

**Welcome Address to the Federal Council of FICE International**  
**in Belgrade, Serbia, on 18 September 2023**

Dr. phil. Anna Katharina Schmid, FICE Switzerland, President of FICE International

Dear members of FICE International, dear Friends

Though a member of FICE Switzerland, I am writing this welcome address to our Federal Council in Belgrade (18 – 19 September 2023) in Budapest in Hungary. For more than 8 years now, I have been collaborating in a project with the Hungarian FICE member organisation NENESZ. Thanks to this project, leaders, staff and young people in youth homes in Switzerland and Hungary have been able to create many positive developments. A group of them from a Swiss home has said: “The collaboration with the Hungarian colleagues is good for the heart”.

Without FICE, this project would not have happened. I would not have met my Hungarian colleagues at a FICE Federal Council in Belgrade in May 2015. And we probably would have had less courage to bring leaders, staff and young people from two different countries together to jointly create and implement a project.

To me, this experience illustrates very clearly what is special and important about FICE!

FICE International was founded on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1948 in the Pestalozzi Children’s Village in Switzerland, not long after the end of the second world war in Europe. Much of Europe lay in ruins. Millions of children were displaced, had no roof over their head, had experienced terrible things. Some were returning from concentration camps.

FICE was founded by children’s communities and carried the name International Federation of Children’s Communities in its first years. Their main aim was to find out and collaborate on how to best work for and with these children. One such community, the Children’s Republic “Gaudiopolis”, was only about a kilometre away from the children’s home in Budapest where I am writing this message today.

In many of these communities, the children and adolescents participated actively in the organisation, and in some cases even in the running of the institutions, for example in “children’s governments”. This participation was as much product of the pedagogical thinking at the time as it was due to necessity. For example, Gábor Sztéhlo from Gaudiopolis wrote to the FICE founding assembly:

“The large number of children living together called for the organization of an autonomous regime, and this system has proved very good. Laws enacted by the boys themselves and by their councils are much more effective than the leadership of grown-ups.” (Sztéhlo, 1948)



*The Prime Minister of Gaudiopolis (second from left) and some of his electors.*

*From: <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/2016/38/budapest-staatsgruendung-gaudiopolis-kinder>*

In honour of these first children's communities who formed FICE, let me cite the names of the organisations that were present on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1948:

France:

- Children's Republic at Moulin Vieux
- Rayon de Soleil, Pommeyrol
- Swiss Home for Spanish Children at Pringy, Haute Savoie
- Hameau-Ecole de l'Ile de France, Longuel-Annel, France
- Cité d'Enfance, Charleroi

Hungary:

- Children's Town at Hajdúhadház
- Pax Social Settlement (incl. Gaudiopolis), Budapest / Pilis

Italy:

- Villaggio del Fanciullo, Cività Vecchia, Rome
- Città dei Ragazzi, Turin
- Scuola-Città Pestalozzi, Florence
- Giardino di Infanzia Italo-Svizzero, Rimini
- Convitta della Rnascità, Novara

Netherlands

- Children's Village of Kfar Jeladiem Ilianah, Apeldoorn, Netherlands

Switzerland

- Pestalozzi Children's Village, Trogen

Soon after the foundation, FICE was in contact with 80 Children's Communities in 11 countries!

At the time, in addition to ideas of “community” and “participation”, it was felt that the institutions should also provide “family life”. These three words led to much controversy in the discussions among the members of FICE in the next years.

Today, 75 years later, Unicef tells us that 43.3 million children worldwide are displaced by war and crises. More than 345 Million children worldwide live with a high risk of food insecurity. We all know of the needs of children and youth in our countries, and of the continued needs for developing the quality of child and youth care. The words Community, Participation and Family or Family Life still are important topics of discussion and debate.

Many years ago already, FICE widened its scope beyond “children’s communities” and accordingly changed its name. Foster care and kinship care and a wide range of further services in support of children at risk – such as the Safe Parks in South Africa – are just as much in our focus today.

What has remained the same is our main goal to work towards good quality of child and youth care – and towards “building a world where children can live” as the founder of the Pestalozzi Children’s Village in Trogen, Switzerland, Walter Corti, said (Corti, 2022).

When I was helping to put together our annual report for 2022, I became aware once again of how much good work the members of FICE do and encourage in their countries and internationally. But I also became once more aware of how much resilience, courage and hope children, adolescents and families, but also all those who work with them, still need.

Where do we get the strength and the hope from? We can gain much of it from our exchange, collaboration, friendship and solidarity among us FICE members, be it at International or National level. Most of all, I believe we can gain it from our direct collaboration and exchange with children and adolescents.

Walter Corti, the founder of Pestalozzi Children’s village in Trogen recommended that we should become students of the child, not its teachers. Not that children should rule the world, not that they should take authority at home. But we should preserve the children’s great vitality within ourselves and act in our world through it. He pointed out that children ask questions about everything, while we adults often have a much more closed mind. He felt that adopting the open perspective of children would help us adults become free to open our horizons, ask new questions – and hopefully find new solutions (Corti, 2022).

I am deeply grateful to all the many people – adults and children – who have come before us in the last 75 years of FICE and who inspire us to this day. I am also deeply grateful that several colleagues who have been active in FICE for many years still are active with us today, maintaining continuity but always with open minds and new ideas. And I am very grateful for all the new people who have joined FICE and become active at the International or National level. My thanks also go to all those who have documented and discussed the history of FICE in publications (Knöpfel Nobs, 1992; Lane, 2018; Lane, 1988; Lasson, Knöpfel Nobs, & Anglin, 1990; Mächler, no date; Shaw, 2008) – we will put several of them on the website – and to Emmanuel Grupper, Jim Anglin and the Editorial Board who are working on a new publication in honour of FICE International’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I herewith open our Federal Council. It includes a Members’ Exchange, followed by the continuation of our work on our three strategic topics, Quality in Care, Leaving Care & Empowerment and Task Force Ukraine “Hand in Hand”. May we do this work inspired by the commitment and achievements of our predecessors, and with the vitality, open minds and joy of children. Tomorrow, we will conclude our work with a small birthday celebration for FICE and a festive dinner together with our colleagues and friends from FICE Serbia.

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