

A vertical black bar on the left side of the page contains a stylized floral illustration. The top part shows several thin stems with circular, textured heads of varying sizes, some resembling poppies or similar flowers. Below this, the bar is solid black, with the text '29th session' in white. Further down, a single stem with a circular head extends from the bottom of the bar. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs

29th
session

Final communiqué

16-17 June 2009
Vienna (Austria)



1. The 29th Session of the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs was held in Vienna on 16 and 17 June 2009 on the invitation of the Austrian government.
2. The Conference was opened by Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe and Mr Heinz Fischer, Federal President of the Republic of Austria.
3. The Conference elected Ms Christine Marek, State Secretary of Family and Youth (Austria) as chair and Ms Lotte Grepp Knutsen, State Secretary for Children and Equality (Norway) as vice-chair of the Conference.
4. The Conference was attended by Ministers, or their representatives, of the Council of Europe member and observer states. Participants also included representatives of Council of Europe bodies and institutions (Committee of Ministers, Parliamentary Assembly, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Conference of INGOs and various committees), international organisations, NGOs and independent experts.
5. The theme of the Conference was “Public policies supporting the wish to have children: societal, economic and personal factors”.
6. The Conference was divided into two sub-themes:
 - a. Why many Europeans have fewer children than they actually want: Societal and economic factors
 - b. Family-friendly policies: measures for an optimal framework
7. At the closure of the Conference, the Ministers and other participants expressed their gratitude to the Austrian authorities for the hospitality and excellent organisation of the event.
8. Following their discussions, the Ministers adopted the following conclusions:

We, the Ministers of the Council of Europe member states responsible for family affairs,

RECALLING

1. The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which guarantees the right to respect for private and family life;
2. The European Social Charter (revised), which states that the family as a fundamental unit of society has the right to appropriate social, legal and economic protection to ensure its full development;
3. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in particular its preamble stating that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, should be afforded the

necessary protection so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community;

4. The Warsaw Summit Action Plan, in which the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe renewed their commitment to social cohesion and children's rights;
5. The Political Declaration of the 28th Session of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Family Affairs (Lisbon, 16-17 May 2006) and the undertakings therein;
6. The Final Declaration of the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion (Moscow, 26-27 February 2009), which underlined the important role of the family for building confidence in the future and developing viable life projects, while stressing the need to reconcile private and working life;
7. The various Council of Europe legal standards relevant to the domains of family policy, children's rights and family law and the importance of promoting their implementation.

RECOGNISING THAT

1. The wish for a child is often postponed or remains unfulfilled because of unfavourable social and economic circumstances, which should be targeted by a crosscutting family policies approach;
2. All couples and individuals have the right to decide freely and responsibly on the number, spacing and timing of their children, to have the information and means to do so and to be free of discrimination;
3. The legitimate concern about low birth rates must not eclipse the fact that children are holders of human rights and not objects of adults' wishes. Thus all policies in this area must be informed of children's rights standards and fully integrate the principle of the best interest of the child;
4. Family today means a variety of living arrangements and children in Europe are growing up in different family forms. These may vary from one country to another and change during the child's life course;
5. Despite the progress achieved in promoting balanced participation of women and men in work and family life, women remain chiefly responsible for child rearing and caring for dependents. The current demographic challenges, however, cannot be properly addressed without integrating the dimension of gender equality in all measures adopted;
6. Many young women and men experience difficulties in establishing job security, reconciling work and family life and affording adequate housing, which might constitute an obstacle for them when planning to form a family of their own;
7. Childlessness is not always voluntary and an unfulfilled wish for a child may be a painful situation that deserves attention by policy makers;
8. Adoption is sometimes seen as a way to fulfil one's wish for a child. However, adoption is first and foremost a service for children and the rights and the best interest of the child, and not the wishes of adoptive parents, must be the paramount consideration in all decisions relating to adoption;

9. Family policy today requires a coherent and integrated approach by member states that derives from co-ordinated policy measures developed by local, regional and national authorities, social partners and non-governmental organisations;
10. The Council of Europe has a unique place that allows it to bring together the various aspects of family policy and the potential to develop holistic policies in this field based on human rights, including children's rights as well as gender equality, and the promotion of social cohesion.

AGREE AND UNDERTAKE

To work together in supporting the wish to have children in accordance with the principles and policy measures set out below.

I. Family-friendly societies and children's rights

Ensure that respect for children's rights and the child's best interest inform all policies and decisions affecting children. In particular, children's rights to family life and to grow up in a safe, supportive and non-violent environment should be guaranteed, notably by:

1. Providing the appropriate material, social, psychological and cultural resources that families with children need to fulfil their functions, thereby paying particular attention to families in difficult social or economic circumstances, families with children with disabilities, families with many children, single parent families and families with underage parents;
2. Recognising the importance of parental responsibilities and providing parents with the necessary support in practising positive parenting as a means of ensuring respect for children's rights;
3. Encouraging family and child friendly living environments in local communities and respecting the needs of children in urban planning;
4. Ensuring that the child's best interest is the paramount consideration in all decisions relating to adoption. Member states are encouraged to ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on the Adoption of Children (revised) applicable to national adoption as well as the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

II. Equality between women and men

Ensure gender equality as an integral part of human rights and as a prerequisite to sustainable family policy, in particular by:

1. Adopting measures aimed at promoting participation and combating discrimination of women and in particular women with children in the labour market;
2. Consider creating equal possibilities for both parents to obtain parental leave and encourage fathers to take up paternity / parental leave, for instance through the introduction of a period of non-transferable parental leave for each parent;

3. Encouraging the equal sharing of parental and other family responsibilities between women and men;
4. Integrating a gender equality perspective in all policies at all levels, including in the budgetary process, in order to take into account the needs and interests of both women and men.

III. Reconciliation of work and family life

Create favourable conditions for parents to reconcile work and family life, in particular by:

1. Creating conditions for accessible, affordable and quality early childhood education and care services and allowing for freedom of choice between different forms of childcare, based on the best interest of the child.
2. Adjusting, where existing, leave policies to care for children and other dependants to reflect as far as is possible the needs and wishes of families and children, and taking the employers' concerns into account;
3. Promoting with employers the need for, and benefits of, a family friendly work culture and policies that allow both women and men to reconcile professional and family life.

IV. Support for young women and men

Remove, where appropriate, social and economic obstacles for young people, who wish to start a family of their own, in particular by:

1. Providing advice and support to young people in their transition from education to the labour market and ensuring that they have equal access to work;
2. Consider the needs of young people for decent housing;
3. Creating the necessary conditions to enable young parents to pursue education and combine this with bringing up their children; for example, by facilitating access to childcare, while having policies to reduce teenage parenthood.

V. Family policy and the unfulfilled wish to have children

Be attentive to the painful situation of persons having an unfulfilled wish for a child, in particular by:

1. Providing social and psychological support to persons who are in distress due to involuntary childlessness;
2. Informing prospective adopters about the impact of adoption on their lives and providing the necessary regulations and procedures to secure that the paramount consideration in all adoption-related decisions is the best interest of the child;

VI. Coherent and integrated family policies

Regard family policies as a cross-cutting issue and promote mainstreaming of family and children's perspectives throughout national policies, in particular by:

1. Ensuring inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial co-ordination in all public policies that have an impact on families;
2. Fostering co-ordination and co-operation between the national, regional and local levels;
3. Actively promoting the participation of social partners, non-governmental organisations, parents and children in the policy making process.

RECOMMEND

To the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to:

1. Continue to promote the implementation by member states of the Council of Europe standards related to family policies and family law, in particular in the fields of reconciliation of work and family life, rights of children without parental care, gender equality and adoption;
2. Continue giving a high priority to promoting children's rights and mainstreaming its children's rights approach in all family policies;
3. Consider the feasibility of setting standards related to the rights and legal status of children being brought up in various forms of family settings, taking national legislation into account;
4. Consider the feasibility of developing initiatives that promote a philosophy of family friendliness among enterprises and other workplaces;
5. Continue to promote among member states policies to support positive parenting, good childhood, as well as the abolition of corporal punishment of children.