

Child and Youth (Welfare) Policy in Europe Current Positions and Outlook

Discussion paper of the German Child Welfare Association

The German Child Welfare Association strongly promotes the development of a European perspective on child and youth welfare services and policy within scientific discussions – most notably with the establishment of the expert committee “Child and Youth (Welfare) Policy in Europe”. The importance of a European perspective was previously documented by the work done by the “Informations- und Koordinationskreis Europa” (“Information and Coordination Circle Europe”) which preceded the expert committee. On October 14 and 15, 2003, a central conference of the German Child Welfare Association addressing the question “Is Europe a Youth Welfare Issue?” took place in Nuremberg. Many representatives from European and international child and youth welfare organisations and policy-makers involved with child and youth issues participated. This conference most importantly marked the shift in the relations between national child and youth welfare services and European politics. The results, insights, and analyses of the conference as well as the expert committee's two and a half years of work call for a moment to draw tentative conclusions, to reassess current positions and develop possible new perspectives. The following paper continues the discussion started with the paper “Child and Youth (Welfare) Policy in Europe” presented by the German Child Welfare Association's board of directors in September 2001.

Due to the fact that misunderstandings and miscommunication regarding the daily work situation of child and youth welfare service programs often impede the progress of developing a discussion about broader child and youth issues within a European context, we begin this paper with a few clarifications.

Defining youth work and youth welfare services

There is no question about the legal definition of the term child and youth welfare services, it means all fields of action, including youth work. In the European context, however, youth work is traditionally understood as the sole field covered by youth welfare services. Discussions focusing on youth work have enabled broader discussion of European issues surrounding child and youth (welfare) policy. Also, this traditional emphasis on youth work is often reflected in the personal experiences of the service-providers. Only recently do they have had the opportunity to “experience Europe” through child and youth services other than youth work.

Currently there is only a single statutory mandate formulated by the European Community for international youth work¹, a situation which makes it difficult to focus on issues concerning child

¹ “Encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors”, Article 149, Chapter 3 “Education, Vocational Training and Youth” of the Treaty Establishing the European Community of 1992 (Maastricht) and 1997 (Amsterdam). However, the suggested treaty establishing a constitution for Europe drafted by the Convention of 2003 provides for “increased participation of youth in the democratic life of Europe” (§182) and mentions 'youth' in general in its discussion of the open method of cooperation.

and youth welfare services at the European level. The wide-ranging consultation process prior to the publication of the European Commission's White Paper on youth policy resulted in systematic and extensive studies of European cooperation in youth policy, and showed that questions of youth work clearly predominate in youth-specific fields of welfare work. The more comprehensive view of child and youth welfare services can for the most part be found only where the impact on youth by other, non-youth-oriented policies is considered and assessed. At the European level it is a new approach to become politically active about *all* policy issues concerning the interests of young people, and discussion about it has only just begun.

As the term “child and youth (welfare) policy” suggests, youth policy is not only a question of youth work – as it has traditionally been understood. Rather the term implies a much more comprehensive understanding of society's responsibility for the upbringing of children and young people.

Child and youth welfare agencies are legally obligated to offer services in areas specific to the lives of children and young people. However, § 1, Article 8, of the German Social Welfare Code (SGB) may be read less narrowly to require the provision of services that take into account all areas concerning the welfare of children and youth. The overall objective of child and youth services is, after all, to create and sustain supportive living conditions for young people and their families. This twofold mandate forms the legal foundation of youth policy. Youth policy is therefore policy concerned with the living conditions of children, young people, and their families, with the external forces and circumstances of their lives as well as their individual life-style choices and decisions.

Europe is important for child and youth policy – child and youth policy must become important for Europe

The principle of subsidiarity is one of the pillars of European politics: It means an approach where what needs to be done and how it will be done is decided upon in as close as possible a collaboration with the people seeking services. At the same time it emphasises efficiency and positive results for the people affected by EU measures. With regards to youth policy this means that decisions are generally made and put into action at the local, regional, or national level, and only as an exception at the European level. However, as European developments continue to have a growing impact on young peoples' lives, it becomes increasingly important to shape youth policy at the European level.

It is crucial that German child and youth welfare services do not shut their eyes to the importance of “Europe”. To the contrary, they need to be more aware of it than they have been so far. The European Community's political decisions are becoming increasingly relevant for the structuring of living conditions inside and outside the borders of the European Community. At the same time the European Community offers new educational and vocational opportunities, widening the range of opportunities available in people's lives. Europe has become the social and political environment of children, youth, and their families. People engaged in youth policy-making need to actively participate in European politics, while, at the same time, remaining focused on the impact on all local, regional, or national child and youth services.

Participation in European politics can only work if this is a priority for all concerned - people engaged in youth policy on the one hand, European decision-makers on the other hand. Questions like “How do European decisions and activities affect the living conditions of children, young people, and their families?” and “How are the interests and perspectives of future generations addressed within European political developments?” must be widely discussed. Child and youth welfare services must find ways to integrate the European dimension into their work and

organisational structures as a matter of course, and not view integration of the European perspective as an additional effort. Child and youth service professionals must develop a heightened awareness of Europe. Issues that formerly were viewed as being either strictly European or strictly national issues must be reintegrated into a common agenda. European exchange and cross-borders scientific debates in all fields of action concerning child and youth services must be encouraged and made logistically possible. Only then will Europe become a living experience for both the 'clientele' and the child and youth service professionals.

Representing the interests of children, youth and families in Europe

Discussions focusing on whether and how to participate in European politics in the interest and with the perspective of future generations raise many questions about who makes EC-policy and who is best suited to speak on behalf of children, youth, and their families. Where to best direct these lobbying efforts also a question of crucial importance.

Of course there are the governing bodies of the EU. Their decisions in many ways affect the living conditions of young people and their families, and they need to be advised politically at the European level (Parliament, Commission, EESC etc.). For this purpose a European child and youth services platform is most urgently needed, to compliment the official advisory structures of the national governments. We suggest the establishment of a European network which unites national structures of child and youth (welfare) policy. Side by side with the European Youth Forum, such a network would represent national youth organisations, their standing conferences, and other more specific networks in a concentrated effort to address the issues of children, youth, and their families and work in their interests. But a European-wide platform like this only makes sense with the input and support from national players as well as political support at the European level. Furthermore, long-term funding must be provided.

The so-called civil society², defined as the entirety of all active non-governmental organisations, is traditionally oriented towards the nation state. At the European level, however, one increasingly observes developments which correspond to the tenets of civil society. Tentative beginnings of a European civil society are starting to show up in various places, among them the European Youth Forum mentioned above, the European Social Platform³ – a coalition of European networks addressing social concerns –, and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)⁴. The EESC, an EU institution with legally defined consulting functions, calls itself a forum of organised civil society at the European level. When child and youth services are to be organised on a European-wide level, they must be more active in both bodies, as a member of the European Social Platform and a valid partner of the European Economic and Social Committee. At the same time it is important to expand the national efforts of people engaged in child and youth services to include the European perspective. Only then will European networks have full authority and power to act, and only then will youth policy be able to obtain a full seat in the Economic and Social Committee.

² There is no unequivocal political definition of the concept of the "civil society". For example, some definitions exclude government agencies and individuals, the churches, and government-funded organisation from the civil society, whereas other definitions are broader and more inclusive.

³ The social platform was founded in 1995, it unites 30 European networks from different social fields. Their common goal is to further the social dimension of the European Community. The European Social Platform sees itself as a possible partner for all bodies of the European Community.

⁴ The European Economic and Social Committee was founded in 1957. It has an advisory role for the EU bodies, representing employers, unions, farmers, consumers, and other lobbying groups. Members of the EESC are nominated by the national governments.

Within the European Union, the corporation of national governments (Intergovernmental Conference, European Council, Council of Ministers) represents the highest level of decision-making. In the different fields of European politics allies can be found in the national governments. For European child and youth (welfare) policy-making, the national government and its ministries continues to be an important ally when addressing European issues and concerns of children and young people. Concerned about developing a long-term and scientifically-based representation of national child and youth interests within a European perspective, the German Child Welfare Association formed an initiative for a “National Platform for Child and Youth (Welfare) Policy in Europe” (“Nationale Beobachtungs- und Koordinierungsstelle Kinder- und Jugend(hilfe)politik Europa”) more than two years ago. The initiative's tasks include, in addition to analysing European processes relevant to youth welfare, rendering these processes transparent and comprehensible to national youth services, and assessing and providing the much-needed basic scientific information and views upon which national decisions with European dimensions can be based. The Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, however, does not yet support this initiative, and maintains that these tasks are sufficiently addressed by other institutions. The German Child Welfare Association stresses again that it is essential that a “National Platform for Child and Youth (Welfare) Policy in Europe,” as outlined above, be established.

Actively engaging in European politics will always require to move back and forth between lobbying for youth policy at the national and at the European levels. Youth-specific approaches as well as approaches concentrating on “youth” in other fields of policy are based on community consultation and participation. They must be put into practice effectively on both the national and the EU level. A politics of community participation can only be successful if voting and decision-making processes are transparent and embedded within an overall democratic structure. Whether one works at the European or the national level, it is important to know and bear in mind the national context of child and youth services and youth policies with their particular history and organisational structures. Also, if participation of children, young people, and their organisations is to mean a real decision-making dialogue rather than mere consultation, then participatory processes need to take place within appropriate time-frames. Participatory politics can only be successful when decision-making processes focus primarily on the dialogue between decision-makers and the people affected by their decisions, or their representatives, regardless of whether decisions are made at the local, regional, national, or European level.

Outlook and New Perspectives

The German Child Welfare Association considers the following key concepts and issues highly relevant for the years to come, and it believes they should be examined closely from the national perspective. These issues are crucial to current international scientific exchange, discussions of youth policy, and the consulting work done for national and European policy-makers. Questions of gender mainstreaming need to be addressed more profoundly than is possible within the limits of this discussion paper.

- The Open Method of Coordination as it Concerns European Cooperation in Youth Policy

A national discussion about the open method of coordination, its appropriateness and effectiveness, is urgently needed in Germany. Such a discussion should take into account the initial experiences with open coordination (questionnaires – national reports – summary reports – recommendations), and focus on what is to be expected from specific European resolutions and how to evaluate those resolutions. It is still unclear how players engaged in child and youth (welfare) policy may be involved in the process of open coordination, and how community participation can be achieved at the national level. Also, an integral part of the open method of coordination involves follow-up

evaluation mechanisms at the European level. These evaluations need to be closely monitored and supplemented from the national perspective.

- Youth as Part of Other Fields of Policy

The white paper on “youth” suggests that professionals and policy-makers should consider more the ways in which children and youths are impacted by policies that do not specifically address their issues and circumstances. Although this suggestion was seconded by the Council of Youth Ministers, almost no efforts were made to implement it. It is as yet unresolved how it can be ensured that youth-related concerns will be taken more serious in the development and implementation of other policies. We need a more profound exchange about methods, contents, and organisational structures of policy work for youth in all relevant fields – local and European – in order to develop a national strategy for realising the white paper suggestion.

- Making European Youth Policy

The decision of the European Youth Ministers to work closely together on behalf of youth creates important new impulses for local, regional, and national youth (welfare) policy. The open method of coordination, as well as the suggestion to make youth a general concern of other, non-youth-oriented fields of policy, demands new objectives and guidelines. These need to be turned into concrete action in a process that is transparent, participatory, and democratic – at all levels from local to national, and in cross-border cooperation. Which new ideas will become reality? Which steps need to be taken? – Such questions can only be answered in close cooperation with child and youth welfare professionals, taking into account the specific situation in Germany with its large number of public and private organisations offering welfare services. The concept of a European-wide subsidiary process, which fundamentally re-evaluates youth welfare and youth policy, would be an effective alternative to the dubious concept of a centralised European institution regulating youth policies.

- European Social Protection Reports

The European Commission developed a proposal to reinforce open coordination in the context of social protection and thereby emphasised the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy – *to make the EU the world's most dynamic and competitive economy, to ensure sustainable economic development with more and better jobs and stronger social cohesion*. The background of the Commission's proposal is the upcoming enlargement of the Union to 25 members and the, sometimes uncoordinated, activities of Member States concerning social and employment policy. Part of the Commission's goal is to reinforce the coordination of economic and employment policies. Instead of the various open methods of coordination (esp. social integration, pension and health care systems) the Commission suggests the drafting and presentation of comprehensive social protection reports with varying topics (such as health, social integration, social security), beginning in 2006. These reports will evaluate how much progress has been made with regards to the EU's objectives concerning social policy.

- European Employment Strategies

To coordinate national employment policies at the European level means the establishment of objectives and benchmarks that would have an enormous impact on national labour market and educational policies. The development of an integrated labour market is an objective equally important as full employment; it determines the vocational opportunities for and the work conditions of today's youth.

- Non-formal Learning

The supposed re-orientation of the German education system notwithstanding, there is no established consensus about a holistic understanding of education which does not privilege formal

over non-formal learning. The European debate is much more advanced, especially where it concerns the recognition of non-formal learning, methods to assess non-formal processes of learning, and ways to integrate formal and non-formal ways of learning. A closer correlation of national and European education policies is thus highly desirable from the perspective of child and youth services.

- Justice and Home Affairs Policies

European-wide coordination of migration and asylum policies will in the long run affect issues of immigration and the integration of third countries as well as cross-border questions of alimony law and residency within the EU member states. All of this, of course, affects the lives of many children, young people, and their families.

- Green Paper on Services of General Interest

In May 2003, the European Commission presented a green paper on services of general interest and opened a debate which concerns child and youth services. In its green paper the Commission arrives at a positive evaluation of the liberalisation which has been taking place in a number of sectors during the last years. These sectors mainly, or at least also, provide services of general economic interest. The Commission will continue to promote "controlled" liberalisation, i.e. a gradual opening-up of the market accompanied by measures to protect the general interest. In particular, access to a service of a specified quality at an affordable price will be guaranteed for everyone, whatever the economic, social or geographical situation. Special attention will be given to ensuring adequate standards for cross-border services that cannot be adequately regulated at the national level alone. In this context, the possible effects of a European legal framework are of special importance to German youth services; their work will also be strongly affected depending on what concrete measures for an effectively "controlled" liberalisation the Commission plans to introduce.

- European Platform of Child and Youth Welfare

As stated above, it is imperative that there exists a European lobbying group representing the interests of children, young people, and their families. Such a European lobbying network must become a reality in the near future. The German Child Welfare Association intends to work towards this goal as part of its mission to promote and support child and youth services – not only from a national but also from a European perspective.

The board of the German Child Welfare Association
Vorstand der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Jugendhilfe (AGJ)
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For further questions and up to date information do not hesitate to contact the national bureau:

Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Jugendhilfe – AGJ

Mühlendamm 3

D-10178 Berlin

Phone +49-30-400 40 200

Fax +49-30-400 40 232

E-Mail agj.@agj.de

Web www.agj.de

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