



## FOURTH WORLD EUROPEAN COMMITTEE COMITÉ QUART MONDE EUROPÉEN

### Minutes of the joint meeting of the Family and Protection of Children and the Fourth World European Committee Intergroups European Parliament, Strasbourg, Wednesday 19 November 2003, 17:00 - 18:30, room N1.3

**Members present:** Ms Uma Aaltonen (Greens/EFA, FIN), Ms Armonia Bordes (EUL/NGL, F), Mr Gérard Caudron (EUL/NGL, F), Mr José Maria Gil-Robles Gil-Delgado (EPP-ED, E), Ms Marie-Thérèse Hermange (EPP-ED, F), Ms Arlette Laguiller (EUL/NGL, F), Sir Neil MacCormick (Greens/EFA, UK), Mr Hugues Martin (EPP-ED, F), Mr Jean-Thomas Nordmann (ELDR, F), Ms Margie Sudre (EPP-ED, F), Ms Nicole Thomas-Mauro (UEN, F), Mr Joan Vallvé (ELDR, E), Ms Olga Zrihen (PES, B).

**Members assistants present:** Ms M. Thérèse Brunagel (ass. J. Daul EPP-ED, F), Ms Josiane Jeantils (ass. S. Ainaridi EUL/NGL, F), Ms Haude Lannon (ass. J.M. Gil-Robles), Ms Flora MacCormick (ass. N. MacCormick), Ms Henriette Mouthey, Mr Francisco Nazaré (ass. J. Ribeiro E Castro UEN, P), Mr Tobias Teuscher (ass. EPP-ED)

**Other participants:** Ms Irene Balaguer (*Children in Europe, Spain*), Ms Marie-Alice Bougon (*ATD Fourth World Strasbourg*), Mr Jean Marc Bottais (*Catholic Workers Action*), Ms Sylvie Clausse (*ATD Fourth World Colmar*), Ms Bronwen Cohen (*Children in Scotland*), Ms Isabelle Collot (*Nid Movement*), Ms Maryke Decuypre (*ATD Fourth World Colmar*), Mr Sébastien English (*Le Furet, France*), Ms Nadine Gaubert (*ATD Fourth World Colmar*), Ms Nicole Gayet (*Nid Movement*), Ms Eva Grueber (*Klein und Gross, Germany*), Ms Yvette Heidinger (*ATD Fourth World Strasbourg*), Ms Agnès Huchon (*ATD Fourth World International*), Mr Thierry Houdart (*Association of Youth Shelters and Homes*), Ms Marie Aude Kanengieser (*Federation of Catholic Family Associations*), Ms Joëlle Kister (*Montagne Vert Parents Group, Strasbourg*), Ms Fabienne Klein (*ATD Fourth World Strasbourg*), Mr Pierre Klein (*ATD Fourth World International*), Mr Roland Klein, Mr Stig Lund (*Born & Unge, Denmark*), Ms Myriam Mony (*Social Services School of the South East, France*), Mr Eric Olivier (*ATD Fourth World Strasbourg*), Ms Jennifer Rice (*Administrative assistant, Council of Europe*), Ms Rosa Maria Securún Fuster (*Children in Europe, Spain*), Ms Marie-Nicole Rubio (*Le Furet, Children in Europe*), Ms Elizabeth Sykes (*Children in Scotland*), Ms Pascale Tissier (*ATD Fourth World Colmar*), Mr Frédéric Trautmann, Ms Catherine Melard (*ATD Fourth World Strasbourg*), Ms Nelly Veteau (*Catholic Action for Children*).

**Secretariat:** Ms Sarah Kenningham (*ATD Fourth World International*)

**The meeting was co-chaired by Ms Marie-Thérèse Hermange and Ms Olga Zrihen.**

Ms Hermange opened the **joint meeting** of the **Family and Protection of Children Intergroup**, of which she is President, and the **Fourth World European Committee Intergroup** on the theme of "**Children and the Fight Against Poverty in Europe**". She passed on the apologies of Ms Martine Roure, President of the Fourth World Intergroup, who had asked Ms Olga Zrihen to co-chair the meeting in her absence.

Ms Hermange emphasised the **importance of addressing the issue of child poverty** as it is still present in the developed countries of the EU and referred to the 2001 UNICEF Report, 'A League Table of Child Poverty in Rich Nations'<sup>1</sup>. The report concludes that there are a combination of factors contributing to child poverty in industrialised countries which include having jobless parents, a lack of income in the household and reliance on state benefits. In a 'relative' child poverty table, Sweden came 1st followed by Norway and Finland; Belgium took 4th place with 4.4% of children living in poverty; France came in 9th position with 7.9% of children living in poverty; then come Hungary, Germany, Spain, Greece, Poland, Ireland, UK and Italy; in the USA 22.4% of children live in poverty with 26.2% in Mexico. This would mean that in France today there are 1.8million children under the age of 18 living in poverty, whereas a French Statistical Office report shows that around 1million children live in poverty.

<sup>1</sup> Innocenti Report Card, Issue No. 1, June 2000, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.

Ms Hermange gave these figures by way of introduction to the meeting adding that there is a major debate in France at the moment about child poverty. She emphasised that the **income poverty of a family is just one indicator** and that there are other indicators to consider such as having a shortage of food, lack of education and learning difficulties. She told the story of a child whom she had met that had trouble speaking and who had moved many times in his life from one poor neighbourhood to the next. A member of ATD Fourth World in France had explained to Ms Hermange that certain children from very poor families stopped speaking for fear of betraying themselves or their families in environments that they perceived as being hostile. She added that this kind of poverty could have a **damaging psychological effect on children** in their formative years, especially if the children cannot be proud of or respect their parents, or do not feel that they can rely on them for protection.

Ms Zrihen began by thanking Ms Hermange for her opening remarks which set the context of the debate and went on to introduce herself. She explained that she was a member of the Fourth World European Committee Intergroup as a result of her involvement with ATD Fourth World at a local level in La Louvière, Belgium. She had been particularly associated with **pilot projects that promote the exchange and pooling of knowledge between professionals, academics and people living in poverty**. These projects give a voice to people in poverty and value their knowledge. Ms Zrihen expressed her vision of the Intergroups as places where MEPs can commit themselves to listening to the hopes, desires and expectations of people. As the European Parliament is a place where there is the opportunity to communicate widely with different groups, she felt that it was important for ATD Fourth World to be able to have their voice heard via the Intergroup. She added that she believes profoundly in the spoken word as it allows people to describe the world that they live in rather than just suffering or tolerating certain situations in silence.

Ms Zrihen **welcomed the initiative of bringing the two Intergroups together for a joint meeting** as it provided the opportunity for ATD Fourth World to present a piece of work available for the first time: the working document **Valuing Children, Valuing Parents**, has been put together by **Mr Pierre Klein**, a permanent volunteer with **ATD Fourth World** based in Strasbourg, with the aid of financing from the EU Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion. Ms Zrihen added that whilst documents such as this are important tools which allow us to learn and to understand, they should also **push us towards taking action**.

She then introduced **Ms Marie-Nicole Rubio** and **Ms Bronwen Cohen**, members of the editorial team of the magazine **Children in Europe**. Ms Cohen was invited to give an introduction about the publication and its background and then Ms Rubio was asked to speak more about the theme of fighting child poverty.

Ms Zrihen finished by specifying that these presentations were intended as an introduction to the discussion and debate that was open to all participants in the meeting.

Mr Klein gave a **presentation of some of the main points explored by the ATD Fourth World European working paper Valuing Children, Valuing Parents**, available for the first time at the meeting (the text of this presentation is included as an annex to the minutes).

Ms Zrihen thanked Mr Klein for his presentation which had already posed many questions for discussion and further exploration during the debate.

Ms Hermange added that she wished to recommend a book that she had recently read by Alice Ferney which told the story of a gypsy family with a strong mother and their relationship with a librarian who came to read to the gypsy children.<sup>2</sup>

Ms Rubio thanked Ms Hermange and Ms Zrihen for having organised the joint meeting of the two Intergroups, an action that in itself illustrated that it is possible to bring people together around a common concern. She then introduced her colleague, Ms Cohen, to speak more about the magazine *Children in Europe*.

Ms Cohen also thanked the Intergroups for the **opportunity to present Children in Europe, a magazine produced in eight countries and languages** which also represented a growing network of magazines in yet more countries. She explained that it is a collaborative effort between different countries and that present at the meeting were colleagues from Scotland, France, Denmark, Germany and Spain. The magazine had its origins in the European Commission's child care network which, over a period of 10 years, examined a range of issues relating to young children. When the network finished in 1996, many of the participants felt that it was important to maintain a **forum or vehicle that would enable the discussion to continue on these issues across the EU** and so the magazine came into being. Ms Cohen felt that the magazine, although only published twice a year on a limited budget, had already addressed some critical issues relating to young children. Mr Klein had referred to the importance of **listening to children** in his presentation and Ms Cohen drew attention to an issue of Children in Europe which had concentrated on why this was important. They had also focused an edition on the subject of **diversity**, as one of the aims of the network of magazines was to understand the diversity of experience in different countries and identify the issues that can be discussed in common. Another edition of the magazine had looked in more detail at **parents' participation in services for young children** as a growing body of research supported what had been said by Mr Klein, in showing that the outcomes for children related directly to the involvement of parents in their care, education and recreation. She specified that this was relevant for both

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<sup>2</sup> *Grâce et Dénuement*, Alice Ferney, Editions Actes Sud, 1998

mothers and fathers. Other issues explored by the magazine had been related to the **workforce** and to the **role of professionals** in different sectors and how they had to be more convergence and collaboration if the global situation of children was to be understood.

Ms Cohen concluded by emphasising the fact that 50,000 copies of the magazine were being produced **without the aid of any EU financing** and wanted to explore further with Members of the European Parliament how this tool could increasingly be made use of, as it is currently distributed to professionals and parents in all EU Member States.

Ms Rubio continued by reacting to some aspects of Mr Klein's presentation and emphasised that those affected and concerned by poverty in general, and in particular child poverty, were **not only those living below the poverty threshold themselves**. She added that there are many people who are indirectly affected by this poverty for many different reasons. She agreed that the **indicators of child poverty available were inadequate** and that the figures available did not reflect the daily reality, what it really means for these children to be living and growing up in poverty. Children from better off backgrounds, for example, who wondered why there were other children around them who were badly dressed or who were obviously experiencing different things to them, were not going to learn much from these statistics. She felt that as adults, we might be prone to feelings of guilt when faced with children in difficulty but that this guilt should lead us to **confront the challenge**. She cited Janusz Korczak who said that people who thought it was tiring to be with children because they had to always had to physically lower themselves to their level were wrong because the difficulty actually lies in raising oneself to the height of their feelings and treading on tiptoe so as not to upset them. Ms Rubio illustrated this point with the example that as adults trying to build Europe, we should have to **raise ourselves to the heights of the hopes and ambitions of children who are in fact the future citizens of Europe**.

She went on by insisting that efforts be increased to **listen to all children, in all contexts**, to enable wider recognition of children as citizens in their own right, with their own projects and their own contributions to social cohesion. Ms Rubio felt that this approach would result in the building of **more common understandings and common actions**. She understood that this aim may appear to be too vague or over-ambitious but went on to detail some of the concrete ways in which it could be encouraged.

For example, she believed that the publication *Children in Europe*, despite its modest means, was contributing to the establishment of a **common vision on issues around young children in Europe** which takes into account the diversity of specific situations. She also cited the many different research projects that were being undertaken around children in poverty, children who had experienced trauma or had been mistreated, that all placed an emphasis on the importance of bonds, ties and links. **Worse than a lack of money for a child would be a lack of ties or bonds with other people**.

The **importance of creating links** also extended to professionals and to associations. For example, Mr Klein and Ms Rubio had met a few months previously and created a link that resulted in the working paper *Valuing Children, Valuing Parents* being covered in the latest edition of *Children in Europe*, well before the suggestion for a joint Intergroup meeting with presentations from both of them had been made. Along the same lines, it didn't seem possible to Ms Rubio that there were no links necessary between rich and poor or that a rich person in front of a fellow human being experiencing many difficulties could be content with the situation.

Ms Rubio concluded with a proposition which had already been mentioned at the meeting of the Family and Protection of Children Intergroup in May 2003. This was the **creation of a European Observatory to both diagnose situations and propose common tools to combat them**.

Ms Sudre referred to a point raised by Mr Klein regarding the propositions for the future and wanted to hear the reactions of the different associations present. As poverty is a major factor in social exclusion, how did the associations plan to **reach those alienated families** that exist outside the normal circuits?

Ms Zrihen added that this question was open to all the participants in the meeting and not only those on the panel.

Ms Tissier from **ATD Fourth World Colmar** responded by agreeing that it was an important question to which they devoted a lot of time looking for possible answers. One of the ways that they managed to reach and find these families was **through other families living in poverty** with whom they were already in contact. Word is passed on and they are often told that they should also meet with another family that is experiencing a lot of difficulties.

Ms Hermange asked if ATD Fourth World organised meetings with these families to try and help them out of their situation, much as a social worker would do, or rather concentrated on actions that were **supplementary to those of social services**?

Ms Tissier explained that if families asked them questions that social services could have the answer to, then ATD Fourth World would try and **act as a bridge** between them and the services that should be looking after their needs. They work to support families to gain the strength necessary to get out of their situation, with the help of social assistance for example. She spoke of the **Fourth World People's Universities** where people who have experienced extreme poverty but have got out of many of their difficulties can help and give advice to other families. They also invite professionals from different sectors to take part so that their can be a wider understanding of particular situations and **people in poverty can have their voices heard** on issues that affect their lives.

Ms Collot from the **Nid Movement**, which deals with **issues surrounding prostitution**, wanted to come back to the comment of Ms Rubio that poverty was about more than not having money. She felt that even though economic poverty was an important factor to consider, that it was necessary to go beyond it to look at **poverty of relations and poverty of affection**. She found that in this respect there were parallels to be found with prostitution which was often a symptom of other major social problems. Ms Collot agreed with the point that these other kinds of poverty were not adequately measured and that if observatories or study centres were to be created, that they should also look at these needs. Prostitution, for example, needed to be seen at the two levels: that of the person, the prostitute, the adult, but also at the level of the **child that had perhaps lived through major need and poverty**, that had grown into this adult. She said that it must also be taken into account that around 80% of prostitutes are mothers, many of whom justify their prostitution from the economic position of having to feed their children. The children can also be used as objects of blackmail to force women into prostitution and many women who turn to or are forced into prostitution **lose their children as a direct result**.

Ms Gayet from the Nid Movement told the story of an eleven year-old boy that she knew who was missing school because he wanted to follow his mother and find out where she was working as a prostitute. She also brought up the issue of **children that are born in prison** and questioned as to whether or not this should still be happening in this day and age.

Ms Hermange agreed that **poverty should not be measured in uniquely economic terms** but also in terms of relationships. She gave the example of Evelyne Sullerot who said that we should not speak about the homeless as 'SDF's meaning 'sans domicile fixe' but rather as meaning 'sans domicile familiale'<sup>3</sup>. This is also linked to the reasons why in the past more men were homeless than women, as traditionally women had more networks to fall back on.

Mr Lund from **Children in Europe, Denmark**, referred to the **Lisbon declaration** which called for the EU to become the most dynamic, competitive, sustainable knowledge-based **economy** in the world. He felt that it should instead be the most dynamic, competitive, sustainable, knowledge-based **just and inclusive society** because the tendency is always to focus on economic matters. He added that he prefers to speak of **children as citizens** and agreed that more research and statistics are needed on the situation of children, especially poor children. Mr Lund regretted the fact that the Danish government had recently cut funding to a Danish institute that provided this information about Danish children and worried about how in the future we would know about their living conditions. He emphasised that even though Denmark may be perceived as a rich country, that they **still had poor families experiencing many difficulties**. Mr Lund added that for him, *Children in Europe* was primarily about sharing information between people who are with children on a daily basis. In Denmark there are 50,000 educators or pedagogues who are in contact with children from all levels of society and who are working to give them a bright future as it is now well understood that what children learn in their early years can have great a great impact on their possibilities later in life. *Children in Europe* brings them different ideas and information on how to meet this challenge together and Mr Lund hoped that in the future there would be **more visibility and support for the magazine from the EU and national governments**.

Ms Cohen brought attention to the fact that in recent years, the UK had seen reductions in the levels of absolute child poverty but that the **problem of inequality** had not been addressed. She insisted that children can be affected just as much by living in a very unequal society and gave the example of research that showed the impact on long-term health for such children. Ms Cohen suggested that *Children in Europe* collaborate more with the European Parliament on issues such as child poverty, as the **Parliament was in a position to ask questions** for the reasons behind some of the statistics that Ms Hermange had quoted in her introduction.

She added that this was necessary because in the UK for example, child poverty was persisting despite the strong governmental commitment to its eradication. She felt that the **debate needed to be widened into other domains** and would benefit from a comparison of experiences from different countries. Ms Cohen offered the services of *Children in Europe* as a potential tool in this process.

Ms Hermange referred once again to statistics from the 2001 UNICEF report<sup>4</sup> that she had mentioned in her introduction for the benefit of participants who had missed the beginning of the meeting.

Ms Mony the Director of Information at the **Foundation for Child Education, Lyon**, brought an additional response to the question of reaching the relevant families living in poverty. She explained that the regional network of *Le Furet* brought together all kinds of institutions, training centres, co-ordinators of child poverty action groups and representatives of federations working on structures for parents. These were often in turn members of other associations which resulted in a **complex and wide-reaching network** concerned with the problems of very young children living in poverty. She felt that the publication *Children in Europe* was an important tool for this network and cited a **1996 edition which gathered together experiences on different methods of dealing with young children**, that she and many of her colleagues used on a regular basis. At the same time, she agreed that it was necessary to have many more agencies involved in the monitoring of these children and that the publication *Children in Europe* could also be a useful tool for them. She regretted the fact that the magazine was not exploited more by the European Commission and within the Member States.

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<sup>3</sup> 'sans domicile fixe' is translated as 'without fixed home' whereas 'sans domicile familiale' is translated as 'without family home'.

<sup>4</sup> Innocenti Report Card, Issue No. 1, June 2000, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy

Ms Zrihen encouraged the participants in the meeting to continue sharing experiences in this way as it was through this kind of network building, exchange and co-ordination that **new perspectives could be developed** and the support necessary for families in difficulty could be assured in the future.

Mr Klein responded with the example of many of the projects of ATD Fourth World that supported families with the most difficulties to **access the myriad of services and programmes in place** to help people in their situation. He explained that the continuation of European exchange over the next two years, in the framework of the EU funded project<sup>5</sup>, will be focusing on different ways that this kind of support has been practised. The objective is to understand why it is that very poor families are unable to access the very programmes designed to assist them, like 'Sure Start' in the UK for example.

He added that another level of the project will be to examine the many networks already in place to try and ensure that information is being exchanged at national and European levels. It will also be an aim to **introduce new participants into these networks**, for example parents themselves that are interested in knowing about the services on offer.

Mr Klein gave the example of the *Aide à la Jeunesse* child protection service in the French speaking community of Belgium. ATD Fourth World has been involved in a **dialogue group** working with them, that includes families who benefit from the services provided alongside administrative staff of the service, members of other associations and directors of local youth services etc. The aim of the dialogue is to **develop and improve the practices of the child protection services** so that they are accessible for those the most in need.

He also referred to the **importance of the relationships** that families in difficulty have or need within the local community which is another example of the need to build networks of support at a local level. These networks can help families have access to their rights and to services.

Mr Caudron shared some of the experience that he had gathered as Mayor of a new town in France over a period of 24 years. He agreed that it was important to have professional service structures in place that are relevant for people experiencing many difficulties however, he also emphasised the **importance of considering those people living on the margins**, those not covered by the statistics or who did not meet the criteria put in place to access these services. His impression was that society was willing to make relatively large amounts of money available to assist people in major difficulty and at the same time, invest in the **prevention of people falling into difficulty through the provision of public services**. Nonetheless, a look at state and local authority budgetary commitments showed that local authorities were being forced to raise the price of school meals, fees for summer camps and crèches, for example.

These kinds of measures resulted in the **exclusion of a number of children who would otherwise benefit from the social aspect of participating in these structures**. The price increases mean that only people in employment can afford for their children to access them and even though some might argue that the unemployed have more time to look after their children and thus don't need these kind of services, this is not necessarily the case. He gave this example because it related to services that are outside the major support structures under discussion and yet it illustrated an increasing phenomenon affecting people in poverty.

Mr Caudron also spoke of the **increasing problem of loneliness** and the fact that there are many people who live alone with their problems who do not know where to go for help or where to find other people. In his town, meeting places were established where it was possible just to have a coffee and a chat and meet other people. In all local communities and neighbourhoods there are those who do not participate in the social structures in place and who are living on the margins. This means that there are the major problems of poverty, social exclusion, solitude and isolation that are all having to be dealt with using limited resources.

Ms Hermange agreed with the emphasis that Mr Caudron had placed on prevention and on the increasing phenomenon of social isolation. She came back to the **role of the family in preventing this isolation** but acknowledged that there would always be individuals who did not benefit from this kind of support. On the subject of services to prevent people falling into poverty and exclusion, Ms Hermange said that in France, local authorities had the possibility to provide optional social services, such as crèches or school meals, that were paid for on a **sliding scale according to the income of the parents**. This meant that the systems were in place to permit access for the children of parents on low income. However, she did agree with Mr Caudron that there were **problems linked to co-ordination between local, regional and national authorities** that could result in people falling through the net and out of the system.

She emphasised that **early intervention** to prevent children with difficulties developing further problems was necessary. For example, there could be as much care taken to ensure the **psychological well-being** of new mothers as there is to ensure their physical well-being after the birth of a baby, and more co-ordination between social work and health professionals at this crucial time. Risks need to be identified before a crisis situation occurs.

Ms Hermange also asked what our responsibility was towards children from Eastern European countries, for example, that can be found begging on the streets and that **exist outside the system**. How can these children benefit from the services in place?

Mr Caudron added that even though systems were in place at a local level, the economic slowdown had nonetheless resulted in local authorities raising the price of basic services. He felt that they would continue to do this and prices would continue to rise for as long as people did come not come out and protest against such measures. He feared that the end result could be the abolishment of services like

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<sup>5</sup> Phase II, Trans-national exchange dimension of the Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion

school canteens and crèches and the creation of ghettos. Mr Caudron pointed out that even **lower middle class families were in a fragile situation** because of the high level of fixed costs and that even the slightest increase could result in them falling into poverty and losing their homes for example.

Ms Zrihen was obliged to conclude the meeting and thanked the participants for the exchange that had taken place. She felt that the meeting had been extremely useful and announced that the **next meeting of the Fourth World European Committee Intergroup would take place in March**. She also suggested that **another joint meeting between the two Intergroups** be envisaged some time in the future to tackle the questions that had come out of the discussion.

Ms Hermange agreed with this proposition.