



MINUTES
Third Meeting of the EU Network for Children's Rights
28 November 2023
Sicco Mansholt Room, Charlemagne building,
rue de la Loi 170, 1040, Brussels

I. Summary

On 28 November 2023, the EU Network for Children's Rights held its third meeting.

The meeting was opened by Julien Mousnier, the Director of Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights and Democracy of DG Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), who recalled the EU's commitment to putting children's rights at the heart of all its efforts and invited MS and participants to present any positive developments and engage in the discussions fostering the implementation of the Strategy.

An important part of the meeting was dedicated to the upcoming **Commission Recommendation on the development and strengthening of child protection systems** in Member States, a priority initiative announced in the 2024 Commission Work Programme¹. The Commission's Coordinator for the Rights of the child and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) presented its general lines, the outcomes of the consultation (open public consultation, consultation with children), the main challenges and good practices identified in Member States' child protection systems. This was followed by an exchange with Member States (presenting good practices) and other participants.

The Commission provided an update on the [EU Children's Participation Platform](#), another key deliverable of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. Three Member States shared their experience on child participation (Malta, Slovakia and Spain).

In the afternoon, after a presentation of DG SANTE of the [Comprehensive approach to mental health](#), discussions were dedicated to the **state of play of the implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**, including funding opportunities, with an example from Finland on child-budgeting.

The meeting gathered representatives of twenty-one Member States and EEA countries, as well as representatives from international organisations (UNICEF, Council of Europe (CoE)), the European Parliament (EP), Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and children's rights civil society organisations (CSOs).

II. Update and exchange on the future Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems (ICPS)

DG JUST (Marie-Cécile Rouillon, Commission's Coordinator for the Rights of the child) presented the key principles and scope of the Recommendation, consultation process and format (Commission Recommendation accompanied by a Staff Working Document and an Annex mapping existing key relevant EU support), as well as the timeline for the adoption (Q1 2024). It will support and encourage

¹ [Commission work programme 2024 \(europa.eu\)](#)

all relevant authorities and services in MS to work together in systems that put the child at the centre, to prevent and protect children from violence. This initiative builds on an evidence-based approach, including child consultation under the new EU Children's Participation Platform, an open public consultation, a call for evidence and FRA mapping.

FRA (Astrid Podsiadlowski) presented the FRA project – Towards integrated child protection systems to support the Commission initiative. A comprehensive mapping of child protection systems across EU Member States (updating the 2016 mapping) will be published in January 2024, and will be followed by a summary report including key findings. FRA work is notably considering: Legislative and regulatory framework and policies; Governance, coordination structures, and services; Capacities (human and financial resources); Care; Accountability, data collection, and monitoring systems; General education, awareness raising and promotion; and Child participation and community engagement.

Austria asked whether a common definition for child protection systems would be included in the report. EC replied that while looking into international standards, the focus is on key components of the ICPS, rather than a one-fits-all definition.

Portugal presented their Child Protection System, based on local commissions for the protection of children and young people.

France mentioned their second four-year inter-ministerial plan on the prevention of violence. It foresees 22 actions amongst which strengthening sexuality education in schools and in children's facilities, improving the quality of the "119" telephone helpline for children and professionals in contact with children, checking the criminal records of all the professionals and volunteers involved in the care of young children and child protection. The plan includes the creation of 63 additional paediatric units for children at risk, to reach 164 in total by 2025. These units called VIAPED in French are similar to the Barnahus model and are attached to a hospital centre. The Independent Commission on Incest and Sexual Violence Against Children (CIIVISE) will be extended with a new mandate of three more years.

Spain announced that their new government has created a new Ministry of Youth and Childhood. Spain has approved and elaborated a strategy of eradicating violence against children. This comprises different media campaigns and a prevalence study on violence against children, updating a previous study of 1994. Spain is working at implementing the Barnahus model with the support of DG Reform and the CoE. Spain is also working on a deinstitutionalisation strategy not only for children, but also for adults and people with disability, promoting a care-based approach and reintegration in families.

UNICEF presented their experiences of system strengthening in European settings. UNICEF has developed key elements of child protection systems similarly to FRA and the Commission but working in 150 countries across the globe. Common challenges are: recruiting and retainment of social workers and other professional, resources, lack of tools to address specific child protection risks and violations. Child protection in the Ukraine context has also shown other challenges: an increased need for child protection systems across the borders.

Four questions sent in advance to the members of the network were then discussed.

Question 1: Does an inter-agency cooperation (in law and/or in practice) exist in your Member State among child protection actors (e.g., ministries, local and national levels, education, health social services, civil society, law enforcement, justice) and what would be needed to move towards a better inter-agency cooperation?

Belgium gave an example of interagency cooperation: a national Commission on the rights of the child which includes 90 representatives from Member States, CSOs, youth councils, etc. The Commission is competent for the reporting from Belgium to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and works

on indicators on the Rights of the child in Belgium. Different instruments for youth and children's rights policy also exist at Flemish level, including a youth and children's rights policy plan, focusing on the rights of the child and concluding observations Belgium received on its reports. Finally, Belgium also has a contact point for youth and children's rights policy in all departments and agencies.

Croatia mentioned a preparatory project started by the Ministry of Justice in cooperation with the CoE, based on a national plan for combating sexual violence and sexual harassment. The aim is to build a Barnahus in Croatia within two years. Furthermore, Croatia has also approved an action plan for the Child guarantee, which includes setting up indicators to be able to better follow the progress.

Question 2: Do you know of any good practices on child-protection (e.g., guidelines, protocols, professional standards, support materials, tools)? What are the barriers for implementation?

Child Friendly Justice Network (CFJN) recommended to include a solid cooperation with CSOs working with children in any multiagency coordination mechanism in order to maintain a continuous dialogue with people working on the ground. She stressed the importance of understanding the different situations and vulnerabilities of children (victim, accused, from different communities), the need to take an intersectional lens (eg children deprived of liberty getting back to child protection system) and the need for better coordination between justice and child protection systems.

Austria recently adopted a package of measures aimed at protecting children from violence with a strong focus on implementation of child safeguarding policies and guidelines within organisations or authorities that work with children. These child safeguarding guidelines should be developed with children, have a child-centered approach, and there must be a clear referral mechanism with a contact person responsible for child protection within the organisation. Rather than a mandatory approach, Austria opted as a first step for the provision of funding to encourage organisations to develop such child safeguarding policies, based on a model. This will be complemented by an awareness raising campaign aimed at strengthening children's rights and promoting the right to self-determination.

Ireland: As per the Children First Act 2015, all agencies that are in contact with children, including international protection accommodation services, already have safeguarding policies in place.

Question 3: Do you have any good practices in place regarding child-oriented budgeting? Do you have systematic and disaggregated data collection or monitoring in place on child welfare/protection, and on the protection on various children's groups?

CFJN: CFJN published a policy brief on smarter financing for child-friendly justice, with a global group called the Pathfinders, reaching out to various governments across the Europe and outside Europe, looking for good practices on child budgeting.

Finland presented its child-budgeting model in the afternoon (*see below*).

Question 4: How could the EU provide support Member States in strengthening their systems, using existing EU child-protection related tools (law, funding, policies), in a cross-cutting way? How could this Network help and how would you like to contribute?

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) suggested that the child's rights defenders in each Member State could organise an interagency meeting bringing together various sectors to identify, for example, the indicators that are lacking, with each country focusing a specific group of children with specific needs.

European Guardianship Network (EGN) reminded that the principle of non-discrimination should be applied in protecting all children, including those in migration (especially unaccompanied and/or undocumented children). It is extremely important to involve and engage children in migration in a meaningful way and to take their specific vulnerabilities into account. Guardianship should be

strengthened, more resources are needed, including the provision of an identified key person the child can trust and refer to.

Child Circle praised the value of the EGN network, co-funded by the EU, bringing together guardianship organisations and partners in the guardianship system, including national ministries and civil society organisations working on guardianship.

Council of Europe (CoE) flagged its recommendation on guardianship, and a related ECHR case law. On Barnahus, the CoE completed a case study: 61% of their Member States (46 countries) had Barnahus or Barnahus-type services, 11% had other good practices (eg Children's Rights Court in the Canary Islands, Spain, or interdisciplinary support for mental health in Austria). Even if Barnahus is not a guarantee to protection, it shows a trend for better protection of children in child-friendly justice for instance. The CoE is planning to develop a more comprehensive recommendation on Barnahus with implementing guidelines in the future, to guide the Member States on adapting their systems to the Barnahus standards. NGOs and CSOs are crucial in promoting services in Member States, but State commitment is needed at national/local level for the Barnahus model to be conceived as a sustainable model.

SOS Children Villages International (SOS) works to prevent situations of abuse (mental, sexual, psychological), which often occurs within the family, providing parental support or alternative care when it's not in the best interest of the child to stay in the family, which need to be better considered. From the child consultation through the EU Children's participation platform, one of the key challenges is linked to length of time to react after violence/abuse is reported, for the system to respond to alert. SOS' recommendation would be to strengthen prevention through family support (universal social protection, child sensitive social protection systems). Other challenges include finding quality emergency shelters, disparities between regions, finding qualified social workforce, training other social workers. When it is in the best interest of the child to be separated, the EU should support further the Member States in transitioning to community-based type of care (deinstitutionalisation process). Reminded that alternative care is part of the child protection system and that the prevention of abuse and violence in alternative care is essential.

DG JUST (Marie-Cécile Rouillon) mentioned that a [summary report of the children's consultation](#) through the Children's participation platform will be presented as a key source of information for the Commission work on integrated child protection systems.

FRA (Astrid Podsiadlowski) thanked the participants for the complementary discussions to their findings. She reminded that a comprehensive approach is needed to identify early detection of signs of (risk of) violence. Data shows a lack of communication and knowledge as well as a diverse approach to reporting mechanisms across Member States that prevents everyone in contact with the child, health professionals, education, parents, to be able to detect these signs, and to report them.

III. Child participation at the EU and national levels

DG JUST (Marta Kuljon) gave an update on the work of the [EU Children's Participation Platform](#) one year on:

- 1st general assembly in June 2023
- 50 organisations from 20 EU MS
- 1st consultation on what children needed to feel safe
- 1st meeting of the Advisory Board with children
- 1st [Work Plan for 2023-2024](#) covering the following areas: feeling safe (connected to the Commission Recommendation on integrate child protection systems), democracy and voting, website co-creation and evaluation of the work of the Platform and development of the next work plan.

Members are reminded to share the call for expression of interest to [join the platform](#).

Malta presented the CERV funded project ECP-MT Empowering Children's Participation in Malta, a partnership between the Ministry for Social Policy and children's rights in Malta and the University College Cork. The aim of the project is to enable children to express their views and influence decisions that affect them through a dedicated online platform ([Empowering Children's Participation in Malta – Project co-funded by the EU Program for Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values \(CERV\) \(gov.mt\)](#)).

Slovakia presented a project from the National coordination centre for resolving the issues of violence against children, under the responsibility of the Ministry of labour, social affairs and family of the Slovak republic, in which children were engaged in the different stages of the creation of a national strategy on Childhood Free from Violence and Action Plan, as well as the European Child Guarantee.

In all the examples presented, children stressed that they are not sufficiently listened to nor taken seriously, and that more of these fora are needed for them to express themselves and to contribute to the decision-making process.

IV. Rights of the child priorities under the current and future Presidencies

Spain informed about a child participation meeting held during the Spanish Presidency, co-created by children. Spain also promotes the declaration on fighting against child poverty to reinforce all the resources and efforts towards the European child guarantee program. The declaration was signed by 24 Member States.

Belgium announced two events putting the rights of the child at the centre of the Belgian Presidency:

- An expert seminar on the European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children's rights, on 21-23 January in Leuven. The seminar will focus on synergies and policy coherence between the European youth strategy and the EU strategy on the rights of the child, with a focus on participation.
- An event bringing together all child guarantee coordinators to take stock of the implementation of the child guarantee after 3 years, scheduled on 2 and 3 May 2024.

European Parliament (Emilio Puccio, General Secretary of the Intergroup on Children's Rights) reminded that the European Parliament has been at the forefront of children's rights, and notably as regards the EU Strategy for children's rights, child participation, child protection offline as online. However, the European Parliament does not have a committee on the rights of the child. He mentioned that it would be important to have a special entity within the parliament tasked to mainstreaming children's rights in all your parties and legislation.

V. Presentation of the new comprehensive approach to Mental Health

DG SANTE (Yvette Azzopardi) presented the [Comprehensive approach to mental health](#). One of the objectives is to boost the mental health of children and youth, as mental health problems are more prevalent in younger age groups. Key measures for children:

- Child and Youth Mental Health Network
- Children health 360 (a prevention toolkit)
- Youth First Flagship
- Health Screens, Healthy Youth

Members were invited to join a thematic Network on “Mental health in all policies” which will gather knowledge of what works, what is already happening and what still needs to be done.

Alliance for Childhood European Network mentioned their participation in the expert group on [Well-being at school](#), an initiative of DG EAC. The outcome will be to set up guidelines for policymakers and teachers, in order to include well-being in schools, put the mental health issue inside the school curricula in a “whole school” approach with the involvement of all stakeholders. These guidelines will be ready by March 2024 and circulated soon after.

VI. State of Play on the implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child

DG JUST (Marie-Cécile Rouillon) updated members on the different areas of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. [this ppt can be put online or we need to refer to the key deliverables under different pillars]

CoE (mentioned, in the context of a Child-friendly justice joint project between the EC and the CoE, with EU funding from Justice Programme, the development of a self-assessment tool for child-friendly justice guidelines which will be piloted in three EU member states before it is put at the disposal of the Member States. A call for expression of interest was circulated to Member States after the meeting.

DG JUST (Véronique Pain) informed members about funding opportunity with two calls for proposals published on the EU funding and Tenders portal:

- The Rights of the child and children’s participation call for proposals [CERV-2024-CHILD](#) (deadline for submission: 26 March 2024)
- The Daphne call for proposals: [CERV-2024-DAPHNE](#) (deadline for submission: 24 April 2024).

Finland presented a pilot project on child-oriented budgeting in wellbeing services counties (reformed social and healthcare services). The objective of the pilot is to improve the effectiveness of services for children, young people and families, to strengthen the allocation of resources to the right measures at the right time and to promote the realisation of children's rights. A network of wellbeing services counties taking initial steps in child-oriented budgeting, has been created in connection with the pilot. The aim of the network is to develop and expand child-oriented budgeting nationally. In 2023-2024, a total of five workshops will be organised for the network to discuss child-oriented budgeting from different perspectives.

CoE, with EU Technical-Support Instrument support, is implementing Barnahus with several Member States (Ireland, Finland, Croatia, Spain) and finalised the Slovenian project in cooperation with DG REFORM. CoE is also working on a project on the best interest of the child in civil proceedings, and finalised a project on child participation (with EU funding under CERV): [CP4 Europe - Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe \(EU-CoE Joint Project\) - Children's Rights](#). First implementation report of the [Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\) - Children's Rights \(coe.int\)](#) will soon be published, as well as an implementation review of the recommendation on the guardianship. The Lanzarote committee on 28-30 Novembre included a focus on taking on board the board the perspectives of survivors of sexual violence. Following the high-level summit that took place in May in Reykjavik, Iceland, it was decided to establish a consultation group on Ukrainian children. The mandate of the group is to discuss and exchange information about the children that are residing outside Ukraine in Council of Europe Member States.

Children’s Rights Action Group (CRAG) mentioned a child rights manifesto for the upcoming election which will be issued on the 21st of March 2024 and will include children’s voices.

Missing Children Europe (MCE) coordinates the missing children hotline at EU level: 116 000. Some of the hotlines in some member states are not fully accessible and there is lack of awareness raising

among the citizens. MCE developed an app for migrant children: [Miniila - Missing Children Europe](#) to empower children in migration to take essential decisions for their future in an informed manner. MCE also implemented a CERV funded project [DATA MISSING - Missing Children Europe](#), to better prevent Missing and the risk of violence that results from going missing, and another project which aims at conducting research on the prevalence of and links between online grooming and missing for developing tools to prevent grooming: [CESAGRAM - Missing Children Europe](#).

Eurochild recently published two reports:

- [Poverty takes away the right to childhood – Eurochild](#), on child poverty, based on consultations with children.
- [Children’s Rights: Political will or won’t? – Eurochild](#), a report on children in need across Europe

Eurochild is also working with ECPAT and Terre des Hommes consulting children on online safety [Children’s voices on online safety – Eurochild](#).

PICUM published a report on access to early childhood education and care by undocumented children and their parents: [Access-to-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-for-Undocumented-Children-and-Families.pdf \(picum.org\)](#). PICUM is also working on mapping good practices that benefit children, undocumented children, and asylum-seeking children, where they are supported in their transition into adulthood. Concerning Ukraine, attention is brought to the end of the Temporary Protection Directive (now extended until March 2025).

SOS mentioned a new e-learning course developed under a CERV funded project (Together) : [Meaningful child and youth participation in public decision-making: new e-learning course - SOS Children's Villages International \(sos-childrensvillages.org\)](#).

COPE has been organising a whole series of child safeguarding workshops with the participation of a great number of prison service representatives, hence representing a good opportunity to establish child protection policies, child safeguarding policies in prisons.

DG JUST (Marie-Cécile Rouillon) thanked all participants and explained that further information about the date and format of the next meeting of the EU Network will follow.