Nearly half of all people living in extreme poverty are aged 18 or under. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, violence and abuse.

Improving the living conditions of children and youth and providing them opportunities to live a fulfilling life is an essential element of development. Whilst children and youth hold the potential for their societies' future development, they are also severely hampered by lack of development – 47% of all people living in extreme poverty are aged 18 years or under – as well as by social exclusion, violence and abuse (which particularly affects girls and young women). Last year, on the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a European Parliament resolution (2014/2919) called on the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 'to prioritise children's rights in all EU external action' and 'to report annually to Parliament on the results achieved with regard to child-focused EU external action'. It also called on the Commission to 'integrate children's rights into development cooperation and into humanitarian aid in order to ensure adequate funding and to increase the level of protection for children'.

The Parliament had already set out ambitious aims for children and development in its 2009 resolution on 'A Special Place for Children in EU External Action' (2008/2203). Welcoming the European Commission's proposal for a 'holistic and coherent child rights-based approach', the Parliament underlined 'the urgent need to pay special attention to the most vulnerable and socially excluded girls and boys'. It called on the Commission to 'develop procedures, benchmarks and indicators' to keep children's rights on the agenda, and to engage children and youth networks in development policy consultations. Mainstreaming children's rights is a legal requirement under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which also includes a dedicated thematic programme on children's well-being to help them access an identity, to fight against traditional harmful practices and norms that affect children, and to establish systems to protect them from all forms of violence. Council guidelines on the rights of the child and on children in armed conflict commit the EU to use also all other foreign policy instruments in a coordinated manner.

International commitments to improve the lives of children have been reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Because of their cross-cutting nature, children's issues are addressed within different goals. The MDG most directly relevant to children is number 4 ('Reducing child mortality'). Significant progress has been made in this area; the 2012 under-five mortality rate in developing regions (53 deaths per 1 000 live births) has nearly halved since 1990 (when the rate was 99 per 1 000). Yet the target of reducing infant mortality by two-thirds by 2015 is unlikely to be met. Every day, 18 000 children still die in the world before reaching their fifth birthday, largely due to preventable causes: a lack of access to sufficient food, safe drinking water and sanitation, or of universal health services, including sexual,
The European Year for Development: Children and Youth

**Chronic Undernutrition Among Children Under Five Years of Age**

The map shows the percentage of children younger than five who are severely or moderately underweight - in Afghanistan, the figure refers to severely underweight children only. Figures refer to the most recent year available; the striped pattern indicates this is 2005 or earlier.

**Adolescent Births, Child Mortality and Rate of Primary Completion**

The regional charts present separately for the different regions, the evolution of three indicators over the period 1990-2012 (1991-2011 for the primary school completion rate):
- In the vertical axis the number of births per 1 000 adolescent women aged 15 to 19,
- In the right axis the number of children per 1 000 live births who died before reaching the age of 5,
- In the left axis the percentage of pupils who reached the last grade of primary school.

Data source: Millennium Development Goals
One in four children under five (162 million) remains stunted, risking diminished cognitive and physical development.

The Parliament recently called on the Commission to scale up its nutrition-specific commitments.

The proposed Sustainable Development Goals include numerous targets to improve the situation of children and youth and represent an important leap forward.

reproductive and maternal health services. Targets relating to children and youth are also included in MDG 3 ('achieving gender equality') and MDG 2 ('achieving universal primary education'). As part of its development cooperation efforts, the EU has devoted substantial resources to promoting gender equality for girls and to improving education, as well as launching concrete initiatives to address the needs of children in conflict situations (for more details, see the European Year for Development briefings on 'Women and Girls' and on 'Education').

Finally, an important aspect of MDG target 1C ('halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger') has involved reducing the number of underweight and stunted children. The number of those who are underweight has declined from 160 million in 1990 to 99 million in 2012, but one in seven children under five remains underweight. Even more worrisome, the growth of one in four of the world's children under five (162 million) remain stunted – a condition that may diminish cognitive and physical development and perpetuate the vicious circle of poverty and undernutrition. To address this challenge, in 2014 the EU Foreign Affairs Council endorsed an 'Action Plan on Nutrition', with a focus on activities and policies targeted at women and children. The plan aims to reduce the number of chronically undernourished under-five-year-olds by at least 7 million by 2025 and to meet the World Health Assembly target of reducing global stunting by 40% (70 million) by the same date. Parliament supported these ambitious goals in its resolution on child undernutrition and malnutrition in developing countries (2014/2853), underlining the importance of the first 1 000 days of life (including the period of pregnancy) to meet a child's nutritional requirements and calling on the Commission to scale up its commitments for nutrition-specific interventions. The EP has also recognised that improving child and maternal nutrition – and food security in general – will require coordinated action across different policies and sectors. The fight against child undernutrition and for universal access to adequate nutritious food should remain, the Parliament has stressed, one of the most important targets of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

In this regard, the zero draft of the UN's proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for post-2015 include numerous targets to improve the situation of children and youth, including achieving internationally agreed targets on growth and weight in children and reducing neonatal mortality to 12 or fewer deaths per 1 000 live births, and under-5 mortality to 25 or fewer deaths per 1 000 live births. In addition, the SDGs include targets to eliminate child labour and the use of child soldiers, to end abuse and violence against children and to provide legal identity for all, including birth registration. This is an ambitious agenda, which constitutes, according to UNICEF, 'a major leap forward' for children and youth. It is therefore imperative for the EU to advocate strongly for the SDG's adoption, and to redouble the Union's efforts for the goals to be successfully implemented.