

Full Report

***Expert Seminar on European  
and international policy  
agendas on Children, Youth  
and Children's Rights***

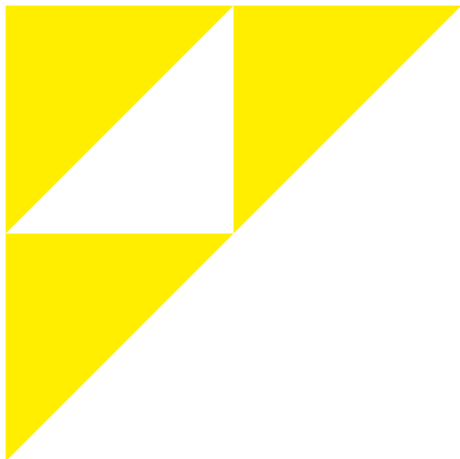
—

***21 - 23 January 2024***

***Leuven***

**EU  
NEEDS  
YOUTH**

The logo features the text 'EU NEEDS YOUTH' in a bold, sans-serif font. The word 'EU' is in black, 'NEEDS' is in black, and 'YOUTH' is in pink. The letter 'O' in 'YOUTH' is replaced by a circle of ten small pink stars. The text is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page, overlaid on a background of a yellow and white grid pattern.

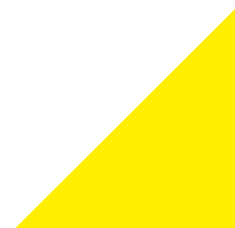


## Colophon

AUTHOR: Dan Moxon

DEPOT NUMBER: D/2024/3241/059

PUBLISHER: Flemish Government, Department for Culture, Youth  
and Media





## Table of Contents

<b>Official welcome</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Follow-up of the Spanish EU Presidency</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Building on the comparative analysis of child &amp; youth policies at EU, Council of Europe &amp; UN levels</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Coordination &amp; cooperation between the EU Coordinator for the Rights of the Child &amp; the EU Youth Coordinator (22<sup>nd</sup> Jan)</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>How dialogue works – ‘Nothing about us without us’</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Integrating child &amp; youth policies at national level</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>What research tells us about EU child &amp; youth policies &amp; the potential for greater synergies</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Monitoring implementation of EU child &amp; youth policies</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Institutionalising child participation in EU agenda-setting</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>When &amp; how to involve children &amp; youth in public decision-making?</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Minimum age policies in participatory rights &amp; democracy</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Mental health support for refugee &amp; migrant children &amp; young people</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Reflections on child &amp; youth mental health &amp; access to services</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Inclusive communities through active participation</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Child &amp; youth participation in urban planning – good practices</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Child-Friendly Cities – how Leuven secured this title &amp; what happens next</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Constructing Childhood and Youth through policy</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>The rights of younger generations - a common value base</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>The case for greater coherence</b>	<b>24</b>



Model of policy coherence between Children, Youth and Children's Rights	25
<b>Major thematic areas for synergy</b>	<b>26</b>
Improving children and young people's participation in public decision making	26
Development of cross-sectoral policy in response to the voices and concerns of children and young people	26
Enhanced support for transitions from dependence to independence, especially for the most vulnerable children and young people	26
<b>Recommendations for action</b>	<b>27</b>



## Full seminar report: Expert Seminar on European and international policy agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights

# Seminar Background

The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union began on the 1st of January 2024, lasting until 30 June 2024. Within this period, the Presidency, held an expert seminar on European and International policy agendas on Children, Youth and Children's rights, which was held on 21 - 23 January 2024 in Leuven, Belgium. The aim was to contribute to the alignment of the European and international policy agendas on children, youth, and children's rights.

The event was hosted by the Department Youth, Culture and Media of the Flemish Government and JINT vzw. JINT vzw is a Flemish knowledge centre for international youth mobility and international youth policy and is the National Agency in Flanders, Belgium, for the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes of the European Union. JINT has been assigned to support the upcoming Belgian EU Presidency and its activities.

Over ninety attendees were invited including,

- National delegations, made up of:
  - Representatives of national, local, and regional authorities (both administrative staff and elected politicians),
  - Experts/Decision-makers at the national level who have influence on youth and children policy making,
- Representatives of European institutions/organisations,
- Experts on children's (rights) policy,
- Experts on youth policy,
- Policy-makers active in the EU Youth Working Party,
- Policy-makers active at a more local level: responsible for the implementation of children's, children's rights, and youth policies.

The specific objectives of the event were to:

- Contribute to a better alignment of the European and international policy agendas on children, youth, and children's rights,
- Promote stronger ties between youth and children's rights policy on the EU level as well as with the Council of Europe and the UN,
- Establish connections between the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and other relevant policy instruments,
- Provide input for the revision of the Council Conclusion on European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth, and the Rights of the Child 2010/C 326/01,



- Evaluate the document ['State of the Art – The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights'](#).

This document outlines the full report of the seminar, drafted by the General Rapporteur Dr Dan Moxon. The lead facilitator for the seminar was Jana Hainsworth, supported by Ana Morgado, Spyros Papadatos, and Matteo Bartolini.



## Opening Ceremony – 21<sup>st</sup> of January

### Official welcome

#### Speakers:

- Mr Benjamin Dalle - Flemish Minister of Brussels Youth, Media and Poverty Reduction, Flemish Government
- Ms Marie-Cécile Rouillon - European Commission coordinator for the rights of the child
- Mr Tobias Flessenkemper - Head of Youth Department, Council of Europe
- Ms María Rodríguez Alcázar - President, European Youth Forum
- Ms Karen Van Laethem - Senior Policy Advisor, UNICEF Belgium

**Mr Benjamin Dalle** opened the event as the first event of the Belgian Presidency with a focus on children and youth. He stressed his desire for a more coherent policy regarding children and young people that promoted youth and Children Rights, in order to deliver on 'our common ambition to create a Europe fit for all children and young people'. He noted the need for more comprehensive and effective European rights-based policy frameworks that serve current and future generations, which address the range of contemporary challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, COVID-19 and children impacted by war in the Gaza strip. Minister Dalle outlined three ambitions for the seminar. Firstly, to strengthen ties between youth affairs and children's rights, mainstreaming these across all areas of European policy making. Secondly, to take children and young people's participation seriously, as this lies at the core of any just and equitable society. Thirdly, that the seminar led to sustained change, and acted as a starting point for conversations amongst stakeholders at all levels.

**Ms Marie-Cécile Rouillon** identified that there are many common challenges faced by both children and young people such as the impact of COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She noted that although both groups have different strategies and programmes there was a need to work collaboratively, whilst still ensuring the protection rights of those under 18. Ms Rouillon stressed the number of children and young people who had contributed, as stakeholders, to the development of The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Youth Strategy, noting that very often they had raised common concerns. She stated we should recognise the needs of five-year-olds were not the same as the needs of 25-year-olds, and there are many differences between children and young people. However, it is necessary to identify where common areas of synergy exist between the two policy fields and within the age-overlap of childhood and youth. She argued these synergies existed within participation, mental health, challenges of the digital world, and mainstreaming Youth affairs and Children's Rights policy.

**Mr Tobias Flessenkemper** addressed the seminar on behalf of the Secretary General on Council of Europe, and the Council of Europe Youth Department. He stressed the importance of the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, discussing a [current case](#) brought by six Portuguese children against more than two thirds of Council of Europe Member States. The case alleges violation of human rights through failure to take action on climate change. Mr Flessenkemper argued that

the outcomes of the case had the potential to underscore if rights were to remain credible for future generations and was a significant moment in the history of the European Court of Human Rights. He further argued that such events would not have occurred without human rights education, and that there was a need to invest in children and young people for the protection of our democracies.

- **Ms María Rodríguez Alcázar** shared her reflection on the work of the European Youth Forum in advocating for a youth rights convention at the UN level. She noted that whilst Children's Rights are clearly defined, there exists no such specific measure for young people. This leaves young people exposed to a variety of age-based discrimination, such as lower minimum wages or having their voices disregarded in the political sphere. As such, there is a need for a rights-based framework for young people in international policy and the removal of discriminatory practices by age. Ms Rodríguez Alcázar further stated that stronger coherence is needed between policies that address child and youth rights, and we should not assume that policies addressed to children automatically tackle the rights of young people.

**Ms Karen Van Laethem** began by noting that many previous speakers had made points she fully endorsed. She used her input to build upon these by stressing the importance of meaningful and ethical child and youth participation. She argued that, despite a variety of guidance and frameworks, this practice was still too uncommon. Ms Van Laethem noted that involving children and young people in policy making required asking critical questions about what difference participative processes could make, how they could be implemented and how they could be equitable. She stressed the valuable role that civil society could play to policy makers in developing child and youth participation.

### Follow-up of the Spanish EU Presidency

**Ms Lucía Losoviz, Director General for Children's Rights & Adolescents, Ministry of Social Rights** (Spain), presented outcomes of a European child participation meeting which took place under the Spanish EU Presidency<sup>1</sup>. She outlined the methodology of the process, stressing the importance of working with non-governmental organisations during its implementation. Recommendations made by the children were:

- Include life skills and practical learning in school curricula and include children in decision-making in schools,
- Invest more in mental health, particularly combating stigma, and improving access to services,
- Focus on meaningful child participation that creates an impact that children can see,
- Invest in children's safety at home, in schools and in public spaces,
- Take children's concerns seriously – and work with them to find solutions,
- Keep on listening to children.

Ms Losoviz identified the need to further build upon these recommendations in future presidencies and to find synergies between the various EU participation platforms. She thanked the Belgium presidency for

---

<sup>1</sup>Raising our Voices: Children's Recommendations to the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union





using the children's recommendations to inform choices of the thematic debates within this expert seminar.

### **Building on the comparative analysis of child & youth policies at EU, Council of Europe & UN levels**

The 'Follow-Up of The Belgian EU Presidency-Youth Note Of 2010 - The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights State of The Art - Update 2023' was presented by **Ms Cristina Bacalso – Independent Researcher on Adolescents, Youth, Policies & Human Rights**, who acted as peer reviewer to the biennial update of this document. Ms Bacalso outlined the legal, policy and institutional context for Children's Rights and Youth Policy at international level within the EU, Council of Europe, and UN, as detailed by the document. She argued that, although there was a degree of coherence, there were key challenges relating to variation in age ranges across policy, differing legal and policy integration across governance levels, and differing legal frameworks for rights covering those under 18 compared to those over 18. Ms Bacalso noted that whilst the boundaries between childhood, youth, and adulthood are universal and varied with context for simplicity policies and legislation, still needed to rely on age-based definition. She further highlighted that the two policy ecosystems relating to children and youth had differing views on autonomy and competence, despite overlapping ages. A further tension was said to be the different thematic foci of the two systems, with Children's Rights policy often stressing rights and protection and Youth policy often stressing learning and development. Ms Bacalso argued it was also important to note that there are bodies of (national) policy on children, which are broader than policy on Children's Rights. She concluded by reminding the audience that 'alignment' of policy was something that might require further interrogation throughout the seminar and could imply a range of approaches.



## Enhancing Synergy Between EU Child & Youth Policies – 22<sup>nd</sup> of January

### Coordination & cooperation between the EU Coordinator for the Rights of the Child & the EU Youth Coordinator (22<sup>nd</sup> January)

Panellists:

- Mr Jan Vanhee - European and International Youth Policy advisor/ EU Youth affairs attaché/Chair of the Youth Working Party & Coordinator of the Belgian EU presidency on Youth Affairs, Representation of Flanders to the EU Department Culture Youth and Media,
- Ms Marie-Cécile Rouillon - European Commission coordinator for the rights of the child
- Ms Biliana Sirakova - EU Youth Coordinator, European Commission

**Mr Vanhee** opened the debate by arguing that the development of policy on children and youth in parallel silos had not always served the general public interest. He argued an exercise of coordination was now needed both at national and European level, recognising the significant overlap of ages between the two groups and the number of common concerns across both fields. He discussed the varying competences in the two fields as defined by the treaties and legislation of the European Union, recognising the challenges this created for coordination. He closed by noting the two fields had developed significantly over the years with a range on international policy, and it was this development which now brought for need to provide coherence between the two areas.

**Ms Rouillon** identified that some themes and priorities occurring within Children's Rights do so as a result of a specific legal basis for a focus on them (e.g. child trafficking). However, it was important to look at all policy priorities within Europe through the lens of Children's Rights. She noted that across the various Directorates within the European Commission, her role was to 'connect the dots' to child rights, which also included connecting to youth agendas.

**Ms Sirakova** highlighted the importance of an 'outside in' approach when making policy – engaging widely with stakeholders including civil society and young people through consultation and participation. This enabled the development of policy based on their perspectives. Ms Sirakova highlighted the new EU youth stakeholder's platform being developed to support this approach.

With the debate it was agreed that the strongest synergies occur when the two coordinators are engaging jointly in other policy areas (e.g. mental health) to mainstream the perspectives and rights of children and young people. It was noted that participation was a key area of synergy. Here both fields are able to learn from each other. There is also potential for joint work adapting wider public consultation and communication on policy to be more accessible to children and young people. The importance of protection measures when undertaking participation with under 18s was also stressed. Finally, the



importance or respecting the unique competences of both fields was highlighted. It was said that respect of each other's fields was key but did not prevent identification of common ground to work toward a more coherent approach.

### How dialogue works – 'Nothing about us without us'

#### Panellists:

- Ms Marie-Cécile Rouillon - European Commission coordinator for the rights of the child
- Mr Nicholas Kujala - Board member of European Youth Forum
- Spyros Papadatos - Chairperson Advisory Council on Youth, Council of Europe
- Ms Cristina Bacalso – Independent Researcher on Adolescents, Youth, Policies & Human Rights

This panel focused on synergies between child and youth participation mechanisms.

**Ms Rouillon** began the debate by outlining the working of the EU Child Participation Platform which provides a safe space for children and teenagers to have their say on the European laws and policies which concern them. This platform has been in operation for over a year and engages children through existing national mechanisms; 52 organisations are involved as members, and it also has an advisory board co-chaired by a child.

**Mr Nicholas Kujala** then outlined the EU Youth Dialogue (EUYD), which operates in all EU members states and is coordinated by a Europe Steering Group linked to the TRIO Presidencies of the Council of the European Union. In each country, EUYD is implemented by National Working Groups, made up of National Youth Councils and Ministries. International non-Governmental Youth Organisations are also heavily involved in EUYD. The dialogue consists of two phases, a consultation phase and an implementation phase. Mr Kujala stated EUYD is now in its 10<sup>th</sup> cycle and has developed essentially over time. It now has significant strengths in diversity, meaningful participation, and impact where it has led to the creation of the EU Youth Guarantee and the Youth Goals.

**Mr Spyros Papadatos** highlighted the work of the Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) which brings together the European Steering Committee for Youth and the Advisory Council on Youth. It is a co-decision-making body which establishes the Council of Europe youth sector's priorities, objectives, and budgets.

The debate highlighted the number of common topics of interest raised by children and young people through all three structures, as well as the importance of effective outreach, mainstreaming across all policy areas and providing support for children and young people throughout participatory processes. It was questioned as to whether children's participation is less political than youth participation but not all panel members agreed. Finally, the possibility of using the new EU Youth Check as a tool to also address the voices of children was raised.

## Breakout discussions 22<sup>nd</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup> of January

### Integrating child & youth policies at national level

- Examples of policy alignment, integration and coherence were presented at a national level:

**Alina Seel, Austrian Federal Chancellery** presented national policies on Youth and Children's Rights, which have a number of shared milestones and initiatives within Austria. These include supporting the right to vote, the child and youth check (regulatory impact assessment) and safeguarding policies for organisations that work with children and young people. The two fields also have common stakeholders that policy makers engage with, through its 'Youth Strategy and Children's Rights Advisory Board'.

**Dorien De Vries, Flemish Department of Culture Youth and Media**, presented the Flemish Youth and Children's Rights policy, which uses the UNCRC as a foundation framework, has a coordinating Minister of Youth and Children's Rights and covers individuals up to the age of 30.

**Ann-Kathrin Fischer and Nina Priebsch, Federal Ministry, Germany**, presented various child and youth policies in Germany, where they argued that an integrated approach to children and youth has existed since the sixties. This approach is based around a wide range of interconnected legislation and policy at national, federal, and municipal level, which does not all cover the same age ranges.

**Linda O'Sullivan, Department of Children Family, Equality and Youth, Ireland** presented the National Policy Framework for Children & Young People, which is intended to inform cross-government work for children and young people over the period 2023-2028, with a target group of 0-24 years. It is based around five national outcomes to be achieved for all children and young people and recognises that improving the outcomes for certain cohorts needs ongoing concerted effort.

Between then, the four countries demonstrated the different levels of integration that occur in EU member states relating to Child and Youth Affairs. During the subsequent debate and workshop several advantages to increased coherence between child and youth policies were identified as follows:

- Thematic synergies** - Many youth policy objectives relate to Children's Rights and vice-versa, therefore enhanced cooperation would be targeting group oriented and could lead to more effective policies in both fields. Youth policy and Children's Rights policy are interconnected, so working together could help formulate a cohesive and effective strategy to address specific areas, such as participation which is a cornerstone and key area of overlap between the two fields.
- Transition synergies** - Enhanced cooperation would enable better concentration on transition phases in the lives of children and young people, particularly as people move across the threshold of 18 years. Improving support in this area can lead to increased continuity in children and young people's lives.
- Cross-sectoral collaboration and mainstreaming** - In the process of policy development, implementation, and assessment, both fields underscore the significance of collaboration across

different sectors. Working collaboratively to mainstream the interests and rights of children and young people in other policy fields ensures a unified and interconnected approach to this.

- **Extending protection for vulnerable groups** - There is strong interest in the field of Children's Rights in extended protection for the most vulnerable groups above the age of 18.
- **Resource efficiencies** - Greater coherence and alignment in areas of overlap can help ensure more effective use of resources.
- **Opportunities for peer learning** – where the two fields can learn from each other.
- **Potential for stronger legislation** - Coherence and alignment by integration into legislation may help establish a framework where policy instruments synergize, amplifying their impact and providing a solid legal foundation.

Some key concerns about integration and alignment were also raised as follows:

- The target groups and stakeholders of both fields overlap but are not identical, and it is important not to overlook those people who are only served by one field. There are risks of the priorities of one field coming to dominate the other if full integration is implemented.
- There are different competences and legal basis for the two fields, which creates barriers to coherence.
- Transition and adolescence support is a specific area of work relating to needs and interests of those undergoing this. These need and interests are not necessarily the same as children and young people outside of this life stage.

Recommendations for developing coherence agendas further included:

- Development of research and mapping exercises to identify gaps and synergies within policy at National and European level.
- Development of support of programmes that focus on transition phases, especially for vulnerable groups.
- Creation of information sharing platforms (or use of existing platforms such as the EU- youth Wiki) to share practice, policy initiatives and tools relating to coherence.
- Establishment of structures or processes to enable exchange and coordination between the two fields (e.g. common frameworks, common goals, or coordination bodies).

### What research tells us about EU child & youth policies & the potential for greater synergies

**Ms Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll** presented a paper<sup>2</sup> on the comparative analysis of European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, prepared by herself and **Dr. Howard Williamson**. She argued their common core was values-based European culture, an opportunity-

---

<sup>2</sup> Hofmann-van de Poll, F. and Williamson, H. (n.d.) European Youth Strategies - A reflection and analysis, EU-CoE Youth Partnership, Strasbourg.

focused approach, participation and democratic governance, inclusion and youth work. With emergent issues focused on empirical change in young people's lives and the context of their lives, The (re-)definition of the youth sector, and cross-sectoral cooperation.

- **Ms Chiara Carla Montà**, presented an analysis<sup>3</sup> on the meanings of 'child participation' in international and European policies on children ('s rights). She argued there is an absence of a universally accepted definition for child participation. The complexity of child participation and its intersection with debated concepts (such as agency, citizenship, and best interest) contributes to a proliferation of interpretations of the concept. She concluded by arguing that policies on child and youth participation have potential to govern what children and young people are enabled to undertake and do in their lives.

**Dr. Astrid Podsiadlowski, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights** presented FRA research on policy implementation and participation. She argued that the strongest synergies between Children's Rights and youth affairs related to encouraging participation, targeted research, data collection with and for young people, addressing transition, and highlighting issues of particular concern for younger generation.

The subsequent debate identified the many common challenges faced by the area of field of child and youth participation, as well as the tension between the differing approaches to supporting autonomy of participants in the two fields. The potential for child participation to learn from the youth field about autonomy, and youth participation to learn from the Children's Rights field about protection was raised. It was noted that both childhood and youth were social constructed concepts, and not universal experiences. The boundaries between them are varying for both individuals and different social groups.

### Monitoring implementation of EU child & youth policies

**Ms Sladjana Petkovic, EU-CoE Pool of European Youth Research Advisory Group** presented the proposal Dashboard of EU Youth indicators. The Revised Situation-Dashboard contains contextual demographic indicators (4) and situation indicators (69) divided into 8 policy domains aligned with the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. This is accompanied by a new policy dashboard with 109 quantitative and qualitative policy indicators which provide an assessment of progress (or the lack thereof) towards established objectives and targets of the EU Youth Strategy. All indicators can be visualised through an online tool. The revised dashboard serves various audiences, including researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The Situation-Dashboard provides a rich source of information for youth research, while Policy-Dashboard informs youth policy research.

**Ms Giulia Salvetti, UN Brussels Task Force on Youth** presented the UN Youth2030 Scorecards which is used by UN Country Teams and UN entities for strategic planning, performance measurement and

---

<sup>3</sup> Montà, C. C. (2023). The meanings of 'child participation' in international and European policies on children('s rights): A content analysis. *European Educational Research Journal*, 22(1), 3-19.



accountability, it captures work with and for youth based around 19 key performance indicators and scores.

**Mr Pietro Gagliardi, Public Governance Directorate, OECD** presented the OECD work on empowerment and intergenerational justice. He highlighted the need to monitor and improve both young people's trust in government and relationship with public institutions as well as administrative and technical capacities to address age-based inequalities. He argued such monitoring would act as a method of promoting coherent policies and services for young people.

During the debate, the potential of regulatory tools such as youth checks was recommended as a method of mainstreaming the concerns of children and young people to other policy areas and improving inter-ministerial cooperation.

### **Institutionalising child participation in EU agenda-setting**

**Ms Ana Rizescu, UNICEF Romania** presented the experience of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU in involving children. The presentation gave the main reflection of what happened during the Romain Presidency and on how this paved the way for the present activities of the Spanish Presidency. The initiatives of the Presidency related to child participation took place in a cooperation of UNICEF Romania under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It involved junior ambassadors, children's boards, and an international conference in Bucharest.

**Ms Adriana Negueruela Macias, UNICEF Spain** presented Child participation under the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which involved a children's advisory board, an online international conference and recommendations to policy makers developed by children. It was noted that UNICEF has developed a participation platform that can be re-used.

**Ms Karen Van Laethem, UNICEF Belgium** acted as discussant, highlighted the principles of meaningful child participation, and leading seminar participants in a debate. Considering how child participation could be better institutionalised at EU level, the debate highlighted the importance of working in partnership with local non-governmental organisations to promote outreach, building on previous work and action of acting presidencies as well as the need to avoid tokenism. Various challenges of embedded child participation were identified including language barriers, lack of coordination between structures, as well as the length of the policy cycle and complexity of Council Conclusions being de-motivating for younger children. The value of coordination between domains though a central liaison point was recommended. This would allow for integration between child and youth participation during presidencies.

### **When & how to involve children & youth in public decision-making?**

**Mr Simon Truwant, KeKi Children's Rights Knowledge Centre** outlined the KeKi participation circle which is a tool for policy makers planning involvement in public decision making developed in a participative process in cooperation with Flemish Government. The tool is based around five cycling steps: i) Defining the challenge, ii) identifying and reaching the target group, iii) outlining the process, iv) shaping the participation process and executing, v) evaluation of the process.

**Marta Kuljon, European Commission** acted as discussant, considering the lessons that could be learnt from the KeKi circle for the EU child participation platform. She noted that the tool invited the policy makers to really engage with their own understanding and motivation for child participation which is important for successful child participation. The discussion further identified the importance of:

- Preparation within participation process and clearly defining motivations and understandings of policy makers.
- The role of adults in the child participation who are trained and able to support children and young people.
- Safe inclusive environments.
- Feedback to the participants on policy changes made, or why explanation of why change has not occurred.

### Minimum age policies in participatory rights & democracy

Panellists:

- Ms Cristina Bacalso – Independent Researcher on Adolescents, Youth, Policies & Human Rights
- Dr Ally Dunhill, Director of Advocacy & Communication, Eurochild
- Ms Carola Meier, Austrian Federal Chancellery

This debate focused on the lowering of the voting age to 16. **Ms Carola Meier** shared experiences in Austria where the voting age was lowered in 2007. She stressed how this was done in combination with increased political education and that research has demonstrated children and young people need to be informed to participate. The change has now led young people to become more of a target group for politicians. **Dr Ally Dunhill** questioned why 18 was the norm for voting ages, noting there was little explanation or rationale for this. She went on to raise concern that children should not be pushed to vote but should have the opportunity to do so. It was identified that the main barrier to lowering voting age are politicians needing to be convinced of the value of a change. It was noted that lowering the voting age does not guarantee an increased turnout and there were concerns about children lacking the information to vote on an informed basis. Therefore, it was recommended educational and information measures were also needed if voting ages are to be lowered. **Ms Bacalso** closed the debate highlighting the importance of access to information and build capacity and experience of children and young people. She argued that we need a longer-term perspective on how to build capacities.

### Mental health support for refugee & migrant children & young people

**Ms Jolien Potemans, SOS Children's Villages Belgium** presented the work of their organisation. Ms Potemans highlighted that 85% of unaccompanied children experienced violence and 92% witnessed violence, as well as facing stigma and discrimination at all stages of journey. She stressed the role that alternative care and child friendly support centres for refugees and unaccompanied minors play in providing mental health support.



**Ms Ronja Ulvot, Child Helpline International** presented the work of her organisation supporting child helplines globally, which includes supporting 30 members in 27 EU member states. She noted that child helplines are professional services that children can contact about any issue, and important features were confidentiality and referral networks. Helplines are an easily accessible service for children in migration. Ms Ulvot highlighted the increased use of services by Ukrainian refugees but noted that children and young people experience barriers such as routing issues with 116 number, language barriers, as well as lack of awareness and trust.

**Ms Sibille Declercq, Awel** discussed a Flemish child helpline for Ukrainian refugees developed by her organisation and operated by volunteers. She noted that the chatroom function was the most popular medium amongst young people, with the main topics of discussion being friendship and relationship, and migrations stories/journeys.

**Ms Aagje Ieven, Missing Children Europe** highlighted that 18.292 children went missing from European reception centres between 2018-2020, noting that unaccompanied child migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups at risk of human trafficking and slave labour. She argued that the context from countries of origin, trauma while migrating, living conditions and lack of support are all significant factors affecting the mental health of this group. Ms Ieven presented the Manilla app ([www.manilla.com](http://www.manilla.com)) as a cross border tool for providing support around mental health.

The subsequent debate highlighted the need to invest in mental health of children and especially those migrants and refugees, who also need better reception support on arrival. The need to extend the continuum of care for these children and young people, instead of dividing support around the 18 years old boundary, was highlighted. This boundary and a lack of an integrated approach around it was said to create a variety of challenges, for instance 'ageing out' is a key moment for going young people going missing through fear of being deported. There is potential for stronger coherence between Children's Rights and Youth policy in this area.

### Reflections on child & youth mental health & access to services

**Ms Sarah Meys, Child Rights Commissioner's Office in Flanders** presented the work of her office consulting with children on their needs and concerns relating to mental health. The work was undertaken following a raise in concerns about mental health during COVID-19, and various surveys received a very high number of responses from children and young people on the topic. Ms Meys highlighted the centrality of schools as a space to address children and young people's mental health needs noting that young people say, 'school is more than a place to learn', it's a very important place to mingle with your peers and to have the feeling you fit in'. Mental health literacy within the school curriculum, preventative mental health checks in schools and peer to peer support were recommended.

**Ms Fatima Awil, Mental Health Europe** noted that data and statistics show poor mental health and mental health problems have been growing among the general population since the onset of the COVID-19. She called for integration and monitoring of mental health in all policies, investing in mental health literacy, including mental health in school curricula and the curricula of teaching staff. She further noted the need

to engage children and young people from diverse backgrounds in policy making around mental health, develop awareness campaigns and working with youth organisation.

- The subsequent debate considered the role of schools in the mental health agenda. It was noted that many other agendas also call for reforms in schools, which collectively creates problems in the capacity of
- teachers. One approach to this is to consider school as a place within which a variety of professions and organisations can deliver support, rather than emphasising placement of topics on curricula.

### **Inclusive communities through active participation**

**Ms Mieke Schuurman, Eurochild** presented the 'Reaching In' project which aims to increase the impact that marginalised children have on decision making including Roma children, children living in alternative care and migrant children. She outlined the challenges of participatory work with marginalised children including discrimination, creating accessible environments and trusting relationship, securing consent, communicating transparently and evaluating long term impact. Ms Schuurman proposed there was a need to fund to grassroots organisations over long timeframes to enable relationship building, create ways how the views of children and young people can be report to the EU, no matter where or how these are articulated and for European decision makers to visit communities with marginalised children.

**Ms Vica Hortobágyi, SOS Children's villages Hungary** presented Project TOGETHER, which aims at improving partnership around children and young people's involvement in decision making, particularly relating to crisis situations. The project developed various roles for children and young people to participate, including as mentors and through advisory boards. It built capacity of both professionals (through a training cascade and e-learning modules), and children and young people (through peer-to-peer workshops and information videos).

**Ms Angie Caruana & Ms Lorella Gatt, Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society** outlined the initiatives of their organisation relating to child participation including a children's council, a children's election manifesto and Project Komunitarja, a project about developing open spaces with children (from 3 years old) as primary designers. They stressed the importance of realising what child participation means to you when working with child participation and the need for trained adults in child participation processes

## Child & youth participation in urban planning – good practices

**Ms Maria Herczog, Family, Child, Youth Association, Hungary** presented experiences of child and youth participation in Budapest District 8 using JóKer a child participatory mechanism from a very young age. This method fosters active and innovative ways of participation, sets up a good practice for others to follow, and includes sensitivity trainings and college curricula.

**Ms Bettina Scharzmay, Wienxtra, Department Stadtbox, Vienna** presented experiences of developing The Vienna Children and Youth Strategy 2020-2025. This involved a large-scale qualitative participation process in Vienna, based around 1309 explorative workshop with entirely open topic selections. The metaphor of a city councillor asking children and young people to ‘perform a service check’ and respond to key questions such as ‘what works well in Vienna’ was used. She stressed that engaging, empowering, and co-creating solutions was beneficial to all stakeholders and led to resource efficiency.

**Ms Mona Meienberg, UNICEF Switzerland & Liechtenstein**, presented the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative and handbook on planning and designing child-friendly living spaces via video. She argued that involvement in urban planning was about more than just planning playground but recognising the changing living environment for children and young people. Different ways of building cities and global challenges such as climate change and digitalisation all impact on how children and young people grow up.

## Ensuring children’s health & safety in public spaces

**Ms Gitte Van Der Biest & Ms Jessica Vosters, JES Brussels** presented their publication ‘Gender and the city: les filles (ne) traînent (pas)’\* about girls and women in public spaces. It explores how they can feel safe in their own neighbourhoods by providing a reflection on the public space and the strategies they use to open up binary male-female thinking.

**Mr Sander Van Thomme, Ghent University**, presented research on dynamics cause young people to experience certain places in their neighbourhood as sanctuary or not, exploring development of free time, culture and experimentation for children and young people.

The following debate identified that young people’s experience and narrative of safety affects which public spaces they access. It was recommended to work with ‘long and slow’ participation processes as a key to involving children and young people in the design of public spaces. This was said to require investing in long term projects (rather than short term experiments) and involvement of children and young people in decisions about all aspects of public space rather than just those relating to facilities for children and young people. It was also recommended to recognise the importance of children and young people’s intersecting identifies and how these relate to feelings of safety and use of public space.

## Child-Friendly Cities – how Leuven secured this title

**Ms Imke Pichal, Batalong & Ms Katelijne Wouters former Jeugdendienst Leuven** presented the Child Friendly Cities Initiative in Flanders. The initiative is based around a certificate awarded by Flemish Minister of Youth to local governments who are working hard on child friendly policy and assuring children’s rights in their community. Research has identified six main building blocks for child friendly city:



diversity, vision, permanent dialogue with children and young people, local government taking a direction role and cooperating with stakeholders, high quality basic services, solidarity / mutual involvement. There are 34 child friendly cities in Flanders and Leuven has held the award since 2016.

## Closing Plenary - 23<sup>rd</sup> of January

Speakers:

- Dr Dan Moxon – Director, People Dialogue and Change
- Ms Olena Chernykh Senior Project Officer, Youth for democracy in Ukraine”, the Council of Europe Office in Ukraine
- Mr Bálint Karagich - Executive Director at Hungarian Youth Association, Hungarian Ministerial Delegation
- Mr Benjamin Dalle - Flemish Minister of Brussels, Youth, Media and Poverty Reduction, Flemish Government

**Dr Dan Moxon** presented the general conclusion of the seminar (see next section).

**Ms Olena Chernykh** addressed the audience regarding the situation of children and young people in Ukraine, and Ukrainian children and young people who had been displaced to other European countries. She argued the crucial needs of these children and young people meant it was time for more efforts to strengthen Children’s Rights policies. Ms Chernykh highlighted that children and young people need the right, means space and opportunities to participate, but that too often we see inconsistent action in this area. She invited all European institutions to continue thinking through our common professional challenges from children and young people’s perspective.

**Mr Bálint Karagich** thanked the Belgian Presidency for setting a high standard in their work through the seminar on children and young people, which he hoped the Hungarian Presidency would be able to follow. He announced that the upcoming Hungarian presidency would keep focus on protection of children, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. In the field of youth, the Hungarian Presidency will consider matters of employment, affordable housing, education and youth participation, with emphasis on creating the conditions for young people to reach their potential in rural areas.

**Mr Benjamin Dalle** closed the seminar by thanking all participants and organisers for fulfilling the ambitions of the event reminding them the findings would inform EU Council Conclusions. He identified that whilst not all question had been answered significant step had been made. As the Flemish Minister of Youth and Children’s Rights, Mr Dalle stressed he was convinced of the added value of a more coherent policy towards children, young people, and children’s rights. Together, we can make significant progress on the path that children and young people are shaping together with us. Mr Dalle proposed four priorities he wished to take forward, if successful in the upcoming Belgian elections. Firstly, mainstreaming children’s rights and perspectives into all relevant policy areas on EU level and on member state level, with



attention to most vulnerable. Secondly, more coherence between youth policy and children's rights policy. Thirdly, ensure the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of policies related to youth and child rights, and finally ensuring alignment of European and international policy agendas and strategies through very concrete projects and actions.



## Conclusions of the General Rapporteur

### Constructing Childhood and Youth through policy

- The boundaries of policy relating to Childhood and Youth have a powerful impact on the lives of young Europeans. Both Childhood and Youth are socially constructed categories. Rather than being fixed concepts, our understandings and experiences of these categories vary with time, place, culture, and context. These categories have not always existed in the way we construct them today, and some would argue have not always existed at all. Though the way we construct these categories is still tied to ageing, growth, and development, the distinctions and transitions between Childhood, Youth and Adulthood are not fixed nor universal. Instead, they vary between societies as well as between individuals. Nevertheless, social policy, in order to remain manageable, will likely always need to rely to some extent on categorisations based around fixed points of age. The way we construct the categories and understandings of Childhood and Youth, through social policy, and more widely through shared social understandings, has the potential to govern, limit, and empower what it is that young Europeans can do, and who they can be. Policy acts as a powerful anchor, to influence, affect, and reflect how Childhood, Youth and Adulthood are experienced and what it is that they are. Thus, discussion about the boundaries and overlap of policy related to Childhood and Youth, are discussion about the way we use our instruments of Governance and Government to shape and define what Childhood and Youth is, and what we enable our younger generations to be.

The field of Children's Rights has been conscious of itself for several decades as a political and social movement to recognise children as agentic rights holders and to support the citizenship of children. At the same time, it has been cognisant of the unique vulnerabilities that children have, and the protection they need as a result of this. Thus, the policy field of Children's Rights has often focused on those children who are the most vulnerable, such as child refugees, or those in alternative care.

Youth policy has been somewhat slower to envisage itself as a rights-based movement. Policy concerns about Youth have often stemmed from economic concerns about elongated and changing transition from education to employment. That is to say the movement from economic dependence to economic independence. But, through the work of institutions like the Council of Europe, and advocacy from young people themselves via the European Youth Forum and others, the Youth policy field has increasingly begun to envisage itself as rights based. Youth policy has begun to expand from concerns about economic transition to the full realisation of the human rights of young people.



### ▀ The rights of younger generations - a common value base

There are two complex ecosystems of international law and policy relating to Childhood and Youth, respectively. This is mapped in the biennial State of the Art report “The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children’s Rights”<sup>5</sup>, the background document for this event. The further inputs related to national policy given during the seminar demonstrated the varying ways in which international commitments to children and young people are realised across EU Member States, alongside other national, regional, and local policy concerns. From these inputs, it can be concluded there is already some degree of alignment and coherence between the two policy ecosystems. This coherence stems from shared underlying values relating to full respect for the rights of the two respective target groups - be that human rights or children's (human) rights. The two fields have a common concern on how best to protect, promote and realise those rights of younger generations in Europe.

There are differences in how the two policy fields approach rights. This stems not only because of the varying legal frameworks, particularly the application of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) to those under 18, but also from the ways the two fields have constructed their differing understanding of children and young people in parallel. Within discussions on rights, it is common to talk about the tension between participation rights and protection rights. In the seminar a key debate was the differing emphasis placed on protection compared to autonomy within the two policy ecosystems with those concerned with Childhood emphasising the need for protection rights and those concerned with Youth emphasising the need for autonomy. It was recognised that the balance between a child or young person's protection versus their autonomy is part of a continuum that evolves across the life course, as individuals move from relative dependence to relative independence through a number of social, economic, and cultural transitions. The two policy fields work at different parts of that continuum.

Both policy fields are ultimately concerned with what the childhood scholar Leena Alanen calls ‘generational order’<sup>\*\*</sup> - the way in which social relations are governed through the age and generation-based hierarchy. The generational order often serves to prevent the full realisation of younger generations' rights. The underpinning aspirations of rights-based policy on Children and Youth and is about how these generational relations might be changed to achieve greater intergenerational justice and to create a Europe that is fit for all generations and for all children and young people.

---

<sup>5</sup> Follow-up of the Belgian EU Presidency – Youth note 2010, 2023, The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children’s Rights, Flemish Government, Department for Culture, Youth and Media, Belgium.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Alanen, L., 2003. Childhoods: the generational ordering of social relations, in: Mayall, B., Zeiher, H. (Eds.), *Childhood in Generational Perspective*. Univ. of London, pp. 27–45.



### ▸ The case for greater coherence

The primary conclusion of the seminar is that there is a compelling case for increasing coherence and building of bridges between the policy agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights, at both international and national level. Increased coherence refers to enhanced **information sharing, exchange, coordination, and cooperation**. Such coherence has strong potential for maximising the use of collective resources, fostering synergies, and improving the effectiveness of policy overall.

The case for increased coherence is underpinned by two core arguments about overlap between policy relating to Childhood and Youth:

Firstly, both fields have an overlap relating to a number of shared goals and thematic concerns. This creates potential for common learning, and collaborative action. It should be recognised that both fields also have unique goals which are not shared (for example, the recognition of youth work, or promotion of children's right to play). However, the respective unique goals of the two fields are neither in opposition nor contradiction with each other and can be understood simply as areas with less potential for synergy.

Secondly, both fields have an overlap of the age ranges they address. Following Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child the field of Children's Rights can be understood to apply to under 18s. Though various actors within the field also seek to extend protection measures for the most vulnerable above this age. The age of youth is not always consistently defined in youth policy. But youth policy, with some degree of variation in both international and national policy, typically address those as young as 13 and as old as 30 (and sometimes even 35). The age overlap creates a value to enhanced coordination and exchange for matters affecting children and young people directly within the overlap. However, the potential for coherence between the two fields is also not limited exclusively to those individuals within the age overlap.

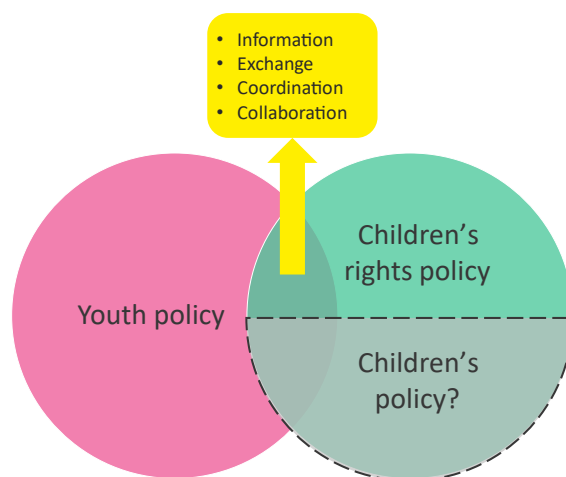
A further major conclusion from the seminar is recognition that some aspects of policy on Children, Youth and Children's Rights demand more or less attention to coherence than others. Increased coherence does not refer to, nor require, full integration and merging of the two policy eco-systems relating to Childhood and Youth. Indeed, such integration may carry risks to both fields. There are concerns amongst some stakeholders that one field may come to dominate the other, to the detriment of children and young people. Though there are successful examples of fully integrated policy at national level, many stakeholders have faced challenges when seeking to establish and prioritise both Children's Rights and/or Youth policy at national level. There is concern that policy goals unique to each field may be diminished by full integration. Thus, it should be recognized and respected that each field still includes a number of unique goals which may be best pursued independently.



- At the EU level, coherence is likely to be best achieved by dedicated policy and policy making mechanisms for both Children's Rights and Youth which are linked by strong bridges between the two systems. The EU holds differing competences across the spectrum of policy on Children, Youth and Children's Rights. Article 6 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) gives the EU competence to support, coordinate or supplement actions of the Member States in the field of Youth. The promotion and protection of Children's Rights is one of the key objectives embedded in Article 3(3) of the [Treaty on European Union](#) and enshrined in Article 24 of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#). However, the EU holds no specific competence for what might be loosely referred to as 'children's policy' (or perhaps, children and families' policy) i.e., policy action on children other than promotion of children's rights. All Member States have extensive sets of policy for action relating to children, that nominally sits outside of promotion of specific policy to promote Children's Rights yet at the same time cannot be separated from these rights.

The policy areas in greatest need of coherence, and where major opportunities for synergy exist, occur at the key thematic overlaps within policy on Children, Youth and Children's Rights, and where coordinated action at EU level can be undertaken within the specific competences of the EU.

*Model of policy coherence between Children, Youth and Children's Rights*



2

## Major thematic areas for synergy

### Improving children and young people's participation in public decision making

The two fields share common goals relating:

- Effective, ethical, and meaningful implementation of participation mechanisms,
- Increasing the policy impact occurring in response to children and young people's voices,
- Increasing the recognition of children and young people as political actors,
- Mainstreaming the rights and voices of children and young people across all fields of policy and all levels of governance.

It is noted that some areas of child and youth participation, such as the shrinking space for youth civil society, and children's involvement in their own social care proceedings are still unique to each field.

### Development of cross-sectoral policy in response to the voices and concerns of children and young people

There are many common concerns raised by children and young people through the EU Youth Dialogue, the EU Children's participation platform and other participatory mechanisms. This includes topics such as

- Mental health,
- Impact of digitalisation,
- Education reform,
- Climate and sustainability issues,

Many of these topics exist outside of the traditional spheres of Children, Youth and Children's Rights policy and therefore require action within other policy domains to fully address. Joint action by policy actors within Childhood and Youth will be well placed to stimulate responses in other policy sectors. There is also potential for shared learning, along with collaborative and coordinated action as these fields are addressed within Children, Youth and Children's Rights policy.

### Enhanced support for transitions from dependence to independence, especially for the most vulnerable children and young people

There is substantial overlap of ages between the two fields. This is accompanied by calls to extend protection measures within childhood to specific vulnerable groups (such as those in alternative care), and recognition of increasingly complex and elongated transition for young people. This suggests clear opportunities for more coordinated policies around transition and adolescence. Enhanced support for transition is desirable, but it is also noted that a rights-based approach to policy means improving the lives of children and young people in and of their own right rather than because such improvements lead to better transitions to adulthood.

### Recommendations for action

- Establish an ongoing mechanism at EU level to facilitate coordination, cooperation, information sharing and exchange between the fields of youth policy and children's rights within Member States and at EU level. Such a mechanism should seek to better enable policy coherence between the two fields and foster coherence on the major thematic areas of synergy.
- Continue a coordinated approach between The EU Youth Coordinator and the Coordinator on Children's Rights to ensure that children's rights, the rights of young people, and child and youth perspectives are integrated across all relevant policy areas at EU level. As part of this, the two coordinators should routinely monitor and identify the concerns that are common to children and young people as raised through the EU Youth Dialogue, EU Children's participation platform and other participatory mechanisms. Joint action to stimulate cross-sectoral policy responses to these should then be taken.
- Consider how the rights and voices of children can be addressed through the using full potential of the Better Regulation framework, and particularly if a 'child youth check' can be developed as a complementary or integrated mechanism alongside the new EU youth check.
- Continue the biennial update of the State-of-the-Art document "The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth and Children's Rights," and further building upon this with mapping of policy coherence between Children, Youth and Children's Rights policy at national level.
- Undertake systematic analysis and research into concrete opportunities for policy coherence within the major areas of synergy. This analysis should identify examples of best practice, replicable tools, and potential for common implementation and/or monitoring initiatives between the two fields.
- Better utilise existing platforms for information sharing, such as the EU Youth Wiki, to map and share information on existing national level collaboration or coordination activities across Children, Youth and Children's Rights policy within Member states.

These recommendations represent starting points for the development of greater coherence, arising discussion in the expert seminar. Further concrete measures will likely be needed and identified as the coherence agenda progresses. Above all, concerted political will and involvement of all actors, including European institutions, Member States, and civil society, in collaboration with children and young people, will be required to progress this agenda.