

Speech

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to appear at this forum. I am very proud my country has acceded to the EU Presidency and I wish the Czech Presidency every success. I believe that a successful Czech Presidency will also mean success for the Union in these bad times.

This conference deals with the principal question for our society: how to best support the family while creating the best conditions for our children.

All parents want their children to be well prepared for the tasks standing before them in adulthood. On various occasions over the last few years, the priorities of the EU and its member countries have been aimed in the same direction.

One of the ways of contributing to families and particularly children is by supporting the development of child care facilities so that each family can decide whether to take care of its children alone or whether the task will be shared with accessible and high quality specialized services. This is the task

we have to undertake for the progress and well-being of our children and it is unavoidable.

Research conducted by the Commission¹, the OECD², and UNICEF³ found that the development of child care facilities contributes significantly to the education of children as well as their personal growth. I will come back to this point shortly (1).

Recently, the European Union and member countries have repeatedly expressed their willingness for a common effort on this issue. The adoption of the Barcelona goals and their implementation shaped the political commitment. I will also return to this point shortly (2).

Today's conference provides an excellent opportunity to summarize the progress attained when implementing the Barcelona goals and to find out if there are any implementation gaps in order to (3):

- help families align their work and family life;
- develop more efficient employment policies.

¹ Literature review on the cost of raising children and the effectiveness of various forms of supporting parenthood. INED.2008 which will be available soon on the EC website.

² Early childhood services in the OECD countries. Review of the literature and the current policy on early childhood. John Bennett. Innocenti Research Centre. UNICEF. 2008.

³ La transition en cours dans la garde et l'éducation de l'enfant. Bilan Innocenti 8. Centre de recherche Innocenti. UNICEF.2008.

1. Child care facilities – beneficial not just for children

First of all, please let me highlight the benefits of childcare facilities for each family and child.

Ideology or economic performance is the question here. We must look at this matter from the perspective of children and their development as well as that of parents who want the best for their children.

The first benefit of childcare facilities from the child's point of view is increased equality. Childcare services provide equal support for all families and are valuable assistance, particularly for poor children and the children of immigrants, by opening doors to successful education and better job opportunities in the future. The development of these services is one of the best investments that society may ever make in the future.

Childcare services can also help to overcome social inequalities. As Professor Esping-Andersen noted, the education “competition” is half over by the time children start school⁴.

⁴ Esping-Andersen, 2005: “Should the competition be half over before children enter school, then it is clear that we must investigate what is happening during the preceding years.”

Children of parents who cannot alternate qualified educators and tutors will be unable to bridge the gap separating them and their peers from central and higher social classes. Price-affordable and universal childcare is therefore necessary for everybody to maintain cohesion in our society and for providing equal opportunities.

For the children of migrants, education is not only the way to social advancement but the opportunity to successfully integrate in the host country, which is a viewpoint that is increasing in importance in Europe because according to available numerical data we will have to depend on migrants to retain the demographical sustainability of our society.

Another benefit is the important role that childcare plays in preventing child poverty. The work of the Social Protection Committee clearly reflects this⁵: all member countries that have progressed in this field have improved their provision of childcare. Therefore, parents have more opportunities to work and increase their income. It's no secret we are going through bad times and this is the one and only way for parents to improve their standard of living and that of their children.

⁵ This work, particularly the report of 2008 devoted to poverty and better living conditions for children, began in 2007 in relation to the session of the Council in March 2006 where the member states were invited to adopt measures for reducing child poverty.

There are also other reasons for developing childcare facilities,
even if we ignore the perspective of our children:

- Childcare is beneficial, both from the point of view of an individual and society. Opportunities for individuals in life increase through better education and better developed social skills: both are obtained from experience as a member of a peer group in early childhood. Society benefits in general if its members are educated and well integrated.
- Childcare is necessary to ensure the equality of men and women. It provides both parents with equal opportunities of finding and keeping employment and developing their careers. If we really want women to have a choice of whether to work or not they must be able to rely on quality and price-affordable facilities.

2. The EU and member countries: continuous effort for childcare development

The European Union has been pushing for the protection of children's interests for many years. The decision of the Czech Presidency to include childcare in the agenda of today's conference supports the activities of the Commission and the efforts of all EU member countries over the past few years.

In 1992, the Council adopted a childcare recommendation⁶ that highlighted the importance of developing childcare facilities that are accessible, price affordable and high quality.

The Council also adopted main employment courses for the periods of 2005 to 2008 and 2008 to 2010 in which the development of these services was again requested⁷.

The restored social agency is the most current example of a commitment shared by all member countries. The restored social agency was warmly received last year in the Council

⁶ Recommendation 92/241/EEC.

⁷ As far as the commitments of the Barcelona goals are concerned, the Council requests the member states in the main employment courses in 2005–2008 and 2008–2010 for “*better alignment of job and private life and the provision of accessible and price affordable facilities for child care and for the care of other dependant persons*” (main course No. 18). The Council also requests the member states “*to improve the lifelong approach to work and to support the alignment of job and family life for which childcare must be ensured. A suitable reference indicator is the provision of childcare by 2010 for at least 90% of children over the age of three up to their entry to school and for at least 33% of children under three years of age*”.

session in Chantilly and it made investment in children and young people a priority.

3. Barcelona goals requesting childcare and employment policy development

Almost seven years ago, the member countries agreed in Barcelona on the importance of childcare and determined some ambitious goals. They agreed to ensure that official childcare is provided for at least 90% of all children from three years of age up to their entry to school and for at least 33% of all children less than three years of age by 2010.

The deadline will expire next year and the majority of member countries have already made great progress particularly with children. Despite this it will be difficult for many member countries to achieve the goals determined in 2002 although the number and quality of childcare facilities and their availability have significantly increased in the EU⁸.

It is now clear that thanks to the Barcelona goals, member countries have intensified their strategies to provide parents with the best childcare services available.

⁸ On average, 26% of children under three years old receive care according to formal provisions and 84% in the higher age group. If we look at the data for individual member states, only five member states achieved both goals. Three of them provide care for more than 90% of children from the age of three up to their entry to school, but not to younger children. Two member states provide adequate care to the youngest children but not those over three years old. Seventeen states – including all new member states – did not achieve any goal. In the Czech Republic, the numbers are only 2% for the younger children and 67% for older children.

- The Barcelona goals clearly help in improving the approach to employment for both parents including increasing the general employment rate and particularly the female employment rate. It should be mentioned that these two strategic goals do not contradict. We can achieve a high employment level, improved equality of men and women and have children who can fully develop their potential. Some member states achieved that: two of them – France and Sweden – are part of the three together with the Czech Republic.
- The Barcelona goals give women a better chance to enter the labour market and mitigate the gap between men and women. In March 2006, the European Council communicated this in the European Pact for Equality of Women and Men⁹.
- They also contribute to solving demographic problems by allowing Europeans to raise their children and have jobs, which brings them earnings and results within the good structure of society¹⁰.

⁹ Conclusions of Presidency, 7775/1/06/ REV 1.

¹⁰ The European goals for better alignment of job and family life were again confirmed in the communication of 12 October 2006 on the demographic future of Europe. This communication particularly stresses the need to create more favourable conditions for the demographic restoration of Europe.

All the member states have developed and approved the goals and these are now implemented. The European Union does not have any direct rights in this field but responded to the request of the member states and provided assistance through:

- The European Social Fund;
- Common monitoring of the progress of member states in implementing the Barcelona goals;
- Active support in exchanging best practices between member states.

4. More than Barcelona goals

The Barcelona goals are one of the aspects of modernizing society throughout the EU; however we must support a compact strategy. Please let me briefly summarize whether the strategies submitted by the Commission are heading in the right direction.

- In their first years of life, children need the maximum care from their parents. The Commission has proposed extending maternity leave, which would allow mothers to choose freely how long they want to be at home before the birth and how long they will stay home with their child. For

the first time, the issue of maternity leave benefits will be discussed at EU level and this may reinforce the efficiency of these rights.

- There are no assumptions about paternity leave stipulated in a legal directive but it may be discussed during talks about parental leave recently launched with social partners. Paternity leave is very important: any conflict between the freedom of women and their involvement in the labour market on one side and the interests of children on the other side is not because women abandon their children but because men reject the fair division of child care.

Conclusions

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference is a welcome initiative. It contributes to the discussion we launched many years ago and is very much needed. Our policies will continue to focus on the interests of children. We will make allowances for the benefits of childcare and think about the best services for all EU families.

All member states have expressed their common intention several times. I am pleased that we all have the common goal of giving each family the opportunity to work AND AT THE SAME TIME raise children. I am also pleased that the Barcelona goals have already contributed to definite progress in this field.

Today's conference is an opportunity to find new ways of implementing the Barcelona goals and of developing additional strategies to provide the best conditions for children and their parents.

It would be a tragedy to reopen old disputes again between fighters for women rights and advocates of traditional family models instead of taking a step forward.

We live in a different world today: we must find the right strategies for the new world where both men and women reach equal education levels and have identical desires for making their lives complete.

However, it is also a world where the transfer of social inequalities between generations can still divide society and take away the opportunities for many people that our modern

economy offers, make us poor in the long term and establish serious social instability.

Let us make this conference an opportunity to discover a better society for everyone.