

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): a Universal Child Rights Framework
17 April 2007

Marta Santos Pais
Director, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

Committee Chairs, Members of the European Parliament, Vice President Frattini and Officials of the European Commission, Representative of German Presidency, Representatives of international and regional organizations and civil society, Child rights experts, Ladies and Gentlemen and Young participants in this hearing

1. It is a great honour to participate, on behalf of UNICEF, in this important Joint Hearing on the Rights of the Child.

We strongly applaud this initiative and opportunity to celebrate and reflect on children's rights, a day that marks a turning point in the process of mainstreaming children's rights in the EU policy agenda.

Children's rights need to be addressed as a clear and distinct concern. Children's rights – civil political economic social and cultural rights – are not mini rights. They are at the heart of the human rights agenda and represent a cornerstone of the EU agenda.

The participation of a wide range of Parliamentary Committees in this Joint Hearing is a strong indication of the Parliament's political commitment to children. It is a recognition that no policy discussion is neutral to children. In each and every area there is an opportunity to advance the rights of the child; each and every decision may have a negative impact on the enjoyment of children's rights.

This hearing is also a decisive step towards the consolidation of an EU inter-institutional pact for children's rights. Building upon the individual role played by the European Parliament, the European Commission and Member States, a consolidated

and mutually supportive strategy for children is within reach, with a unique potential to enrich the EU's overall human rights agenda, and to strengthen the EU's voice and influence the world over.

Today's hearing also provides a special opportunity to move this process forward in partnership with a strong and historic alliance of children's rights organizations and actors. We are delighted to join hands again with so many colleagues and friends; many of whom have been instrumental to the development of this process. Together, we can make a visible and lasting difference in children's lives.

2. Safeguarding children's rights is a question of good governance and it is also a question of urgency!

Over the last several years, children have gained an increasing visibility in the national and international agenda. Important political commitments have been made to promote, protect and fulfil their rights and to involve children as actors of change.

In Europe and elsewhere, extensive changes have been introduced in legislation, in several cases even in national constitutions; Ombuds offices and other independent institutions have been established to voice and serve the best interests of the child at all moments and circumstances; coordinating mechanisms have been set up to articulate activities, avoid overlap and promote synergy across sectors and regions; there is today more and better data on children, giving visibility to hidden areas of neglect and giving a face to marginalized children.

In spite of progress achieved, largely due to the process of social change generated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the life of millions of children continue to be marked by poverty, marginalisation, exclusion and exploitation.

In today's world, more than 10 million children die every year before reaching their fifth birthday – 30,000 child deaths a day.

In most cases, the death of these children could be easily prevented through low cost interventions – including immunization efforts against the most frequent diseases, costing only 50 cents for each child.

With the spread of HIV/AIDS, development gains are being reversed – widening disparities and frustrating efforts to reduce poverty and hunger, to provide primary education and to reduce child and maternal mortality.

Every day, an additional 1,400 children die to an AIDS related disease – every minute, a child below 15 years is lost to AIDS. Yet, in cruel contrast, less than 5 per cent of HIV positive children in need of paediatric AIDS treatment are receiving it.

More than 90 per cent of children living with HIV are in Sub Saharan Africa, a region that is also home for 80 per cent of children orphaned by AIDS. But less than 10 per cent of children affected by the pandemic receive public support or services.

As the Millennium Development Goals so clearly indicate, children are at the heart of development. Unfortunately, however, children continue to be rarely envisaged as an indicator of progress.

The reality in the neighbouring Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States illustrates this well.

Despite signs of economic recovery, an overall decline in the number of families living in poverty, and a significant decline in the child population, 25 per cent of children in the region are still living in extreme poverty, with serious implications for their health, nutrition, education and development.

Children are at greater risk of becoming poor than adults – in the most recent members of the EU, Romania and Bulgaria, the risk is twice as great.

Disparities in the access and quality of basic social services are widening and dramatically affecting the most vulnerable group of children, including those living in rural areas and belonging to ethnic minorities.

As a result, there is a worrying pattern of child abandonment and institutionalization, leading, in some countries, to levels of 80 per cent of children abandoned being placed in institutions.

What this brief picture confirms is that the improvement of children's lives is not an implicit consequence of overall policy – or an automatic result of economic growth. Even when there is progress, it is important to assess who are the children left behind, and why they remain untouched by the wave of progress.

3. Children require distinct and systematic attention and their consideration cannot be diluted or neglected when policies are shaped and budgetary allocations made.

It is for this reason that we warmly welcome the adoption of the EC Communication under the leadership of Vice President Frattini towards an EU strategy on the Rights of the Child, and we look forward to the development of the Strategy on Children in external relations.

The Communication provides a strong foundation to safeguard children's rights in the EU's internal and external action, in support of Member States efforts, and in the international fora.

The Communication promotes the mainstreaming of children's rights. As a result, children can now be systematically considered as a self-standing concern in EU budgets, policies, laws and programmes.

Framed in the Communication, the awareness of children's rights can be decisively strengthened within EU's institutions, in Europe and beyond, and child rights violations can be more vigourously prevented and addressed.

Together with the many partners present here today, we are committed to supporting the process of implementation of the Communication, including the pivotal role the European Forum on the Rights of the Child will play.

The European Forum has a unique potential. It can become the common EU home for the Rights of the Child – a place where EU institutions and partners can come together to promote policy reflections, cross fertilization of initiatives and experiences, and to advance the mainstreaming of children’s rights. But the Forum needs to also be a reference for expertise on children’s rights questions – with the capacity to provide sound advice and analysis to inform the development of EU actions and assess their impact on children’s rights.

To move in this direction, three instrumental actions are urgently needed:

Firstly, it is critical to establish within the Forum a group of Children’s Rights Experts with participation of the CRC Committee, Council of Europe, European Network of Ombuds for Children (ENOC), as well as participation from within the UN – to provide evidence and independent advice, to help shape the agenda, monitor progress and identify areas where priority attention should be given – in brief, to ensure credibility to the Forum’s work.

Secondly, it is necessary to associate with the Forum an advisory group of children who can feed ideas and suggestions, generating passion and creative proposals. This will be a crucial recognition of the right of children to participate in decision making processes. But it will further be an instrumental step to promote an agenda that is sensitive to children’s needs and shaped by children’s perspectives.

As we have recently heard from a group of children joining hands with UNICEF “We are not asking for the moon. We just want to be respected as partners and contribute to development efforts”.

Thirdly, it is urgent to allocate and sustain core resources to give the Forum and these two Advisory groups the chance of being visionary, pragmatic and effective in advancing the children’s rights agenda.

4. As we look ahead, we feel strongly inspired by the commitment of the European Parliament, and all those present here today, to support these developments.

The vision to move the child rights agenda forward must be translated into a concrete process of change, with undeniable consequences for the EU and the international community at large.

This hearing and the consolidation in the EU of the Children Rights agenda happen on a very timely and auspicious occasion.

That occasion is the review by the UN General Assembly, later this year, of progress made in the follow-up to the Special Session on Children,

The Action Plan agreed upon at the Special Session is a timebound strategy to advance the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The EU's priority attention to children's rights and the outcome of this Joint Hearing, are a decisive regional contribution to this process.

It is for this reason that I would like to encourage you all to maintain this unique momentum and advance the Child Rights Agenda steadily forward.

- Firstly, by holding periodic and inclusive parliamentary hearings on children's rights, to raise awareness on child's concerns and to promote concrete follow-up to today's agenda.
- Secondly, by promoting the mainstreaming of children's rights in the European Parliament's work, including in political and budgetary related debates.
- Thirdly, by giving greater prominence to the rights of the child in your annual human rights report.

We look forward to collaborating closely with you in the process ahead and stand ready to support you in this endeavour.