



Kids jumping off a dock into a lake

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This article was specially written on the occasion of this book in order to reflect about the subject from the perspective of social and institutional innovation, and secondly, to take stock of the current situation in Brussels.

Concluding Chapter

Improving the quality of childhood: A learning process on the level of society

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

1. Introduction

In our second volume of Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe 2011, I explained the approach and the philosophy of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group by using the metaphor of a lake and the fish. I wrote then:

When fish are dying and start to float to the surface of a lake we all know something is wrong with the quality of the water in the lake or with some aspect of the environment of the fish species in question. Ecologists will work on identifying the pollution in the lake that caused the problem and try to remedy it.

When things go wrong with human beings most of the time we follow another approach. To stay with the metaphor of the fish and the water: we take the fish (i.e. the child or the adolescent) out of the lake and put it into an aquarium (or in human terms prisons, institutions, remedial programmes) and start to treat the fish with the aim of 'repairing' what has gone wrong.

In the above mentioned example I wrote that 'ecologists will work on identifying the pollution in the lake that caused the problem and try to remedy it'. But this phrase refers to a learning process that took place on the level of society, which spanned more than a century and involved arduous work by many people.

Other learning processes on the level of society are:

Societal Challenge	Societal Response
Threat of war, or of being conquered by another tribe or country	Cooperation between individuals to fend off the threat / attack, setting up an army, a Ministry of Defence, participation in international alliances such as NATO, creation of the Geneva Convention , setting up the Red Cross, etc
Threat of floods	Building dykes, setting up a State Service for Dykes, Canals and Roads, etc.
Threat of diseases	The training of doctors and nurses, the creation of water companies and sewerage systems, setting up a Ministry of Health.
Slavery	The movement to abolish slavery, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA.
Industrial Revolution	Training of labourers on the one hand and setting up of trade unions on the other hand. Emergence of the Socialist Parties.
The occurrence of small risks, but with a high risk for the individual, who is affected by it	Setting up of insurance companies
Economic crisis of the 1930's and beyond	Better supervision of banks by the BIS (Bank for International Settlements in Basel, Switzerland)), new economic policies (Keynes, New Deal).
Environmental Pollution	The environmental movement, etc.

Learning processes on the level of society follow a similar pattern, but each time the process is a bit different:

- First phase: pioneers become aware that something is wrong, in our example the pollution of the environment. They start to speak out, but are considered by the majority of the people as being strange and not belonging to the mainstream.
- Second phase: these activist-pioneers look for like-minded people and start to form groups and clusters.
- Third phase: scientists start to build up a body of knowledge in the area in question. Step-by-step a consensus among scientists emerges.
- Fourth phase: people start to organise themselves in a more professional and elaborate way. Action models to protest about the subject in question are developed and tested. Think in this respect about the protesters of Greenpeace in their rubber boats.
- Fifth phase: politicians get involved and start to include elements of the protest movement in their election manifestos. At the same time new parties may be established around this theme. Policy makers develop new approaches to meet the new challenges.
- Sixth phase: the general public becomes involved, the media start to report on the issues.
- Seventh phase : new laws are formulated, often in reaction to a catastrophe.
- Eighth phase: institutions are established to take care of the new challenge;
- Ninth phase: international agreements are negotiated and ratified in order to take up this matter internationally, because in most cases the problem cannot be solved entirely within the borders of one country.

With regards to children and the quality of childhood we have followed the same path, but in this case we are some 40 years behind the environmental movement. Nevertheless things are already happening in all the nine phases mentioned above.

We note for instance that the European institutions are rapidly picking up the standpoints and approaches that have been brought forward by the various NGOs and others that work in these areas. We know that it will take time before these new ideas will be implemented in the member states, although it should be noted that some Member States have already implemented the strategies brought forward in the documents mentioned below. And it will take still much longer before it will be felt on the ground, but in the heart of the European institutions the new messages are taking root. The countries that are ahead are for instance the Scandinavian countries in the area of early childhood policies and the combatting of social exclusion and discrimination.

In the second part of this chapter I will describe the main documents published by the European institutions¹ over the past few years. For each document cited the full website address is included in the text or in the footnotes, for easy referral.

2. The new approaches regarding children and childhood have taken root inside the European Institutions

The European Institutions publish and discuss working papers and then publish the results of their meetings. That is the way the European Institutions function. Within the European Union there are three main organisations:

- The Council of the European Union
- The European Commission
- The European Parliament.

In this paragraph we will review recent publications of these organisations on the subject of children, childhood and education. This review illustrates that the viewpoints that we have been advocating for many years, with other NGOs, have taken root inside these institutions.

2.1 The Council of the European Union

In this paragraph I will look at three documents that were published under the auspices of the Council of the European Union:

(i) The Treaty of Lisbon²

The Treaty of Lisbon, which was signed by the heads of government of the 27 Member States in Lisbon on 13 December 2007, includes Article 2 the following statement:

It (i.e. the European Union) shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child.

It is an important step forward that it is stated in a legally binding treaty that *the European Union shall promote... the Rights of the Child*. In Chapter 9 of this book Ezio Perillo, Director of Legislative Affairs of the European Parliament, has written about what this statement implies.

(ii) Council Conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the 'Social Dimension of Education and Training' and the 'Competences supporting Life Long Learning and the 'new skills for new jobs' initiative'³

On 11 May 2010 the Council of the European Union had a meeting on the social dimension of education and training and on 'Competences supporting Lifelong Learning and the 'new skills for new jobs' initiative' (2010/C 135/02). This is a powerful document, which is very much in line with the advocacy work of among others, the European Civil Society Platform for Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) and other NGO's, which worked for many years on these topics⁴. I cite below part of the conclusions of this document:

Regarding the Social Dimension of Education and Training the following is stated (my italics):

The Council invites the Member States with regard to early and school education, to:

- 1. Ensure wider access to high-quality early childhood education and care, in order to give all children – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special education needs – a sure start, as well as to increase the motivation to learn.*
- 2. Improve the quality of provision in schools and reduce differences between them and within them, with a view to countering possible socio-economic or cultural marginalisation.*
- 3. Focus on the acquisition of essential basic skills, especially literacy, numeracy and – notably in the case of pupils with a migrant background – language skills.*
- 4. Encourage networking activities between schools, in order to share experience and examples of good practice.*
- 5. Intensify efforts to prevent early school-leaving, based on the development of early warning systems identifying pupils at risk; encourage school-wide strategies for inclusion, focused on quality and supported by adequate leadership and teacher training in a lifelong learning perspective.*
- 6. Develop more personalised approaches and systemic responses to support all pupils, as well as provide additional help for those with disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs.*
- 7. Enhance the relevance of school education with a view to raising pupils' aspirations and stimulating not just the ability to learn, but also the motivation to learn.*
- 8. Enhance the attractiveness of teaching as a profession, provide relevant in-service training and ensure strong school leadership.*
- 9. Make schools more accountable to society at large, strengthen partnerships between schools and parents, business and local communities, and further integrate formal and non-formal activities.*
- 10. Promote successful inclusive education approaches for all pupils, including those with special needs, by making schools learning communities in which a sense of inclusion and mutual support is nurtured and in which the talents of all pupils are recognised. Monitor the impact of such approaches, in particular with a view to raising access and graduation rates of learners with special needs at all levels of the education system.*

The note continues with the following:

...and in general to strengthen the social dimension of education and training systems by:

- 1. Increasing the flexibility and permeability of education pathways and removing barriers to participation and to mobility within and between education and training systems.*

2. *Developing closer links between the world of education and the world of work and society at large, with a view to enhancing employability and active citizenship.*
3. *Establishing systems for the validation and recognition of prior learning, including informal and non-formal learning, and increasing the use of lifelong guidance among disadvantaged and low-skilled learners.*
4. *Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of financial support measures which target the disadvantaged, as well as the effects of the design of educational systems and structures on the disadvantaged.*
5. *Considering the collection of data on outcomes, drop-out rates and on learners' socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in vocational education and training, higher education and adult education.*
6. *Considering the establishment of quantified objectives in the area of social inclusion through education which are appropriate to the situation of each Member State.*
7. *Considering the development of an integrated approach to these objectives, in coordination with other policies.*
8. *Devoting adequate resources to disadvantaged pupils and schools and, where appropriate, extending the use of the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, in order to reduce social exclusion through education.*

The note concludes with the following statements:

The European Council accordingly invites the Member States and the Commission to:

1. *Pursue cooperation on the strategic priority of promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, by actively using the open method of coordination within the context of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and by implementing the social dimension of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and adopting measures in line with the 2008 Council conclusions on adult learning.*
2. *Endeavour to make active use of each strand of the lifelong learning programme and, where appropriate, of the European Social Fund, of the European Regional Development Fund and of the progress programme, in order to strengthen social inclusion through education and training, and maintain a strong focus on this dimension in the proposals for the next generation of programmes.*
3. *Promote and support greater participation of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with special needs, in transnational mobility schemes, partnerships and projects, in particular those established under the Lifelong Learning Programme.*
4. *Support comparative research on the effectiveness of policies to increase equity in education and training, widen the knowledge base in cooperation with other international organisations and ensure a broad dissemination of research results.*
5. *Promote the role of education and training as key instruments for the achievement of the objectives of the social inclusion and social protection process.*

These texts are far ahead of what is happening in most Member States and it is now up to all parties concerned to turn this language into reality.

(iii) Declaration of the Permanent Intergovernmental Group 'Europe de l'Enfance' (Permanent Intergovernmental Group on Children and Childhood), meeting on 16 November 2010 in Brussels⁵

On 16 November 2010 the Permanent Intergovernmental Group 'L'Europe de l'Enfance' adopted a Declaration at the invitation of the Belgian Presidency which is a positively formulated and influential document. One of the key paragraphs of this document reads as follows (my italics):

The Group "Europe de l'Enfance" welcomes the fact that on this occasion they have for the first time a real chance to exchange about comparisons and possible synergies between the European and International policy agendas on children, youth and children's rights and recommends the following:

1. *To welcome the information provided in the document "The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights, A Belgian EU Presidency, Youth Note" as a very useful reference document for further policy development;*
2. *n/a*
3. *To encourage the Member States, the EU and other international institutions to explore, exchange good practices and improve synergies across the different policy areas and organisations of the European Union, Council of Europe and United Nations to enhance coherence and efficiency in the implementation of the European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children's rights at member state, European and international level;*
4. *To promote activities which strengthen the knowledge and action on children's issues and to increase cooperation with other national and international, governmental, nongovernmental and academic key actors on children's rights in particular in the fields of education, justice, social services, health and youth, as well in cooperation i.e. with the youth organisations, the Ombudspersons for children or other institutions for the promotion and protection of the right of the child;*
5. *To reinforce the cooperation with the youth sector, building upon shared thematic priorities of participation and poverty and social exclusion at national, European and international level.*
6. *To continue to support measures to fight against poverty and to reduce poverty and social exclusion in particular as they affect children and young people, and to take note of the Trio (Spain, Belgium, and Hungary) Declaration of the EU Belgian Presidency Conference: Roadmap for a Recommendation on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being, adopted in Marche-en-Famenne, on 3 September 2010.*

This Declaration, which is not legally binding, is to my opinion a robust document because of the following reasons:

- It was a common Declaration of the representatives of the member states.
- It puts into words the new thinking about children and childhood in accordance with the standpoints developed by many NGO's.
- It spells out a sound framework for cooperation between many governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental organisations regarding children, youngsters and childhood and the many policy domains in this respect.
- The NGO's can henceforth refer to this document in their ongoing dialogue with EU member states and EU institutions and they can henceforth monitor the progress made in this respect and publish the results.

2.2 The European Commission

(i) Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child'⁶

On the 4th of July 2006 the European Commission published the Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (COM (2006) 367 final'. In this document the authors argued that the Member States are all bound by the Treaties of the European Union, the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. By bringing these various documents together and integrating them as far as children and childhood issues are concerned a powerful new document was created.

(ii) An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child⁷

On 15 February 2011 the European Commission published the sequel to the 2006 Communication entitled 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child' Brussels, 15.2.2011 COM (2011) 60 final. In this report there are 11 Action Points, and its concluding paragraph reads as follows (my italics):

With this EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child, the Commission calls on the EU institutions and on the Member States to renew their commitment to step up efforts in protecting and promoting the rights of children. The action of the EU should be exemplary in ensuring the respect of the provisions of the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and of the UNCRC with regard to the rights of children. The Commission will review regularly progress made in the implementation of the EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child in its Annual Report on the application of the Charter.

As underlined in the Europe 2020 Strategy, the long-term effects of not investing enough in policies affecting children may have a profound impact on our societies. Many of these policies require determined action by the Member States, and the

Commission is ready to offer its support and cooperation. The Commission will continue to play its part in joint efforts to achieve well-being and safety of all children. A renewed commitment of all actors is necessary to bring to life the vision of a world where children can be children and can safely live, play, learn, develop their full potential, and make the most of all existing opportunities.

Please note the last sentence in which the European Commission speaks about its vision. This is new language for the European Commission, which has tended up till now to consider the child simply in his/her capacity as a future worker, who had to take care of the future prosperity of the European Union. The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group has been advocating for these types of changes for many years. As explained in the book *Improving the Quality of Childhood in the European Union – Current Perspectives* (2010, pages 16 and 17) a new way of looking at children and young people will in the end change the entire policy approach in this field.

(iii) Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow(17.2.2011 COM(2011) 66 final).⁸

This Communication has highlighted the need to improve Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across the EU by complementing the existing quantitative targets with measures to improve access and to ensure the quality of provision. In response to requests in the Council Conclusions of 2008 and 2009 for more policy cooperation on ECEC issues and to the challenge of the new European benchmark on ECEC participation, it proposes an agenda for work among Member States on key issues related to access and to quality, supported by actions taken by the Commission.

This agenda is summarised below. This work would be organised under the Open Method of Coordination⁹ and focus on the identification and analysis of common challenges, good practice models, and how to transfer successful approaches to other systems.

ECEC has an important role to play in reducing early school leaving, and so key challenges as well as possible solutions in this field should be highlighted in Member States' National Reform Programmes to address the Europe 2020 priorities. The need to learn from good practice and experience across the EU, and so improve the quality of policy in ECEC, is pressing.

I cite some paragraphs to give you a flavour of the content of the document (my italics):

Proposed issues for policy cooperation among Member States

Access to ECEC

- *Using ECEC effectively to support inclusion and to reduce early school leaving*
- *Widening access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged children, migrants, Roma children (such as incentives for participation for disadvantaged families, adapting provision to the needs of families and increasing accessibility and affordability)*
- *Collecting evidence on the advantages and impact of universal versus targeted provision*
- *Designing efficient funding models and the right balance of public and private investment.*

Quality of ECEC

- *Finding the appropriate balance in the curriculum between cognitive and non-cognitive elements*
- *Promoting the professionalisation of ECEC staff: what qualifications are needed for which functions*
- *Developing policies to attract, educate and retain suitably qualified staff to ECEC*
- *Improving the gender balance of ECEC staff*
- *Moving towards ECEC systems which integrate care and education, and improve quality, equity and system efficiency*
- *Facilitating the transition of young children between family and education/care, and between levels of education*
- *Ensuring quality assurance: designing coherent, well-coordinated pedagogical frameworks, involving key stakeholders*

In support, the Commission will:

- *Promote the identification and exchange of good policies and practices through the Open Method of Coordination on Education and Training with Member States (ET2020)*
- *Support the development of innovative approaches by developing transnational projects and networks under the Lifelong Learning Programme*
- *Provide support for research into these areas under the 7th Framework Programme on Research and Development*
- *Encourage Member States to invest in these areas through the Structural Funds, in particular through support for the training of staff and for the development of accessible infrastructure.*

(iv) *Communication 'An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020'*¹⁰
The Communication of the Commission entitled 'An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' is another example of decisiveness and energy within the European Commission. The problems of the Romanian Roma people in the summer of 2010 in France may have speeded up this process, and the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is also proud that it assisted in the lobbying process by devoting the 21st session of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood to the subject 'Improving the Quality of Childhood in the European Union: the Case of Roma Children'. One of the speakers was Ivan Ivanov, Executive Director of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO), one of the key lobbyists for Roma matters. The session was hosted by MEP Gerald Häfner with the support of MEP Livia Járóka, whose nickname in the European Parliament is "the Roma MEP". We may conclude that this robust policy note was the result of all the lobbying efforts on many levels. The scope of the note is as follows:

This EU Framework seeks to make a tangible difference to Roma people's lives. It is the EU's response to the current situation and does not replace Member States' primary responsibility in this regard. With this EU Framework, the European Commission encourages Member States, in proportion to the size of the Roma population living in their territories and taking into account their different starting points, to adopt or to develop further a comprehensive approach to Roma integration and endorse the following goals.

A targeted approach, which provides an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies was formulated. The note states further that:

EU Roma integration goals should cover, in proportion to the size of the Roma population, four crucial areas: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing. These minimum standards should be based on common, comparable and reliable indicators.... :

- *Access to education: Ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school*
- *Access to employment: Cut the employment gap between Roma and the rest of the population*
- *Access to healthcare: Reduce the gap in health status between the Roma and the rest of the population*
- *Access to housing and essential services: Close the gap between the share of Roma with access to housing and to public utilities (such as water, electricity and gas) and that of the rest of the population*

The Member States are invited to make their national Roma reform programmes realistic, with clear targets, sufficient budgets, strong monitoring methods, in participation with Roma civic organisations, and a national contact point to coordinate the implementation.

2.3 The European Parliament

(i) Conference on the Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child'

On 17 April 2007 a conference was held in the European Parliament to discuss the Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child'. The following Committees of the Parliament hosted this conference: the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, the Committee on Culture and Education, the Subcommittee on Human Rights, the Committee on Development and the Committee on Legal Affairs and the entire conference was chaired by MEP Roberta Angelilli (Group of the European People's Party or EPP, Italy).

The conference was a great success. The content was good and there were some 300 people in the audience. The conference resolved to draft a resolution that was entitled 'European Parliament Resolution of 16 January 2008: Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child'¹¹.

The resolution was adopted on 16 January 2008 in a plenary session of the European Parliament. The Calls for Action are clustered by subject. To give you a flavour of this document a selection of the Calls for Action by subject is included below (my italics):

Overview of the strategy (35 Calls for Action):

26. Emphasises the imperative for a differentiated consideration of children's needs, a good example for such a differentiated scale being the Report Card 7 by the UNICEF INNOCENTI Research Centre, with six dimensions of child well-being, including material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviour and risks and subjective well-being.

29. Emphasises that, since the vast majority of children, especially young children, are cared for in a family, a strategy on the rights of the child must include provisions to promote the welfare of families.

31. Proposes that the EU define as 'children at risk' all children who are victims of a social situation that threatens their mental or physical health and/or exposes them to the risks of delinquency, both as actors and as victims.

Child Participation (6 Calls for Action):

37. Welcomes the fact that the Commission has established an inter-service group and appointed a coordinator for children's rights and calls for the establishment of a coordination unit in Parliament in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon, to act in liaison with the Commission's inter-service group and to link up and rationalise all Parliamentary initiatives and activities relating to children's rights; takes the view that such

bodies should also provide a network for the exchange of information and good practices, in relation to the national strategic plans on children being implemented by some Member States; calls for these bodies to establish direct contact with child and youth-led organisations in order to develop, implement, monitor and ensure the meaningful and effective participation of children in all decision-making that affects them.

Priorities of the EU strategy on the rights of the child

Violence (52 Calls for Action)

42. Affirms that no forms of violence against children in any setting, including the home, can be justified and that all violence must be condemned; therefore calls for Community legislation that prohibits all forms of violence, sexual abuse, degrading punishment and harmful traditional practices; condemns all forms of violence against children including physical, psychological and sexual violence, such as torture, child abuse and exploitation, child abduction, trafficking in or sale of children and their organs, domestic violence, child pornography, child prostitution, paedophilia, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages and honour crimes.

Poverty/ Discrimination (24 Calls for Action)

94. Recalls that 19% of children in the EU live below the poverty line and that appropriate assistance measures geared to the needs of children must therefore be taken, including measures to support their families, and calls on the Member States to adopt ambitious and achievable targets for reducing - and eventually eradicating - child poverty.

99. Stresses that action against the commercial sexual exploitation of children - i.e. trafficking in children for sexual purposes, child pornography and child sex tourism should be made one of the strategy's major objectives for action both within and outside the European Union, in particular in the light of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); points out that poverty is often one of the many causes of and reinforces social exclusion, discrimination and endangering of children; takes the view, however, that commercial sexual exploitation of children has its true origin in the demand for sex with children and in organised crime, which is prepared to exploit situations that place children at risk.

Child Labour (5 Calls for Action):

122. Points to the fact that products being sold in the EU may be produced by child labour; calls on the Commission to implement a mechanism by which victims of child labour can seek redress against EU companies in the national courts of the Member States; calls on the Commission to enforce supply-chain compliance and especially to come forward with

mechanisms that make the main contractor liable in the EU in cases of violation of UN conventions on child labour in the supply chain; to this end, calls on the EU to use the generalised system of preferences (GSP) procedure as one way of combating more effectively the exploitation of child labour which occurs in various regions of the world, with special measures for dangerous work which a large number of children are forced to do.

Children of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees (17 Calls for Action):

136. Underlines the negative consequences of emigration and the precarious situation of children left alone in their countries by parents who have emigrated; stresses the need to ensure comprehensive care, integration and education for such children, as well as family reintegration whenever possible.

Rights of Children to Information and Education (17 Calls for Action):

140. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to draw up an effective system to ensure that, at home and at school, and to a degree appropriate to their age and intellectual development, children are made aware of and may exercise their rights.

Health (14 Calls for Action):

157. Points to the worrying fact that obesity, especially among children, is on the rise in Europe; underlines that estimates indicate that more than 21 million children are overweight in the EU, with this figure growing by 400,000 each year; calls on the Commission to bring forward proposals to regulate aggressive and misleading advertising and to improve the provisions for nutritional labelling of processed food in order to tackle the growing obesity problem.

167. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to step up their efforts to combat alcohol-related harm for women and children, by:

- a) providing better information to women on foetal alcohol syndrome disorders,*
- b) providing adequate health services and counselling for women with alcohol problems during and after pregnancy as well as for women and children in families with alcohol and substance-abuse problems,*
- c) introducing stronger regulations on advertising for alcoholic beverages and the sponsoring of sport events by the alcohol industry, in the form of a ban on advertising between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m., and by prohibiting advertising for alcohol in children's content (computer games, comics), so as to not communicate a positive image of alcohol to children, and*
- d) prohibiting alcohol beverages which in their design are hardly different from sweets or toys, since children cannot make the distinction between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.*

Birth registration (7 Calls for Action):

171. Acknowledges the right of every child to be registered at birth as a legal recognition of his/her existence and of his/her right to acquire nationality and identity, irrespective of his/her gender or ethnic origin, or of his/her parents' nationality or status as refugees, immigrants or asylum seekers.

Children in armed conflicts (9 Calls for Action):

178. Stresses the crucial need to implement the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflicts.

179. Urges the Member States to incorporate the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court into their national laws and to investigate, prosecute and punish all those who have unlawfully recruited children into armed forces or groups, or used them for active participation in conflict situations, in order to ensure that every effort is made to end the culture of impunity in respect of such crimes.

Children and democracy (4 Calls for Action):

187. Stresses the right of children to grow up in a free and open society where human rights and freedom of expression are respected and where death sentences are no longer imposed, particularly on under-age individuals.

The document is not legally binding, but it is nonetheless a powerful paper that is much in line with the viewpoints brought forward by the civil society organisations in Brussels, including the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group. It was sent to the following organisations:

- the Council of the European Union,
- the European Commission,
- the Member States,
- the European Network of National Observatories on Childhood (ChildONEurope),
- the Council of Europe,
- the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child,
- UNICEF,
- the ILO,
- the UNHCR
- and the World Health Organization.

(ii) The European Parliament's Report on Early Years Learning in the European Union¹²

On the 29th of March 2011 the Report on Early Years Learning in the European Union (2010/2159 (INI) by MEP Mary Honeyball (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, or S&D, UK) was adopted in a plenary session in the European Parliament. This report is again a powerful text aimed at improving the setting for early years learning in the EU Member States. The main paragraphs have headings such as:

- Child-centered approach
- Universal provision of ECEC
- Engagement with parents
- Better integration of services
- Economic benefits
- Staff and quality services
- Research and exchange of best practices

and in total 41 recommendations are made.

3. What is required at this point in time?

In the beginning of this chapter I assessed that the movement to improve the position of children and their quality of childhood in Europe is following a similar path as all the other movements in history to improve the living conditions of human beings and that the Childrens' / Quality of Childhood Movement is actually engaged in all nine phases of the model which was outlined earlier.

Ample scientific knowledge is available

With regards to our subject we are in a lucky position that so much scientific knowledge about children, families and their development is already available and in our previous two books, and also in this one, the chapters by the various specialists provide ample evidence thereof.

I have furthermore shown that many new ideas about children and childhood have taken root inside the European institutions. On paper important progress in this respect has been made and it is now time to implement what has been put in writing. It should therefore be the task of all those working on these topics, both inside and outside government, to push for the implementation of these benevolent intentions.

So what is to be done now? I will discuss this question in two spheres: the governmental sphere and the NGO-sphere.

Work Agenda in the Governmental Sphere:

Setting up a Child Secretariat:

In some countries there are already Ministries for Children, Schools and Families, but due to the current austerity programmes some of these have been dissolved. However, whatever the organisational situation in each Member State I think that it would be beneficial to set up a small unit that could be called a Child Secretariat, that fulfills the tasks mentioned below. This unit could report to the Minister for Children, Schools and Families, and, if such a ministry does not exist, to the Prime Minister. The tasks:

- to monitor the situation of children and youth in the country;
- to monitor whether the good intentions as described in the second paragraph of this chapter, are being implemented.
- to coordinate the activities of the different ministries which pertain to children, childhood and youth of the different ministries.
- to function as a coordinator regarding policy actions of the various layers of government: the local, regional, national and European levels.
- to function as a coordinator between the government, the scientific community and the organisations doing the work on the ground such as the various social services and other practitioners.
- to function as a contact point for European cooperation in this area.
- to publish each year a progress report and to describe clearly what is still lacking and to indicate what action should be taken by whom.

Open Method of Coordination

The Alliance for Childhood welcomes the initiative by the Council and the European Commission to use the Open Method of Coordination within the context of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training and early childhood services respectively, but it should of course not be limited to these fields. It should gradually be expanded to other areas concerning children and childhood, such as for example the quality of childhood and well-being of children and families in general and the rights of the child.

Building up a Framework of Institutions for Children and Childhood

In all EU Member States there are already many institutions that provide services for families, children and adolescents. There are maternity clinics, daycare centres, kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, social services, sports clubs, but also penitentiary institutions etc. These services are for families and children in early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescence and late adolescence. However, in the majority of countries most of these institutions work on their own and there is no underlying and connecting philosophy which helps the organisations to provide the services to the children and their families in a consistent way. Due to this lack of a connecting philosophy the services rendered will be less effective, and in some cases even harmful for the children and young people concerned. It is therefore important that:

- in each country an underlying and connecting philosophy for children, families and childhood is worked out in order to ensure the consistency of the services rendered.
- on top of that it is necessary to monitor that these services are provided in a coherent way.

Such important tasks cannot be outsourced to a consultancy company, but it should be at the heart of Central Government. In my opinion, a framework of institutions, responsible for children and childhood and families should be built up, very much in the same way as has been done for all the challenges mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter.

Work Agenda in the Sphere of the NGOs

In Brussels there are many NGO's working on the theme of children, the rights of children, children in the family, children and exclusion and poverty, immigrant children, homeless children, abused children, street children, children in developing countries, the well-being of children, lifelong learning etc. Each organisation has its own perception of the child, its own objectives and its own work programme and there is only limited cooperation.

Also here we can learn from the environmental movement, which has bundled its efforts in Brussels in a joint platform that is called 'The Green 10' (<http://www.foeeurope.org>). The different green NGOs work on their own and lobby for certain viewpoints, but on top of this they liaise with each other to ensure that they reach common positions vis-à-vis the European Institutions in order to make their work more effective.

It would be an import step forward for the NGOs working on behalf of children in Brussels to follow this example and to build a robust platform, which could be called 'The Child 10'.

Another feature of the Green NGOs in Brussels is that most of them are big European organisations with thousands of national, regional and local member organisations that work simultaneously on the European, the national and the local level. Also in this respect the Children's NGOs can learn from the Green NGOs. The difference with the NGOs for Children and Childhood is that there are far fewer NGOs at the local and regional level with far fewer members, and they have often not yet formed platforms on the national level. Nevertheless it is an important task to develop and to strengthen the links between the NGO's working in Brussels and the NGOs working on the local and national level. In the end it should become a strong matrix where information flows take place horizontally and vertically, forming together one large advocacy network for the sake of children.

The big children organisations such as UNICEF Save the Children, Plan, SOS Children's Villages etc. function in the EU Member States as fundraising organisations to gather money that is then spent on children's projects in developing countries. To improve the quality of childhood in the industrialised countries is often not one of their priorities. It would be welcomed if they were to include this task in their mission statements.

In conclusion: I think that the time is now ripe that the many different NGOs active on the

EU level and in the various EU member states start to develop and to strengthen the horizontal and vertical connections between themselves, so that a strong matrix of organisations may come into existence that will lobby for the quality of childhood, the well-being of children and children's rights in the European Union.

¹ Most documents were found on the website of Eurochild www.eurochild.org and on <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/index.htm>

² The full text can be found at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:SOM:EN:HTML>

³ The text can be found on: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2010:135:SOM:EN:HTML>

⁴ On the website of EUCIS-LLL the following definition of lifelong learning is to be found: Lifelong learning covers education and training across all ages and in all areas of life be it formal, non-formal or informal. It shall enable citizens' emancipation and full participation in society in its civic, social and economic dimensions. Its objectives should not only be described in terms of employability or economic growth but also as a framework for personal development.

⁵ The text of the Declaration can be found at:

http://www.childoneurope.org/ee/pdf/Declaration_REME%20_Eng_version_25_11_2010.pdf

⁶ The report can be found on the following website: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0367:FIN:EN:PDF>

⁷ The report can be found on the following website:

http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/docs/com_2011_60_en.pdf

⁸ The report can be found on the following website: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc/childhoodcom_en.pdf

⁹ The open method of coordination (OMC) is a relatively new and intergovernmental means of governance in the European Union, based on the voluntary cooperation of its member states (Source: Wikipedia).

¹⁰ The full title is 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' Brussels, 5.4.2011 COM (2011) 173 final. The report can be found on the following website: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Notice.do?mode=dbl&lng1=en,nl&lang=&lng2=bg,cs,da,de,el,en,es,et,fi,fr,hu,it,lt,lv,mt,nl,pl,pt,ro,sk,sl,sv,&tval=568816:cs&page=&thwords=null>

¹¹ The report can be found on the following website: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0012+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>. The code of the resolution is P6_TA (2008)0012.

¹² The report can be found on: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/file.jsp?id=5869722>

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 improvement of the quality of childhood in the European Union (www.allianceforchildhood.eu). Michiel Matthes is co-editor of the 'Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe', series.