Manoel Barros. *"The river that ran behind our house was the image of a melting glass that curved behind the house. Later, a man passed by and said: This curve that the river makes behind your house is called an inlet. It was no longer the image of a glass snake that curved behind the house. It was an inlet. I think the name impoverishes the image."*¹² As we proceed into a world where creativity is more highly prized and becomes a key to our economic and social success, the whole question of childhood education has to be reviewed in order that the natural creativity of the child grows into the creative imagination and capacities of the adult. By stultifying children with "funnel" education, especially in the early years, with an overly academic, highly pressurised and economically orientated and utilitarian curriculum, we run the risk of not achieving what we know will be increasingly important.

But creativity alone is not enough, we will also need an ethical dimension in order to create sustainable societies in ecological balance with the globe that we have inherited. In his *Good Work* project Howard Gardner and his team studied good working practices over 12 years and in this time interviewed 1200 people from journalism, business and law. They asked them what they considered good work to be and what inspired them to do good work. The authors came to the conclusion that neither genes nor culture are solely responsible for our future. What is crucial is our code of consciousness and the way we choose to interpret the instructions handed down to us by both biology and culture. *"The deterministic forces of the past are modified, rejected, or improved upon by ideas and ideals*

*invented by individuals, and then shared by communities. Hence, our vision of the future shapes what happens."*¹³ What we think about the future influences how it is created and our vision of ourselves as individuals with a future is founded in our childhood. Rudolf Steiner, another early 20th Century pedagogical innovator, phrased it as follows: *'In looking upon our cultural surroundings we have... the effects of bygone times. If we acquire a feeling for this, not only the past affects us but the future as well. It is our task (as teachers) to let the future work into us.'*¹⁴

Another ethical stance is stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where the child has a right to preparation *'for a responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origins.'*¹⁵ The hoped for goal is an empathetic knowledge that can lead to mutual respect and understanding. As we face times of economic globalisation and tendencies to increased competitiveness, with more readily available and fast international communications, we are creating a new awareness of our diversity and our intercultural interdependence. Young children naturally accept diversity and their response to differences is curiosity followed by exploration. They are eager to understand and it is up to our schools and settings to encourage this positive exposure to diversity. It is therefore incumbent upon policymakers to encourage pluralism in order for this to take place in schools. Only by exploring our human variations can we apprehend our common humanity.

As educators we should be at the forefront of the struggle to ensure that whatever our children receive is, as far as possible, in harmony with their needs and future development. Karen Wells, in her book *Childhood in a Global Perspective*, concludes, *"The heart of the disagreements between different cultures about what constitutes a childhood probably rests more on the ontological question of what it means to be human - and therefore how children should be raised."*¹⁶ Her book explores this change in attitude from one of saving children, as exemplified in 19th Century literature and discourse about childhood, to a growing awareness and respect for children's rights. The tension between these two approaches, as well as cultural differentiations, then rise up. *"Rights do not adhere to humans by virtue of our common humanity but are won in political struggle and defended by persons with capacity. In other words rights imply both the capacity to defend them and the possession of a legal personhood."*¹⁷ The full implications of the charter are yet to be understood and, as recent studies have shown, most countries fall woefully short in their implementation. Childhood has become a key theme in policy making and the media reflects this heightened awareness back to us. If, however, children are becoming competent social actors and are participating in shaping the social environments then the role of parents must also be going through fundamental changes and challenges.

*"To act morally we have to be moved; we have to feel something."*¹⁸

As times change and we evolve, we can be moved by different things according to our prior experience, expectations and cultural background. In his book *The Age of Empathy* Frans De Waal gives the example of a letter written by Abraham Lincoln to a slave-owning friend in 1841. *"You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio, there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continued torment me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave border. (It is) a thing which continually exercises, the power of it made me miserable."*¹⁹ De Waal then points out that compassion is not just a matter of giving time or donating money to help others but also of pushing a political agenda that has within it the recognition of everybody's dignity. His book explores this as an inborn capacity. When educating children it is this capacity to be compassionate and to be empathetic that should be strongly supported in an age-appropriate fashion as the child grows. Martin Luther King believed *"The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."*²⁰ In the 19th Century the plight of children was highlighted by Charles Dickens in his novels. He struck the conscience of his time by describing the exploitation, abuse, disregard and cruelty visited on many children as a result of the industrial revolution. The result of his efforts, as with Lincoln, goes towards validating King's optimism. We know that by reducing toxic stress in childhood we can help prevent illness in adulthood. If we can reduce the severity and number of early adverse experiences we can also then reduce the prevalence of health problems *"(Health) disparities are rooted in where and how we live, work, and play. Science is now telling us that they are also about how we as a society treat our youngest members"*²¹ In our post-industrial age we have the possibility to improve the experience and the quality of childhood across the world. *"Because we are trying to grow the new society within the old, our values and the way we work must be part of how we bring a new society into being."*

²²

Our task is to raise awareness, find the child in ourselves and thereby nurture the capacity to be curious, open and to appreciate diversity. Then we can more readily explore our own human nature. Listening to the child within is not a utopian fantasy but a psychological reality. By reliving that childhood capacity we can see the world with fresh eyes. The Alliance for Childhood is one example of a network of experience and shared responsibility that is there to raise these issues and to disseminate them. This is in keeping with the knowledge that we are not striving to reach a utopia or luxuriating in an unrealisable fantasy, we are just trying to make the world better for children. When considering how we work with and reciprocally develop our relationship with our children we need to remember Havel's evocation of the importance of 'meekness'. If children are the co-creators of our world they have to be 'listened to' through whatever form of communication they choose, and we need the sensitivity to decipher that language. Then we can be open to the questions and challenges that they present to us. These are relevant to our growth, as well as theirs. During our lives we will be confronted with a multiplicity of challenges through which our prejudices, beliefs, perspectives, traditions and habits will be open to questioning

and doubt. In these situations can we become open to learn from others? There will not be one right answer or one approach we can all follow. By believing in the wisdom of childhood there is a deeper message that should stand as the foundation of every educational enterprise.

*In the past I travelled on a road
(some time has passed since)
Made of certainties, hard as stones.*

*Now I tread a track of mud
(carved by time):
Wet, damp with doubts.*

*As I cross it (carefully)
I am certain that only love
Is worth the trip.*

*from "Doubt is the Teacher" by Thiago De Mello*²³



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Christopher Clouder – FRSA

is currently CEO of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, which is registered in Brussels, and speaks for some 670 Steiner schools in 27 European countries. He is a member of the executive group of the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship for the U.K and Ireland and a co-founder and International Director of the Alliance for Childhood, which is a global network of advocates for the quality of childhood. Previous to this he taught adolescents for 5 years in the state system in the Netherlands, where he was instrumental in founding a Waldorf school, and then taught for 25 years in Steiner Waldorf schools in England. He writes and gives public lectures widely throughout Europe and internationally on educational matters, such as play and imagination, contemporary issues and cultural evolution. He gives many key-note presentations and lectures at conferences, universities and teacher education courses, as well as representing and discussing educational issues with policy makers. He has published numerous books and articles on education and childhood. He has recently been appointed the founding Director of the Botin Platform for Innovation in Education, which is working across the world to enhance educational practice in schools and early years settings.



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Improving the quality of childhood: the progress made over the last few years

by Michiel Matthes

Secretary-General of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group
and Secretary of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament

Some reflections on the quality of childhood

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group was founded in Brussels on 4 October 2006. The objective of the Group is to form a community of people that works in concert to improve the quality of childhood in the European Union.

'The participants believe that a poor quality of childhood is harmful for children. When society as a whole improves this quality, it will be beneficial for the children and adolescents in question and for the societies in which they grow up. Furthermore, the participants believe that a good quality childhood is based on the following principles and attitudes:

- *The child is respected as a fellow human being with his/ her own aspirations to develop his/her inner potential.*
 - *The quality of the relationships of the child with important adults and others is a key element of the quality of his/her childhood and for his/her growth as a human being.*
-

The Network Group has deliberately not defined what it means by the quality of childhood, because in each area of childhood – family, the development of the brain, school, play, the quality of relationships – we constantly consider what is at stake and what could be understood to be a better quality of childhood. We want to encourage everyone to dialogue continuously on this topic.

This approach is in line with the book entitled *'Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Languages of Evaluation'* by Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence. They highlight the danger of describing quality standards in detail, which may then dictate what should happen with children in various settings. In the preface Carlina Rinaldi makes the following remark:

'The underlying concept, at the heart of the book, is that we must change our language of evaluation and take on the idea of 'meaning making' as a permanent process for change. If we can make this perspective our own, schools will become centres not only for making meaning, but also for change. Change, then, becomes the essential feature of schools. The transformational change, which comes from deep learning processes and knowledge building. A 'school which changes' does not mean a school changing because of a School Reform (although this can certainly constitute a strong influence). Rather it means that the transformational essence, the ability, the pleasure, the fatigue and the joy of change are intrinsic to the identity of the school as a place of 'dialogue'.

In addition, Carlina Rinaldi draws attention to the ethical values outlined in the book:

This discourse (of meaning making) is also situated within the ethical position we have outlined previously, the ethics of an encounter, foregrounding the importance of meaning making in dialogue with others'.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group follows this same approach.

The strategy pursued by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group

The strategy taken by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group has the following components:

1. Change in society is based on communication

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, stated that the change that takes place in the world is the result of communication between human beings. These changes normally take place within the silos that make up our society, such as the educational system, the legal system, the business sector, the government, the scientific community etc. and often it takes a long time before the changes that occur in one silo are disseminated to other parts of society. It is therefore our aim to invite people from the different silos and from the different EU countries to participate in our work.

2. Social change processes in western societies are nearly always initiated and led by citizens' organisations

We have looked at the history of social change processes in western societies over the past three hundred years and a common pattern has emerged. The changes that occur are initiated by citizens who are convinced that a particular practice in society is wrong and should be changed. The citizens start to speak out, to organise themselves, to raise funds for their causes, to organise themselves politically, and so on. For example:

- the movement to abolish slavery
- the socialist movement
- the cooperative movement

- the human rights movement
- the environmental movement
- the formation of the European Union

In all these cases citizens set the ball rolling and they often forced the governments to adopt their cause and to draft laws, to set up institutions, etc. For this reason the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group invites citizens' organisations working in the area of childhood and the well-being of children to become members. Our group is itself inspired by the above mentioned social movements.

3. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences".

Urie Bronfenbrenner said:

'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. ¹

I understand this statement as follows: if people are really convinced about something this will have consequences for them, the groups of which they are a part, and the society in which they live. The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is therefore eager to attract members (organisations and individuals) who are deeply concerned about the quality of childhood in their society and have decided to work on this topic.

4. Putting it all together

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group applies these principles to the work it undertakes and to the meetings that it convenes. For example, members brief each other about how they perceive the situation with regards to the quality of childhood in their areas of activity. The members inform one another about their activities, strategies, and the networks in which they function. In short: the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group maintains a knowledge system with respect to the Quality of Childhood in the European Union. This dialogue enables members of the group to work on a certain theme within the broader subject of childhood in coalitions of innovation and policy development.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group and the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood have created a space:

- between advocacy groups from different European countries.
- between various scientific disciplines such as pedagogy, educational science, psychology, family sciences and so on, working on the theme of children and childhood.
- between practitioners, scientists and administrators.
- and links are maintained with other international bodies such as the Alliance for Childhood organisations in the U.S.A and Brazil and the European Early Childhood Education Research Association.

One of the focal points of our advocacy work: to dialogue with key players in society about the image of the child that they hold

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group discovered that each organisation, even each person, that works for and with children, holds, consciously or unconsciously, an image of the child and the adolescent on which its philosophy and work is based, and all the activities undertaken by that organisation tend to be in accordance with that image. It is not easy to discover the characteristics of the image held by a particular organisation, because in most cases it is not written down, but it can be derived from various policy statements by that organisation. To illustrate:

How does a Ministry of Education look at children? Does the department perceive them as objects to whom knowledge must be transferred? As needing to get a good PISA score when they are 15? As people who should, when they are grown up, be capable combatants in the global competition to ensure the continuous prosperity and dominant position of their country? If this is the image of the child that is held, consciously or unconsciously, then all policies and actions will be based on it.

The same is true for other ministries who work for and with children and adolescents, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Finance. In Sweden the type of language that is used with regards to children stands out in this respect. In 1998 the Ministry of Education and Science published a curriculum for early childhood services. In this document only broad goals and guidelines are specified, leaving open the means by which these goals should be achieved. Philosophically, the curriculum is built on the idea of the child as competent learner, an active thinker and an involved doer. A strong orientation towards democratic values, continuous learning and development, connecting to the child's experiences; development in groups; and the pedagogical importance of both care and play underpin curriculum development and the delivery of early childhood programmes .

The following conclusions can be drawn from this:

Each ministry holds its own image of the child. Because the images of the child are different in the different ministries their programmes will go in different directions and in many cases one ministry will oppose the activities of another, simply because of the fact that they look at the child in different ways. Because central government does not hold a perception of the child which is shared by all the government ministries billions of euros are wasted.

The image of the child held by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is that described by Loris Malaguzzi, who spoke of the 'rich child', by which he meant:

'... not materially rich, but a child born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages; an active learner, seeking the meaning of the world from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values; a child that can live, learn, listen and communicate, but always in relation with others; the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity; an individual whose individuality and autonomy depend on interdependence, and who needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support.'

Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament

Christopher Clouder, who is one of the pioneers of the Alliance for Childhood initiative and who was co-organiser of the Alliance for Childhood conference in 2000 in Brussels and in 2005 in Salzburg, set up this Working Group together with MEP Karin Resetarits (Alde Party in the European Parliament 2004-2009, Austria). In the current European Parliament the following Members take part in the Working Group:

Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament

MEP Rovana Plumb (Romania)
MEP Adrian Severin (Romania)
MEP Corina Cretu (Romania)
MEP Evelyn Regner (Austria)
MEP Karin Kadenbach (Austria)

Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)

MEP Livia Járóka (Hungary)

Group of the Greens

Gerald Häfner (Germany)

The purpose of this working group is:

- To gain a better understanding of the Quality of Childhood in the EU member states.
- To think about the role that the European Parliament could play in improving the situation.
- To get to grips with the principles and approaches that could lead to a better quality of life for children.
- To form an effective working group and to get a sense of how to move on.

At the time of writing this chapter (September 2010) 24 sessions have been held since December 2006. The reports of the first 16 sessions were published in 2009 in the book *'Improving the Quality of Childhood in the European Union, Current Perspectives'*.

The success of the Working Group depends on:

- the willingness of the Members of the European Parliament to host and to chair the meetings.
- the willingness of outstanding scientists and practitioners to come to Brussels and to speak, in most cases free of charge, to the group and to dialogue with the participants about how policies regarding children could be better developed.
- the secretariat of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group organising the events and drafting the reports.

The Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament fits in very well with the strategy of the Alliance for Childhood group. The dialogue on the quality of childhood and the well-being of children is now also being conducted with European politicians and policy makers.

The Policy Landscape for Children and Adolescents in the European Union is improving

When a group of people becomes active in a certain area, even if this group is not big, rich or powerful, it can nevertheless be observed, in most cases, that changes in the wider society take place, in accordance with the objectives of the group. This is a magical process, but it happens, and it is difficult to explain. As far as the quality of childhood is concerned we have observed that literally hundreds of other groups are active in this field and that change is taking place in the wider society:

- Nearly all governmental organisations on a European, national or local level have taken great steps forward with regards to their policy agenda for and with children.
- Until recently, the dominant civil society organisations that focus on children were the ones working on the issue of children's rights. In 2009 and 2010 we observed that more and more elements concerning the quality of childhood and the well-being of children were incorporated into the public discourse.
- In the media the reporting on the theme of children has changed. The implicit image of the child is shifting away from the old paradigms such as 'this is a problem child' or 'children are the future combatants in the global competition' towards more holistic perceptions of children as advocated by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group and many others.

Taking our work to a higher level: assessing the quality of childhood

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group and the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood are continually looking for more effective ways in which to pursue our goals. In this context we have looked at the environmental movement and the approaches it has taken. The process that took place in the climate change policy area is a great inspiration

to us. In the 1980s the topic was not taken very seriously by the public at large, and it was not a prime concern for most governments. Nevertheless, the environmental organisations, whether in or outside government, pushed the subject and, as we know, succeeded in mobilising the world.

One of the tools that was employed by the environmental organisations was assessment. The following assessments that took place can be mentioned as examples:

- the International Assessment of Agricultural Science & Technology for Development,
- the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
- the International Scientific Assessment of Stratospheric Ozone
- the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the assessment reports that were written under its auspices.
- UNEP's Global Biodiversity Assessment.

It is the aim of the Working Group to devote one session in 2011 to assessment in the area of the quality of childhood and to provide a concrete proposal to follow up on this topic.

Michiel Matthes

was born in 1950 in Bussum, the Netherlands. He grew up in a nourishing family made up of both parents and four children. In 1967 he received his secondary school diploma. He studied Economics for Developing Countries at Wageningen University. From 1976 until 1980 he worked for the FAO in Ethiopia and Kenya. From 1981 until 2005 he worked for the Rabobank and the Unico Banking Group, for most of that period in the Netherlands.

He married in 1976 and has a family of three sons. He became active in the advocacy field regarding the quality of childhood because of his experience as a father of these three boys. He discovered that measures taken by governmental organisations, including schools, were often not in the best interest of the child. In 1998 he founded a Platform Group in the Netherlands, and in 2006 he co-founded the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group in Brussels to advocate for the improve the quality of childhood in the European Union (www.allianceforchildhood.eu). Michiel Matthes is co-editor of the book *'Improving the Quality of Childhood in the European Union, Current Perspectives'*.