



REVES proposals for the CoR opinion on 'Local and Regional Cooperation to Protect the Rights of the Child in the European Union'

REVES welcomes the initiative of the CoR regarding an opinion on 'Local and Regional Cooperation to Protect the Rights of the Child in the European Union'.

It comes timely in a period when an ever increasing number of children and youngsters all over Europe risk to be exposed to poverty, hindered access to education and school dropout - often linked to additional problems of social exclusion, drug abuse, violence and other challenges.

Moreover, it seems evident that the foundations that will be laid now for the protection of rights and personal development of children and youngsters will have a major impact on the future of our societies at local, national and European level, and the way they will be shaped by future generations.

In the view of REVES members, a European strategy on protection of the rights of the child has to apply to all children living on the territory of the EU, notwithstanding their actual legal status (measures extending towards other non-European countries and continents are welcome!). In a number of European cities and regions, more than 30% of the local population is composed of different migrant groups. Children and youngsters represent often more than 50% of the total migrant population. They will have, now and in the future, an important impact on the development of their cities and regions. Their well-being and integration into social networks, their possibilities to develop skills and capacities will be fundamental for Europe's future!

REVES members consider that local and regional authorities, together with other actors at local level, are best placed to identify real needs of different parts of the population and have important responsibilities regarding actions/policies that influence well-being and development of children. They therefore need to be considered as partners on an equal footing and be involved in relevant decision-making processes at national and European level.

This does not in every case necessitate new instruments for dialogue and joint co-construction of strategies and policies. However, tools such as the OMC will only be effective, if they properly integrate the local dimension (local action programmes, reports etc.) and facilitate exchange between different (vertical and horizontal) governance levels, which is currently still not the case. Moreover, a stronger dialogue between governments and civil society, including social economy organisations, and their joint implementation of programmes, is a pre-condition to reach the objectives set.

REVES welcomes the integrated (mainstreaming) approach the CoR wishes to be taken with regard to fundamental rights of children. Indeed, respect and promotion of rights of the child (which are as

such not in contraction with the rights of other parts of the population) is a basic condition for social cohesion and therewith also territorial cohesion.

REVES endorses the Committee of the Regions' demands for a better access to education and promotion of "a safe, comprehensive and beneficial environment for children development, in order for them to become full-fledged, conscious, socially responsible members of respective local communities, Member States as well as of the whole multicultural European society."

When considering education concepts and schemes, a multidimensional approach has to be taken, which would promote different kind of knowledge and capacities:

An important aspect here is to convey children, as already stressed in the CoR working document, their rights and opportunities to enforce them. This also means making them aware of their role as active citizens that may contribute to develop and improve living conditions in their neighbourhood/city/region/country etc.

For this to happen successfully, however, children should not be perceived, in the first place, as weak and helpless subjects, but as individuals able to express their needs and to contribute, in their way, to the development of our society.

Practices such as youth parliaments, implication of children in boards of organisations/agencies providing services for them, pupils' councils at schools, and other methods of participation, should be further experimented and disseminated (*see good practice examples below*). In a number of European member states this would mean, of course, to change some traditional schemes of local governance.

Local authorities, in partnership with schools and other local organisations, may foster children's sense of social responsibility, solidarity and cooperation also through other measures, e.g. by encouraging participation of children in democratic associations providing services/spaces/activities for children and youngsters, by promoting pupils' co-operatives/young co-operatives and other kind of 'mini-firms' run by children and youngsters such as they are currently experimented in a number of schools in cities and regions in different EU member states, or by allocating to children and youngsters (meeting) spaces which they can manage themselves. Such initiatives foster the aforementioned values while at the same time allowing children and youngsters to develop first (entrepreneurial /managerial) skills and take on responsibility for own projects at an early stage (*see good practice examples below*).

The European Commission should further re-orient existing programmes and policies in a way to make financial and/or technical support to innovative initiatives (such as those mentioned above) available.

The Committee of the Regions itself (*or a group of its members*) could set a good example by organizing, eventually in cooperation with the European Commission and civil society, an annual meeting of children and youngsters to discuss their concerns and listen to their proposals (this could be done, for instance, by re-arranging visits of groups of young people to the CoR and its members).

Finally, REVES calls on the Committee of the Regions and the European institutions to recognize and strengthen the role of the *local community* when it comes to safeguard children's rights. Children are shaped by their environment (and, in turn, they shape this environment). They need social networks and dialogue with different parts of the local community (parents and teachers alone might not be able to respond to all their needs and questions) in order to find their place and role in society. The

European Commission, in programmes linked to issues such as urban regeneration and local development in general, housing, social inclusion and others, should put stronger emphasis on strengthening these social networks between different parts of the local community.

A European framework to protect the rights of the child which would be based on the implementation, at local, regional, national and European level, of basic principles such as those mentioned above, i.e. dialogue, participation, partnership and community development, is indispensable. It is not only the rights of the child that would be enhanced by its proper application, but fundamental rights of all individuals, be they EU citizens or third country nationals.

Such a EU framework has to be based, evidently, on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which all local and regional authorities should commit to actively implement in cooperation with organisations of the civil society.

Good practice examples:

- *Participation:* In a number of cities in different European member states, children and youth parliaments were established and/or experimented in order to consult children/youngsters on policies that concern them directly (or are of concern *for* them).

To give some examples: In Finland, the national Youth Act includes clear provisions enforcing the right of children and youngsters to be consulted, for instance, on relevant local and regional policies. Municipalities set up aforementioned youth parliaments or other kind of councils, online participation systems etc. To reinforce access of children and youngsters to information, libraries, youth centres and specific counselling and information desks were established. Associations and other structures working *with* and *for* children and youngsters partially opened their boards and/or special work committees to them (the association Villa Elba in Kokkola, Finland, for instance, counts among its board members two representatives from the Youth Parliament of the City of Kokkola).

The Italian city of Pordenone put an old bus depot at the disposal of associations working with children and youngsters. The building was renovated in cooperation with the children/youngsters and following their ideas - it was transformed into a youth centre offering different kind of services. The centre is also managed by young people themselves (with technical support by the city of Pordenone and a number of associations).

- *Participation/Education:*

In the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and other member states, so-called Pupils' co-operatives/young co-operatives or cooperative associations¹ have been established and are experimented in particular in schools. These mini-firms are based on co-operative principles (e.g. participation in decision-making of each member notwithstanding the amount of his/her financial contribution, re-investment of profits in activities of the co-operative etc.). They are active in fields such as handicraft, small catering services, selling of products grown in the school garden etc. Apart

¹ "Schülergenossenschaft" in Germany, "Coopérative scolaire" (coopérative de classe/coopérative d'école) in France, "Associazione cooperativa scolastica" in Italy

from fostering entrepreneurial skills, these mini enterprises promote a sense of solidarity, responsibility and cooperation (another way of doing business) among young people. Moreover, they give children and youngsters the opportunity to 'experience' democracy and become active citizens (activities of the co-operatives are based on the decisions taken by their General Assembly, the board etc.). *For more information on these pupils' co-operatives you may also contact Co-operatives Europe: m.nodari@coopseurope.coop.*

- Children and the local community:

In a number of European cities and regions, local authorities already seek to promote stronger social networks between diverse groups of the population, among them children. Some rather known examples are multi-generational houses in Germany (promoted by a specific federal programme <http://www.mehrgenerationenhaeuser.de/>) and other member states, or other initiatives bringing younger adults, elderly people and children together (e.g. reading events at schools).

In the Italian city of Genoa, an innovative local urban regeneration programme provides business support for entrepreneurs that commit to contribute, in addition to their daily business, to various aspects of life of the local community - in this context, initiatives such as schools visits by migrant entrepreneurs providing children an insight in geography and culture of their country emerged, different leisure activities for children and youngsters were/are organized (often also in cooperation with associations) etc.

Brussels, 22 March 2010