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MHE Event at the European Parliament "Ensuring Mental Health in Youth in European modern Societies" 3 December 2008, Brussels

Opening speech by Malgorzata Kmita, MHE President

On behalf of MHE, I am delighted to be able to welcome you all to the third in our series of European Parliament debates. Previous meetings have explored issues of Social Inclusion in relation to Mental Health and Well-Being and their relationship to Work and Employment. Our meeting today considers Mental Health and Well-Being amongst young people in modern Europe.

As you will all be aware Mental Health and Well-Being constitutes a high priority in all that MHE-SME do; we aim to position Mental Health and Well-Being at the centre of the socio-political agenda through strengthening the position of European citizens through the recognition that wealth cannot be understood without reference to the concept of social capital which affirms that people constitute the real wealth of society. Therefore, a holistic approach to understanding wealth in its broadest possible sense which recognises the primacy of genuine human dialogue, communication and interaction characterised by respect and justice is essential in promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Europe.

We often think of children and young people as our future. However, if we concentrate solely on their future we forget that they have to live today in a world in which they inherit and respond to our decisions, values and hopes. Janusz Korczak, the great promoter of children's rights, said that "Children are not the citizens of tomorrow, they are the citizens of today". Korczak believed that children and young people should not be seen as the passive recipients of the world adults create for them but should be able to act and create the world of tomorrow and actively contribute to the socio-political reality of today. Youth is often described as being the period of "storm and stress". I believe that one of the reasons for this is to do with young people re-enacting attachments, the often underdeveloped and unresolved bonding with their parents and significant others which characterise their early years resurface as they attempt to enter and navigate their way through the adult world in which they find themselves confronted by a culture of individualism, materialism and consumerism which requires them to be very resilient in order to survive emotionally with respect for their humanity and authenticity. For many children and young people the development of personal authenticity and integrity which characterises positive Mental Health and Well-Being is often neglected or, at times, lacking in their formative relationships and experiences.

It can be suggested that all too often education systems, parents, faith communities and youth services, for example, miss out on ensuring that young people are provided with the necessary physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and moral resilience to enable and empower them to navigate the stormy days of youth. Many young people reach adulthood to find that they are acutely aware that they have missed out on forming significant authentic nurturing relationships

and attachments because, for example, their parents and others in caring roles were not able to be fully present with, and for, them and, due to a range of factors, the significant adults in their lives were not able to deeply nurture them lovingly and unconditionally. Some children have missed the positive experience of an extended family or other networks of social support, and have not experienced fully the joy which can arise from experiencing safe and secure environments.

Children who experience such social and emotional deprivation can come from a range of very different backgrounds. Some are from migrant families who have had to adapt to living in a new country and culture with the experience of learning a new language and social norms whereas some children are from middle-class families where, in some cases, material success can be regarded as being the primary goal of life resulting in a focus upon high educational achievement, career success and material gain at the expense of human presence, dialogue and respect. Some young people have been raised to value objects, gadgets and property as the way to real existence and their authentic selves have not been allowed to develop; they have, in effect, been socialised to value 'having' rather than 'being'. Such children can be regarded as experiencing emotional poverty at the experience of material prosperity.

I strongly believe that our upbringing introduces into our lives what can be termed the first level of exclusion by which I mean that if a child is not adequately loved and nurtured they will find living in the society extremely difficult and many will find it very challenging to live their lives without the aid of, for example, alcohol, drugs and other substances and experiences which are often perceived to offer some respite from the burdens of existence.

Therefore, in any initiatives and programmes aimed at creating meaningful and nurturing communities it is essential that we take into account factors such as, for example, the quality of the physical environments in which children live and are educated, the degree of awareness by parents of their children's needs together with recognition of the socio-economic frameworks and support systems required to ensure the development of a positive quality of life in as broad a sense as possible which respects the right of children to develop the inner strength and resilience which will stay with them throughout their adult years.

In some African cultures the word "Ubuntu" expresses all that is essential for a child to find his or her meaningful presence in the world: "I am because you exist". This recognition of the interdependence of humanity is too often missing from the ways in which Western cultures approach children and their upbringing and institutions charged with responsibility for care of the young can be regarded as all too often focussing on responding to the symptoms of deprivation in its many and varied forms with limited reference to the wider social context and sense of interdependence and interrelatedness which characterise human flourishing.

This has also led us to disconnect our humanity, our personal sense of self, our identities, from the wider context of our economic, socio-political and cultural existence. In terms of exploring Mental Health and Well-being such a limited perception of what it means to be human may lead to significant negative consequences such as, for example, suicide being the fifth highest cause of death amongst young people, that sixteen million young people in Europe live in poverty and that human trafficking of young people is rising. Even some child care institutions find that their conditions and dynamics are too volatile to provide a happy, safe and consistent upbringing for the children in their care as illustrated, for example, by the sudden and unplanned termination of nursery education provision such as that seen in the experience of the Happy Times Nursery closure in London in 2008.

That is why the development of the European Pact for Mental health and Well-Being is so important. The launch of the Pact in June 2008 has marked a monumental stage in galvanising political will and commitment towards ensuring that Mental Health and Well-being are fully present in the European agenda. Further European events in 2009, The Debate on Mental Health

and Young People in the Educational Context and The Promotion of Young People Participation at all levels in Creating Communities that Care will hopefully reinforce the message that young people are the citizens of today and have an active role to play in shaping their communities and the wider European Society.

It is important for the development of meaningful and creative educational and economic opportunities, social cohesion and inter-cultural and inter-generational diversity and dialogue to ensure that young people have a genuine part to play in working towards the creation of a caring, humane and fully participatory democracy from which they can derive a sense of meaning, purpose and shared positive values together with a trust in themselves and others. Investing in protecting children and young people from exclusion in its different forms can be a positive factor in developing genuine emotional flourishing and Mental Health and Well-Being.

It is also important to invest in families by strengthening them psychologically through strategies such as, for example, Mellow Parenting interventions and the Webster Stratton Model of parenting together with providing parents with the economic tools and resources and educational, training and employment flexibility to combat poverty, exclusion and social dysfunction.

We must also remember that, as all of us in this room either are young or have been young, when young people seek fun and joy in inappropriate ways, in ways that do not authentically promote authentic human flourishing, that much of what is termed anti-social behaviour occurs. Therefore, a properly funded strategy to ensure a good quality, safe and creative pursuit of life-affirming education, training and leisure which genuinely promote children and young people's experience of joy in life is resourced in a range of youth and community work settings.

It is positive and encouraging to see that the Social Inclusion Agenda, the Lisbon Agenda and the Four Pillar Approach to Fighting Poverty make reference to the importance of early interventions and the involvement of young people in creating their futures. It is also encouraging to see that the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child is gaining the momentum in our communities and it has done so since 1979 which was proclaimed as the International Year of the Child, Janusz Korczak Year.

Whilst the motion on Mental Health and Well-Being is going through the Parliament at present we must ensure that young people are given priority in creating the world based upon the values of dignity, respect, love and care, mindfulness, positive parenting and community support. For this to happen we all need communities which ensure peoples basic needs can be met without young people experiencing falling into debt, poverty and homelessness.

By adopting this holistic approach we convey the message that Mental Health and Well-Being is not defined by, and located exclusively within, the perspectives of the Health and Psychology professions and their ways of seeing and being in the world but that in a very real and deep sense it involves the recognition that the creation of communities are at the heart of social, economic and political interaction and engagement.

I would like to thank MEP Poul Nyrup Ramussen, and MEP Giovanni Berlinguer for making this event happen and for supporting MHE in bringing this important topic on the European agenda. I would also like to thank all MHE-SME staff particularly the Director Mary van Dievel for organising this event and preparing all the administrative support.

Partnership and cooperation is required at all levels in Europe in order to place Mental Health and Well-Being at the heart of the agenda to be developed for responding to the challenges and opportunities facing the world today. Mental Health Europe will continue to actively lobby, campaign and create through the Focal Points in Europe and through organising capacity building seminars, conferences and a Platform a movement for change where we can all play our part in

contributing to develop a better and just society where human costs are fully taken into account. If we truly want to create better Mental Health and Well-Being we must adhere to the values of dignity, humanity and respect at all levels including the socio-economic, political and educational.

I am very encouraged by the numbers of young people attending this event and I look forward to the continued development of strategies for improving Mental Health and Well-Being for children and young people becoming a reality throughout the European Union.

Many thanks; I will be happy to answer questions afterwards.

Malgorzata Kmita
President, Mental Health Europe