Special place for children in EU external action

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PURPOSE: to establish an integrated approach to advance children's rights at the international level by using the different instruments available in the Union's external action.

BACKGROUND: the European Union is firmly committed to promoting children's rights and responding to their basic needs as an integral part of both its internal and external policies. As part of the process of honouring this commitment, the Communication "Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child", adopted on 4 July 2006, outlines a process for developing a long-term strategy for the EU on children's rights.

One of the initiatives identified in this strategy is the elaboration of an Action Plan on Children in External Action. The present Communication, with the attached Staff Working Papers on "Children's Rights in External Action" (see the summary of SEC(2008)0136) and on "Children in Situations of Emergency and Crisis" (see the summary of SEC(2008)0135) is intended to contribute to the development of such a long-term strategy in connection with the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the Council in December 2007.

CONTENT: the strategy outlined by the Commission in the 3 abovementioned documents (communication and working documents) aim to enhance the role for the EU in the global challenge to ensure the respect and promotion of children's rights together with identifying specific actions on the part of the European Commission.

Multiple challenges: the European Union is fully committed to achieving the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The majority of the MDGs are tied to the well-being and successful development of children and adolescents, including those on health, education, water and nutrition. They all relate to key challenges that put at risk the mental and physical development of children in many parts of the world. To date it appears probable that not all countries will be able to reach the MDG targets. Therefore, unless measures are taken to put children at the heart of development policies, the likelihood of achieving the MDGs will be significantly reduced. The communication also states that children's rights are closely linked to the rights of their mothers. The absence of sexual and reproductive health and rights of mothers and the lack of basic social protection coverage have direct consequences for their children's health and wellbeing. Thus, one third of all pregnancies are neither desired nor planned; half of all mothers giving birth world-wide are not assisted by a trained midwife and over 3 million children annually die from complications that arise during or immediately after delivery. Many others will experience life-long consequences from their mothers' illness during pregnancy or from unsafe deliveries. Over 300.000 children annually are born HIV positive. At least 10 million children die every year from preventable causes before reaching the age of five. Education remains a major challenge. 72 million children worldwide are not attending school. 57% of this total are girls. For those children fortunate enough to be in school, the quality of the education they receive is highly variable. 110 million children and adolescents are involved in child labour and are effectively deprived of the opportunity to receive an education.

A European response: the 2006 Communication "Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child" describes the process of developing an EU long-term strategy on the rights of children, including improved coordination, consultation with stakeholders, more efficient mainstreaming of children's rights and the assessment of the impact on children of existing EU actions. A number of children's rights in external relations are covered by existing specific EU development policies: for example those associated with education, health, employment, social inclusion, decent work and human trafficking. The protection

of children's rights is also given particular prominence in the EU's human rights and democratisation policy towards third countries, especially in the context of implementing the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict (2003). The Council recently adopted EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Childthat identifies as a first priority area the issue of combating all forms of violence against children. These Guidelines advocate the promotion of synergies and the strengthening of inter-institutional cooperation. They include initiatives promoted by the European Commission on the rights of the child, as well as reinforcing coherence between activities undertaken by Member States and those of the European Union's institutions.

The present communication also supports the development of an integrated approach to advance children' s rights at the international level by using the different instruments available in the Union's external action. It starts from the premise that satisfying children's and adolescents' basic needs is essential for the realisation of their rights. EU humanitarian aid provides a needs-based emergency response aimed at preserving life, preventing and alleviating human suffering.

There are also commitments relating to children in **specific geographical regions**, in particular:

- the Cotonou Agreement contains provisions regarding human rights and children's rights, including the active participation of young citizens in public life;
- the EU Strategies for Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific specify as priority areas, children's rights, child labour, education, health and basic services and the special attention necessary for vulnerable children;
- the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instruments make specific reference to children's rights (including child labour) as being among the areas of cooperation eligible for Community assistance;
- the EU Strategy for Latin America to ensure the respect and implementation of the rights of the child and recognises the need to generate specific public policies for the protection of children and youth and to break the cycle of poverty;
- improved cooperation between the EU and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the field of combating child trafficking.

The nature of the EU's response: the aim of this Communication, together with the accompanying working documents is to establish a framework for a comprehensive EU approach towards the protection and promotion of children's rights in third countries. Such an approach must be based on a holistic and universally applicable view of children's rights and be part of broader development and poverty reduction strategies. The specificity of the situation of children and adolescents in each country, sub-region or region demands that each circumstance be individually analysed to ascertain which of a number of possible instruments will provide the EU with the most appropriate response. In many countries, governments are unable and/or inadequately committed to promote and protect children's rights. Ensuring effective complementarity between the different policy tools and financial instruments of the EU as well as the EDF is indispensable.

The EU will maximise and coordinate the use of the available instruments in its external action as follows:

(1) Children and adolescents in development cooperation: in countries where financial and institutional capacities are too weak to guarantee children's access to acceptable living conditions and to basic services, the EU should make full use of development cooperation and poverty eradication measures designed to address the root causes of poverty. At the same time, the rights and needs of children and adolescents should be effectively mainstreamed across various national policies.

(2) Children and adolescents in trade policy: EU trade policy is formulated recognising fully the need to ensure that it is consistent with the protection and promotion of children's rights. In trade policy the promotion of children's rights is part of the broader agenda of sustainable development. In bilateral agreements the issue of children's rights is covered by labour standards.

(3) Children and adolescents in the political dialogue: in view of the central role of political dialogue between the EU and the national authorities, systematic consideration should be given in these dialogues with partner countries to the implementation of commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The same point should be made in EU actions in international fora.

(4) Regional and global actions: country-level actions will be supplemented by appropriate actions at a regional and at the global level addressing issues that have a supra-national character.

(5) Empowerment of children and adolescents: the EU should address the lack of capacity to meet obligations with regard to children's rights by empowering children and adolescents to play an active role in those matters that affect them directly.

(6) Children and adolescents in humanitarian aid: in countries on the verge of conflict, actually in conflict or emerging from conflict, children's needs are often unrecognised or ignored and their rights regularly violated. Humanitarian aid is also used in the case of humanitarian crises resulting from natural disasters where governments are overwhelmed, unable or unwilling to act. Humanitarian aid will address, inter alia, three crucial issues related to children during crises and emergencies: i) separated and unaccompanied children, ii) children associated with armed forces or armed groups, iii) children's education in emergencies.

The Staff Working Papers annexed to this Communication explore in greater detail the integration of the concerns of children in external relations and the situation of children in the context of humanitarian aid.