



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Making social rights work for children

2018 Eurochild Report
on the European Semester

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policy making. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

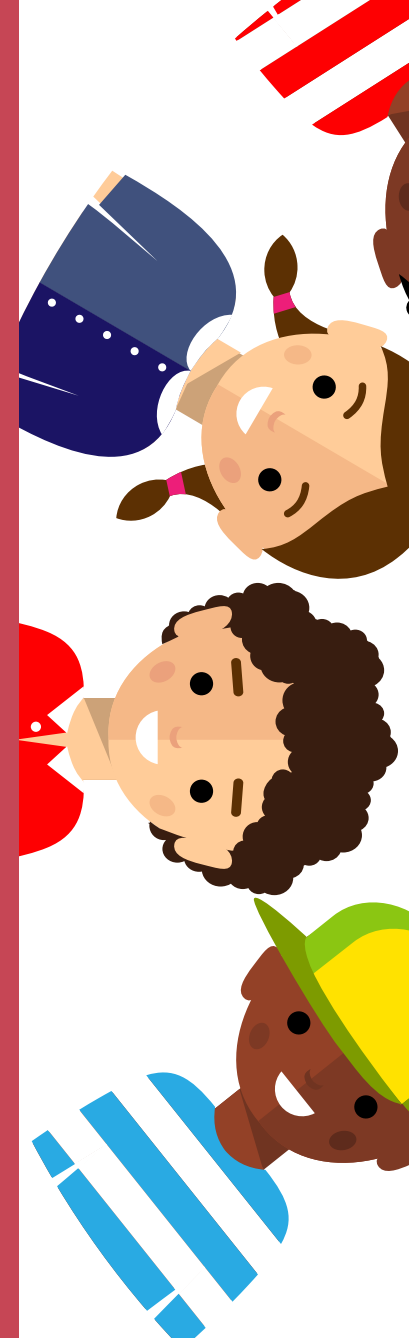


Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Eurochild AISBL Hallepoortlaan 27, 1060 Brussels, Belgium.
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83

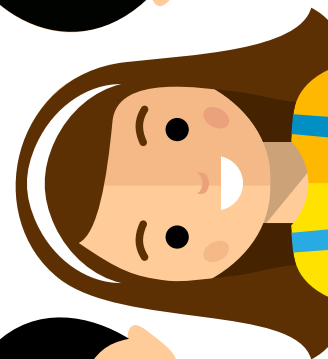
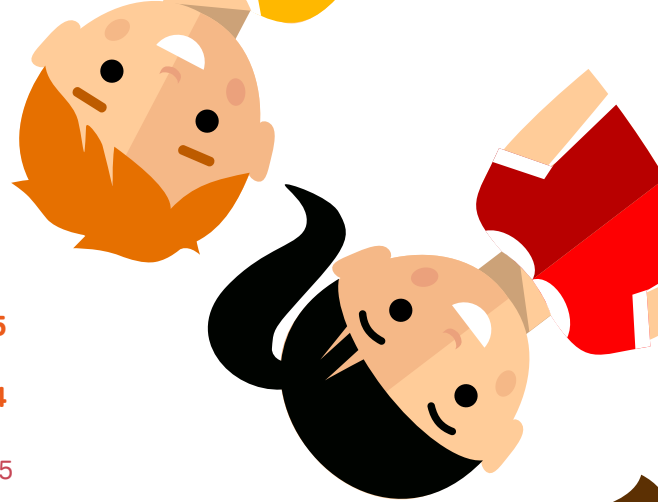
info@eurochild.org - www.eurochild.org

For more information, contact:
Réka Tunyogi
Head of Advocacy, Eurochild
reka.tunyogi@eurochild.org



Contents

1	Background and Context.....	5
2	Country profiles.....	14
	Belgium	15
	Bulgaria	17
	Croatia	20
	Cyprus	23
	The Czech Republic	26
	Estonia	29
	Finland	32
	France	35
	Ireland	38
	Latvia	42
	Poland	45
	Serbia	48
	Slovakia	51
	Slovenia	54
	Spain	56
	The Netherlands	59
	United Kingdom	62



Purpose of the report

- 1 Show Member States' progress in implementing the European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' and the 'European Pillar of Social Rights' (particularly Principle 11).
- 2 Evaluate the extent to which children's rights and well-being are prioritised within the 2018 European Semester cycle. For Serbia (an EU accession country), assess the impact of the EU's macroeconomic framework from the perspective of children's rights and child poverty.
- 3 Support Eurochild members' advocacy by familiarising them with the European Semester process and by providing a resource that can be used for advocacy at national and European level.
- 4 Bring a child-centric perspective to policy-makers at EU level who are responsible for monitoring and evaluating countries' progress towards economic and social objectives.

Acknowledgements

This report is based on assessments provided by **22 Eurochild members in 17 countries**. These are: Child Rights Coalition Flanders (Belgium), National Network for Children (Bulgaria), Coordination of Associations for Children (Croatia), Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Cyprus), Defence For Children International (Czech Republic), Estonian Union for Child Welfare (Estonia), Central Union of Child Welfare (Finland), National Federation of Associations for Child Protection and Apprentis d'Auteuil (France), Children's Rights Alliance (Ireland), Latvian Child Welfare Network (Latvia), Defence for Children (Netherlands), Polish Foster Care Coalition (Poland), Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia (Serbia), Coalition for Children (Slovakia), Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth – on behalf of the Slovenian NGO network ZIPOM (Slovenia), The Spanish Children's Rights Coalition (Spain); and from the United Kingdom: Children in Wales, Children in Northern Ireland, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Children in Scotland.

Thank you to all Eurochild members who contributed through the 2018 questionnaire; to the Policy and Advocacy Team of Eurochild, in particular Réka Tunyogi for overall coordination and supervision, to Karolien Celie for practical coordination and drafting, to Zuzana Konradova for drafting; to Anna Patton for proofreading; and to Emmanuelle de Castillon from Page in Extremis for editing and design.

1 Background and Context

1.1 The European Semester Process

The 'European Semester' process was put in place in 2010 to coordinate national efforts towards the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the Stability and Growth Pact (budgetary surveillance).

It is an annual cycle, starting with agreement of objectives (Annual Growth Survey), followed by country reports issued by the European Commission, Member State responses and Country Specific Recommendations adopted by the European Council (see next page). Most attention has been

given to fiscal discipline and budget policies. But the Europe 2020 targets recognised the need for a more integrated approach. Economic growth is expected to support other societal outcomes such as social inclusion, more and better employment opportunities, increased educational attainment and environmental sustainability.

The Proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in November 2017 brought high-level political attention to concerns of growing inequality in Europe. Its 20 principles and the accompanying

Social Scoreboard are intended to encourage greater scrutiny of Member States' performance in employment, social protection and inclusion. In its first year of implementation, the 2018 Semester Cycle was expected to be 'more social than ever'; indeed the Annual Growth Survey mentioned that the Pillar 'should be used as a compass' and that 'efficient and fair tax and benefits systems and effective, modern public institutions, facilitated where possible by government structures, play a key role in creating a balanced and comprehensive policy mix and should be prioritised'.¹

For organisations working with and for children and their families, engaging in the European Semester process provides an opportunity to understand and influence the broader macroeconomic agenda. Child poverty and marginalisation of certain groups of children have structural causes which link to a wide range of economic, employment and social policies. By bringing a children's rights perspective, organisations can also show how investing in children brings wider economic benefits to society.

1 Communication: Annual Growth Survey 2018, European Commission, November 2017: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-comm-690_en_0.pdf

Calendar of the European Semester

November: The European Semester cycle starts with the publication of the Annual Growth Survey, Alert Mechanism Report and Joint Employment Report in which the European Commission sets the policy priorities for the coming year and identifies, based on a scoreboard of indicators, gaps that need addressing in each EU Member State.

February: The European Commission publishes Country Reports with an analysis of the economic and social situation in each Member State.

April: Member States submit their National Reform Programmes (NRPs) for implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy and their National Stability and Convergence Programmes setting out their commitments on budgetary policy.

July to November: This is the 'National Semester' phase. Member States should integrate the CSRs into national policies and budgets for the next year. They can be sanctioned for failing to implement deficit rules and macroeconomic priorities.

May: The European Commission reviews the NRPs and proposes Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for each Member State (and for the Euro area), which are adopted by the European Council.



1.2 The European Commission Recommendation ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’

The European Commission Recommendation on ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’ (2013)² is a non-binding instrument outlining a comprehensive approach to ending child poverty and improving child well-being. The Recommendation is based on the recognition that

‘preventing the transmission of disadvantage across generations is a crucial investment in Europe’s future, as well as a direct contribution to the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, with long-term benefits for children, the economy and society as a whole’.

In the Recommendation, child poverty is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing income and other forms of deprivation. It takes the view that strategies to address child poverty must be based on the recognition of children as rights holders, on the best interest of the

child, and on equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged while ensuring quality universal provisions for all.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children calls on EU Member States to develop integrated strategies based on three pillars:

1. Access to adequate resources and reconciling work and family life

- Support parents’ participation in the labour market.
- Provide for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits.

2. Access to good quality services

- Reduce inequality at a young age by investing in early childhood education and care.
- Improve education systems’ impact on equal opportunities.
- Improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children.
- Provide children with safe, adequate housing and living environment.
- Enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings.

3. Children’s participation in decisions that affect them, and in cultural, leisure and sport activities

- Support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities.
- Put in place mechanisms that promote children’s participation in decision-making that affects their lives.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H0112>

The Recommendation encourages Member States to develop necessary implementation and monitoring mechanisms, and to make use of relevant EU instruments such as the Europe 2020 strategy or EU financial instruments to achieve the Recommendation's objectives.

Eurochild believes that investing in children and their well-being is not only a moral obligation but also an economic priority for the future of the European Union. By breaking the cycle of disadvantage, governments are investing in the future of our societies.

1.3 The European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed by the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the Commission in November 2017. It is comprised of 20 key principles that support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in EU Member States.

Principle 11. Childcare and support to children

Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.

Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.

Delivering on these principles and rights is expected to contribute to greater upward economic and social convergence, and more resilient societies. Several principles are relevant to the rights and well-being of children, including those addressing minimum income, access to essential services, work-life balance, education, and housing and assistance for the homeless. Principle 11, however, stands out as it specifically addresses childcare and support to children. It should be noted that the Staff Working Document to the Communication on establishing a Pillar³ specifies that 'protection from poverty' means that all children should have access to 'comprehensive and integrated measures as set out in the 2013 European Commission Recommendation on investing in children'. It further elaborates on the definition of 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds' (including Roma

³ Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document, Communication: Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights, European Commission, April 2017: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1494929441507&uri=CELEX:52017SC0201>

and migrant children and children with disabilities) and their need for reinforced and targeted support. The Staff Working Document also encourages Member States to tackle child poverty through 'national and subnational strategies that include targets, indicators, earmarked budget allocations and a monitoring mechanism', and to put in place national strategies on child participation 'to promote awareness on how to involve children in all actions and decisions that concern them'.

Indeed, delivery is the collective responsibility of Member States, EU institutions, social partners and other stakeholders. European funds, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), should provide financial support to implement the Pillar. EU legislative or non-legislative initiatives in the past year have already built upon this framework (e.g. the [Work-Life Balance package](#),⁴ the [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on high quality early childhood education and care](#)

[systems](#)⁵), and more such initiatives are expected. The Pillar is also meant to influence the European Semester process. According to Commissioner Marianne Thyssen, the Country Specific Recommendations of this year's Semester cycle have seen the greatest focus on employment, social issues, and education to date as a direct result of the Pillar.⁶

The Social Scoreboard

Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is monitored through the Social Scoreboard, which includes a number of indicators structured around three 'people-centred' dimensions. These are:

- **'Equal opportunities and access to the labour market'**, comprised of indicators related to fairness in education, gender equality in the labour force, living conditions and poverty, inequality and upward mobility, youth, skills and life-long learning;

- **'Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions'**, which covers income, labour market dynamics and labour force structure; and
- **'Public support / social protection and inclusion'**, which is composed of indicators related to social protection and poverty reduction.

By drawing attention to trends and divergence through its indicators, the Social Scoreboard is useful in terms of informing and reinforcing the social dimension of the European Semester process. From a child rights perspective, it has relevant indicators on poverty, early childhood education and care, and the impact of social transfers, showing (to some extent) Member States' progress in implementing dimensions of the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Its main added value is making effective links between the Recommendation, the Pillar of Social Rights and the Semester Process. Nonetheless, it does not provide the level of

detail necessary to understand the situation of children in a particular country, and must therefore be broken down by age where relevant and include more child-specific indicators, such as children's material deprivation.

The Pillar of Social Rights is an opportunity to give more visibility to policies directly affecting children. Eurochild is pleased to see that protecting children from poverty is one of the 20 principles. But all economic and social policies will impact the lives of children and families one way or another. For all children to grow up with equal opportunities, attention must be given to understanding how economic and welfare systems can stop disadvantage being passed from one generation to the next. One year into the implementation of the Pillar we see that the challenge will be ensuring that the rights-based approach of the Recommendation on Investing in Children is echoed in future initiatives, and that the Pillar is

⁴ Proposal for a Directive COM/2017/0253 final and more: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1311&langId=en>

⁵ COM/2018/271 final <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0271>

⁶ 'European Semester 2018 Spring Package: Commission issues recommendations for Member States to achieve sustainable, inclusive and long-term growth', European Commission, 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1226&newsId=91110&furtherNews=yes>

used to encourage Member States to do more for children's well-being.

The impact of the post-2020 EU budget

The EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) sets up the different financial instruments and the maximum annual budget that the EU can spend in different policy areas over a period of several years. By prioritising the policy areas in which the EU will invest, the MFF also drives policy-making in the EU. Through its multiannual perspective it allows the EU to carry out policies with a long-term vision, while ensuring predictability through financial programming and budgetary discipline. The current MFF runs until 2020 and the next framework is (at the time of writing this report) under discussion in EU institutions.

Based on the European Commission's proposal for the post-2020 MFF of 2 May 2018 and

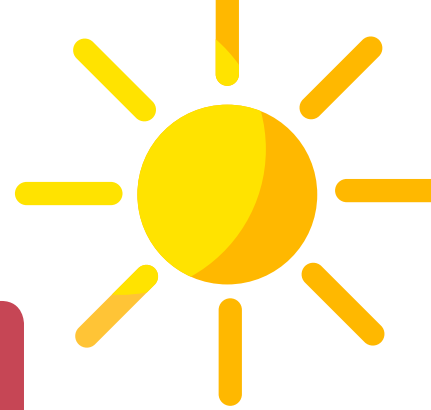
the subsequent funding instrument proposals,⁷ Eurochild sees some opportunities for investing more in children in Europe through the EU's next long-term budget. Despite decreasing available resources across the board, including for instruments benefiting children, the European Commission allocated the largest percentage of the budget to 'Cohesion and Values' (34.6%), which addresses 'economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU', with the European Social Fund + (ESF+) specifically set aside to support the implementation of the Pillar with a budget of €101 billion. This pot of funds includes the ESF, the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), and the EU Health Programme.

It is Eurochild's hope that links between the Pillar and EU cohesion policy result in increased available funding, particularly for tackling child poverty. Within this context there is potential for ensuring that Member States put in place

ambitious national strategies on poverty reduction and social inclusion which include specific actions for tackling child poverty – as required by the draft funding regulations; and that delivery of these strategies is monitored through the European Semester and backed up by sufficient funding both from EU and national resources. It is also important for Eurochild that the emphasis on child protection reforms and the transition from institutional to family and community-based care is maintained, and in some places even strengthened and expanded within the next MFF.

With the Europe 2020 strategy reaching its end, there would be logic in putting more emphasis on a more social Europe and references to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, despite the fact that the EU has committed to the 2030 Development Agenda, the SDGs have not been strongly reflected in the MFF proposal as a whole.

⁷ Communication: A Modern Budget for a Union that Protects, Empowers and Defends; The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, European Commission, 2 May 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2018%3A321%3AFIN>



1.4 Recommendations

1. Put social goals on a par with the economy and employment

Thanks in part to the European Pillar of Social Rights, the 2018 European Semester was perhaps the most 'social' to date. However, Eurochild members still assess the CSRs and Country Reports as being driven by goals of fiscal discipline and economic growth, and failing to take a holistic perspective of a country's sustainable progress.

Giving increased weight to the Social Scoreboard in the overall analysis of Member States' performance can help to redress this balance.

The Social Scoreboard and common indicators measured by Eurostat help to monitor important social trends over time and between countries, for example child poverty, early school

leaving, or childcare enrolment. But Eurochild members also believe more can be done to make better use of existing data and to develop new indicators which will give a more complete picture of children's situation and better guide policy responses. The Country Reports would also benefit from more in-depth analysis of social policies, - for example around gaps in delivery, worrying trends, assessment of ongoing policy reforms and the negative impact of recent policy measures – which could be achieved through better involvement of national stakeholders.

Correct the imbalance: Give the Social Scoreboard the same weight as the macroeconomic scoreboard to ensure the European Semester process is balanced in its analysis and recommendations.

A message from the past:

“ Strengthen the social dimension of macroeconomic governance ensuring it supports investment in children”

Eurochild report on the European Semester 2016

A
message
from the
past:

“The European Semester should monitor how Member States are delivering on tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being”

Eurochild report on the
European Semester 2015

2. Make children an explicit and priority focus of the Semester

All Eurochild members involved in assessing the impact of the European Semester in their country concluded that inadequate attention is given to the situation of children. Even if child poverty is often recognised as a problem, the EU is failing to use the tools available in the European Semester to remind Member States about their commitment to the Recommendation on Investing in Children and the gaps in its delivery.

We therefore recommend that the Country Reports dedicate a specific section to investing in children. We would also like to see more recognition of the impact of economic or labour market policies on children and families, in particular the most disadvantaged.

Ongoing efforts to strengthen the links between the European Semester and cohesion policy offers an important opportunity. As a condition of spending EU structural and investment funds, Member States are required to have national strategies for poverty reduction and social inclusion. Within this framework there should be a specific focus on children and families. We welcome the Commission's proposal to retain this requirement in the next funding period and call for it to be effectively and regularly monitored to ensure compliance and to facilitate flow of EU funding towards these objectives.

Use Country Reports to regularly monitor policy development in line with national strategies on poverty reduction and social exclusion – the implementation and regular monitoring of which is required by the enabling condition for cohesion policy instruments in the MFF 2021-27!

A
message
from the
past

3. Make the Semester process more transparent and inclusive

All Eurochild members involved in our analysis told us that influencing the European Semester at national level is very difficult, if not impossible. We believe this is a missed opportunity. More and better engagement of civil society will improve understanding of social challenges and contribute to better policies. It also means the EU cannot effectively harness the full potential of the European Semester process to influence policy change at national level, because of the lack of ownership. Furthermore, the voices of children and young people are often absent; they should be consulted when making decisions related to the European Semester process.

Both national governments and the European Commission should give more clarity and guidance on when and how civil society can feed into the European Semester process. Eurochild recommends that the European Commission develop guidelines for Member States on stakeholder engagement. The roles of European Semester Officers in terms of outreach and consultation with civil society also needs to be reinforced, possibly by designating one Officer responsible for liaison with civil society.

The European Commission should issue and make public guidelines on stakeholder consultation in the Semester. These should be addressed both to European Semester Officers and to governments.

“Engage in meaningful and ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations”

Eurochild report on the European Semester 2016

2 Country profiles



CSRs country specific recommendations
ECEC early childhood education and care

Belgium*

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Belgium should address high levels of inequality and child poverty by ensuring that the best interest of the child is considered at every level of policy and decision-making."

(*) The answers for this country profile cover only Flanders and are not all representative of other regions in Belgium.

Respondent organisation:
Child Rights Coalition Flanders



11.35 millions total
22.5% under 19 yrs
5.5% under 4 yrs

Population

8.9%

Early school-leavers
rate

22%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

Due to the complex devolved political structure in Belgium, respect for the rights of the child varies considerably depending on the political level: federal level, community level, regional or local level. There is a lack of coherent measures and effective coordination between the different levels of administration. The various

education systems co-existing in the country have increased the risk of inequality and discrimination, which should be highlighted in Semester documents on Belgium. Indeed, while the 2018 Country Report does pick up on the need to 'ensure that the most disadvantaged groups, including people with a migrant background, have equal

opportunities to participate in quality education, vocational training', these indicators and the efforts listed do not necessarily address the problem fully. For example, reforming secondary school education to ensure it meets the demand of the labour market will not reduce inequality or school drop-out rates alone. Furthermore,

cooperation and coordination between and among administrative levels is not mentioned. Child Rights Coalition Flanders thinks there should be more investment in the support, schooling and participation of children from disadvantaged families at all levels of government, and that education should be free until the age of 18 in the whole country. Furthermore, efforts are needed to decrease inequality of pupils in schools and ensure that the education system is inclusive of children of all backgrounds. The Country Report rightly picks up on this problem, as well as on the high percentage of those not in education, employment or training (NEET). However, these points are missing from the Country Specific Recommendations, as are concrete suggestions for tackling them in a unified way.

The Belgian State should ensure respect for the rights of every child in

the country by overcoming political barriers and supporting the policy of 'best interest of the child' at all political levels, in every policy and legislative initiative. Furthermore, it should promote a national political responsibility for implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the country and push for higher budgets for children's rights implementation and for collection of less fragmented data. Indeed, these will be necessary to tackle the worrying levels of child poverty in Belgium. Approximately 15% of Belgian citizens live below the national poverty line; child poverty keeps increasing. The situation is most critical in Brussels, where four out of ten children live in poverty. Though growing up in poverty has been proven to have a huge negative impact on a child's life, very few policy measures tackle the issue in Belgium. Some measures have even exacerbated the problem, such as cuts in social welfare

benefits, increasing living costs, or a tax system that does not benefit vulnerable families – unfortunately, this is not mentioned in the Country Report or the Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) for Belgium. More initiatives will be necessary – beyond just a change in the child allowance system – to improve the situation of families in need.

Child Rights Coalition Flanders therefore demands that Belgium drafts priority budget lines regarding the most vulnerable children, and strengthens the social security system and family allowances, in particular for families living in poverty throughout the country. Minimum allowances and incomes must exceed the poverty threshold.

The continual shortage of social housing in Belgium and the government's failure to meet its own objectives for building extra social housing also contribute to

child poverty across the country. The private rental market is a heavy financial burden on poor families, and since energy costs have tripled over the past years, many more families are in debt. There is a need to invest in social housing in the near future so that every child has a safe and healthy home.

Fortunately, there have been efforts to increase availability of childcare in Belgium, but lack of capacity or high prices still make childcare inaccessible for more than half of Belgian children. Beyond the implications for gender equality, the lack of quality early childhood education and care has a negative impact on a child's development which can impede their chance for equal opportunities in the future. As such, Child Rights Coalition Flanders recommends that the Belgian State invest in flexible and affordable child care, including for parents who are unemployed.

Bulgaria

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Bulgaria should take action to

- 1) apply the multidisciplinary approach to tackle child poverty rather than the sectorial one which currently dominates the work of public authorities, and
- 2) adopt a National Strategy for the Child and the Family to outline and integrate all the policies of the different ministries and agencies."

Respondent organisation:
National Network for Children
Bulgaria (NNC)



7.1 millions total
18.4% under 19 yrs
4.6% under 5 yrs

Population

12.7%

Early school-leavers
rate

41.6%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

The main challenge for Bulgaria today is the development and adoption of a state policy which targets parents and families and outlines clear objectives, actions and monitoring systems in all areas affecting children's rights and well-being. NNC emphasises that access to adequate financial support for all children and their parents should

exist alongside access to well-coordinated and integrated services covering nutrition, health care, early cognitive stimulation, inclusive education and parental literacy. This type of complex reform should be subsequent to the minimum income scheme revision highlighted in Bulgaria's 2018 Country Specific Recommendations (CSR). The key

ministries and agencies, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Education and Science, and Ministry of Justice, as well as the Agency for Social Assistance and the State Agency for Child Protection, lack a common and shared understanding of 'integrated services' regulation, which leads to ad hoc decisions

taken case by case and a lack of sustainability of services run within pilot projects. This poses questions around the effectiveness and efficiency of these policy efforts and investments.

Child poverty

In Bulgaria, more than 40% of children aged 0-17 live in poverty or social exclusion. This is a much higher proportion than the EU average of 25.8%. Indeed, poverty affected nearly 80,000 children more in 2017 than the previous year. Single-parent families (47.4%) and families with three or more children (70.5%) are at the highest risk of living in poverty in Bulgaria.

Despite the introduction of new types of social payments - and an increase in existing ones, such as monthly allowance for children with disabilities - no other strategic measures have been implemented to tackle children's social deprivation and its consequences. Cash transfers in Bulgaria have proven inefficient as these do not guarantee

children are safe from the threat of poverty and social exclusion. Between January and September 2017, 278 children were taken out of families and placed in alternative care due to family poverty. In total, it is believed that around 1,100 children who have been in care for a longer period of time in Bulgaria are in care at least partially because of poverty. The separation of children from families is a violation of one of the principles of the United Nations Children's Alternative Care Guidelines, namely that the State should ensure that poverty alone can not be a major reason for children to be taken out of the family.

NNC points out that Bulgaria has not progressed in children and family policies in recent years. Despite constant changes in the social, educational and health systems, integrated policies towards families and children are a huge challenge for the Bulgarian authorities. This has emerged as a lasting trend and is leading to a delay in key reforms in child welfare. Similarly, the Action Plan 2017-2018 for implementation of the National Poverty Strategy

and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 duplicates measures and activities and ignores proposals from different stakeholders. Out of 30 recommendations on children's well-being proposed by NNC, only two were accepted¹. The low state expenditure on social affairs – 36% of GDP, compared to the EU average in 2017 of 46% – indicates that pressing social and economic needs receive only limited resources. To combat its poverty levels, the European Commission has recommended that Bulgaria, via CSRs, introduces a regular and transparent revision scheme for the minimum income and improves its coverage and adequacy. This would be a highly positive move – however, according to NNC, is only one dimension of the overall reform needed to actively tackle poverty in Bulgaria.

Alternative care

Bulgaria has made significant progress in the de-institutionalisation of children's homes. There has been an 80%

decrease in the number of children placed in institutional care between 2009 and 2017: from 7,587 children in 2009, to 979 children eight years later. EU funds catalysed this change from institutional to community-based care, but this certainly would not have been achieved without national political commitment. Nevertheless, according to NNC, the sustainability of this process should be secured with continuous national investments, targeted innovations, a special focus on vulnerable groups (such as children with disabilities), and a commitment to minimising differences between regions. Monitoring the implementation of deinstitutionalisation reforms is also necessary to guarantee that good quality services are provided to all children in out-of-home care.

Education and health care

Although recent measures aim to modernise the education system, challenges remain. Educational outcomes are low and strongly

1 Recommendations are included in the 'Report card 2018: what is the average government score on childcare?' annual report 2018 prepared by NNC.

influenced by socioeconomic status. Early school leaving rates are high, and kindergarten fees contribute to an unequal start in education. Integration of Roma children remains a major challenge. A mechanism to identify out-of-school children has been established, but measures to improve school attendance and retention are still limited. The same is noted by the European Commission in its CSRs, which recommend that the Bulgarian government improves provision of quality, inclusive mainstream education, particularly for Roma and other disadvantaged groups.

Access to healthcare is limited by low and uneven distribution of resources. Public healthcare expenditure is very low, resulting in a high proportion of non-reimbursed medical expenditure. There are major district-level differences in the distribution of doctors, and the low number of paediatricians and nurses remains a problem. Despite improvement in recent years, the number of Bulgarians reporting problems with accessing healthcare is much higher than the EU average. CSRs also emphasise that in line with the National Health Strategy

and its action plan, Bulgaria should improve access to health services, including by reducing out-of-pocket payments and addressing shortages of health professionals.

Civil society's role

NNC believes that Bulgaria should prepare new policies and legislation which introduce a National Strategy for the Child and the Family, outlining all policies of the relevant ministries and agencies. Other legislation that should be either adopted or revised includes the Child and Family Act, the new Social Services Act, and a Law on diversion and implementation of educational measures for juveniles. As EU funds are a main vehicle for social programmes in Bulgaria, NGOs should also play a bigger role in the programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of such funds.



Croatia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Croatia should take action to create an integrated policy strategy to ensure that all children aged 0-3 have access to quality early childhood education and care. This strategy should entail concrete goals, monitoring systems, and a long-term investment plan, with the aim to prevent inequalities early in life."

Early childhood development

Croatia has one of the lowest rates of young children aged 0-3 attending formal early childhood education and care (ECEC). Regional disparities are high and persistent, and children of low-skilled parents

are especially affected. According to the European Commission's 2018 Country Report on Croatia 2018, any progress will be difficult in the absence of a major reform around the ECEC financing system and the distribution of competences between central and sub-national government levels. The Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC)


is pushing for a complex reform with adoption of a national strategy for ECEC. This should entail clear and measurable indicators and be supported by investment to balance regional disparities and to prevent the trans-generational transmission of poverty, social exclusion and unequal opportunities.

Respondent organisation:
**Coordination of Associations
for Children (CAC)**



4.15 millions total
19.9% under 19 yrs
4.6% under 5 yrs

Population

3.1% 
Early school-leavers
rate

26.6% 
Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion (2016)

Croatia belongs to a set of countries identified by the European Commission as having the lowest rate of participation of children in ECEC. According to EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC), the percentage of children between the ages of 0-3 in formal ECEC was only 17.1% in 2014, 11.8% in 2015 and 15.7% in 2016.¹ The percentage of children between three years old and the minimum compulsory school age attending ECEC was only 41.2% in 2014, 52.9% in 2015 and 51.3% in 2016. These figures are well below the EU average of 94.8%.²

Noticeable within this data are significant regional disparities. For example, in the city of Zagreb, 91% of children aged 3-5 attended some form of ECEC in 2014, whereas only 22% of children did so in the Brod-Posavina county. Constraints for the achievement of quality ECEC also include: shortage of staff (including professional specialists such as psychologists or speech therapists), rigid working hours

which are inconsistent with parents' needs, and high costs for parents, which vary from around 7% of the average net salary in Zagreb to 15.8% in the Krapina-Zagorje county. As kindergartens are under the responsibility of local authorities, there is no national policy to address these regional differences. ECEC participation rate is extremely low in less developed and poorer counties, where there is also very low participation of women in the labour market. Indeed, there is a vicious circle of disadvantage, as kindergartens' enrolment policies favour employed parents – but parents often need childcare before they can commit to a job. This clearly discriminates against single-parent households.

The authorities announced plans to increase participation in ECEC to 95% by 2020. However, as established in Croatia's 2018 Country Report, achieving this goal will be difficult in the absence of a major reform of the ECEC financing system and the distribution of

competences between central and sub-national government levels. CAC agrees with this statement, having seen that the recently-drafted Demographic Programme lacks concrete, comprehensive and integrated measures to make any significant positive change which might aid children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Furthermore, there is a significant shortage of services aimed at strengthening parental skills in Croatia – a crucial aspect of ECEC. Poorer regions are particularly deprived of these services and assistance. Currently, most programmes for parents of children with disabilities, children with behavioural problems and Roma children are provided by NGOs who are dependent on insecure project-based funding.

Poverty and social exclusion

Based on Croatia's 2018 Country Report, the rate of those at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Croatia declined in 2016 – but remained high, affecting 27.9% of the population, compared to the EU average of 23.5%. Furthermore, the percentage of the population living in overcrowded households was more than double the EU average. The Croatian Bureau of Statistics also found that regional disparities are high and persistent, with at-risk-of-poverty rates reaching over 40% in many eastern and central municipalities, as well as in rural areas. Particularly affected are children of low-skilled parents. Only 2.9% of children of high-skilled parents were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared to 73.2% among children of low-skilled parents.

¹ Report: On the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the "Barcelona objectives"), European Commission, May 2018, Available: <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8785-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

² These data are well below Barcelona targets and EU-28 figures of 30.3% in 2015, as well as Education & Training 2020 benchmarks requiring at least 95% of children from 4 to compulsory school age participating in early childhood education.

Healthcare and justice

The Croatian public healthcare system does not secure good quality healthcare for children due to a lack of paediatricians – even in urban areas. There is also a lack of public financing for health interventions outside of Croatia in cases when desired experts or healthcare equipment are not available in the country. Furthermore, CAC notes that public health insurance coverage for people affected by rare diseases is inadequate. Unfortunately, none of these issues are addressed either in Croatia's Country Report or the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) of 2018.

The law on the Ombudsperson for Children states that the Ombudsperson can be replaced if Parliament rejects his or her Annual Work Report. CAC believes this represents a constant threat to the autonomy of one of the most important bodies for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Croatia.

European dimension

Reducing child poverty and social exclusion is directly related to children's rights and well-being. CAC therefore suggests incorporating a separate section on children rights in Country Reports – this should then be reflected in the CSRs. This would enable analyses and an impact assessment of the European Commission's Recommendation on 'Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage' on national policies and actions. CAC found the Social Scoreboard useful in the Country Reports because it highlighted one aspect of early childhood; but noted, however, that the other Barcelona target³ – enrolment of children in ECEC from four years old to compulsory school age – is missing.

CAC also proposes that representatives from civil society organisations and public authorities should cooperate more strategically in the framework of the European Semester to address current social challenges. Collaboration should go beyond national stakeholders

and involve also international organisations who can share their experience and good practice. This type of initiative would require a framework to facilitate cooperation, as well as considerable financial support for NGOs to build their capacities and enable their effective participation.

3 Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council, March 2002, Available: http://ec.europa.eu/invest-in-research/pdf/download_en/barcelona_european_council.pdf

Cyprus

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Cyprus should take action to
1) conclude the long-pending reform of the social protection system to address children's needs and eliminate child poverty and exclusion, and
2) improve the education system, including curricula, from an early age to ensure that education policies are not seen merely as a means for entering the labour market but as the right of a child and an investment in their development."

Children's policies and policies affecting children do not appear to be a government priority in Cyprus. Despite laws having been passed and Conventions ratified, implementation is lacking and children's issues remain stagnant.

Respondent organisation:
Pancyprian Coordinating
Committee for the Protection and
Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)



855,000 total
22.2% under 19 yrs
5.5% under 5 yrs

Population

8.6%

Early school-leavers
rate

29.6%

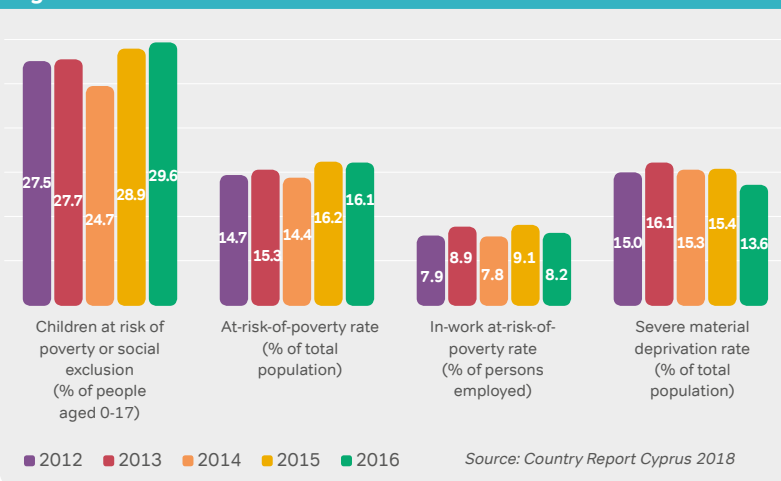
Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

Child poverty

Social problems persist in Cyprus. Particularly worrisome is the lack of progress in the reform of the social protection system, which was supposed to be concluded by 2015. This planned reform includes a new Law on Children to replace the one that has been in place since 1956.

The current law has been amended several times (in 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2013 and 2014) and is complemented by different laws seeking to protect children, such as the 'Violence in the Family Law' and the 'Corporal Punishment Law'. While initiatives to protect children are welcome, this approach is fragmented and ineffective. The new

Figure 1



integrated law on children should be comprehensive and completed as soon as possible within the framework of a new social protection system.

The PCCPWC notes that there has been no progress on the development or creation of socially-oriented actions since the Cypriot government adopted a new Minimum Income Scheme (MIS) in 2015. This scheme itself is not adequate in combating poverty and should be reformed. Currently, the MIS is set below the

poverty line of €800 a month and has resulted in the withdrawal of benefits for everyone except people with disabilities and single parents. Other individuals who were receiving benefits can now apply for the MIS scheme, but as it is set so low many are left out. The Cypriot government has voiced its intent to modernise the social protection system and reform the MIS, but this has not yet been done. In the meantime, poverty and exclusion in Cyprus are statistically on the rise, affecting children the most.

Cyprus is still under strict EU fiscal consolidation measures. As such, it is felt that pressing social issues have gained little attention – neither from the Cypriot government nor the EU. Although the government claims that Cyprus is ‘out of the crisis’, and is a ‘success story’, there is no tangible effect in terms of reducing poverty and exclusion. For example, statistically speaking, Cyprus appears to be tackling unemployment well, having steadily dropped these rates since 2013. However, these statistics are only made possible by the creation of a large group of ‘working poor’ which consists mainly of young Cypriots earning €500-600 per month. This level of income is insufficient to cover living expenses (the poverty line is €800).

Education

Quality, accessible and inclusive education should also be a priority in Cyprus, not just for the sake of its labour market (as stated in Cyprus’s past two Country Specific Recommendations), but rather to fulfil a child’s right to education and acknowledge its contribution

to a child’s personal development. The government should have been investing more into that priority around the country in the past year, if only as part of the response to the CSR of 2017 on education. However, the tendency is the opposite with a number of government kindergartens and pre-school services being closed down and replaced by church-run facilities. The increasing role of the church over the education system is worrying as the tendency to support private education could have a discriminating effect for groups of children with already high rates of poverty and social exclusion.

Despite children being mentioned in Cyprus’s Country Report of 2018 and analysis being generally robust, the main focus of the Country Report is still economic, with fiscal consolidation and macroeconomic targets prevalent – issues relating to children (such as education and teacher training/evaluation) are primarily seen through the ‘labour market perspective’. With regard to the 2018 CSRs, there is a very poor social dimension; while health care is mentioned under the prospect of a National Health Strategy to

be implemented by 2020, there is no specific mention of children, accessibility, adequacy, affordability or prevention.

According to PCCPWC the European Semester process should focus on the right to education for children in Cyprus, regardless of the labour market implications, and the need for Cyprus to reform the social protection system. Cyprus is in the midst of a 'reform' of both the Educational and the Social Protection Systems (including the first assessment of the Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme from 2015), thus it is utterly important to advocate on how these reforms will meet children's needs and eliminate child poverty and exclusion. Cyprus should be reminded that the Recommendation on Investing in Children calls on Member States to organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion and to promote children's well-being, through multidimensional strategies. Such an approach has to include access to affordable, quality services to reduce inequality at a young age, improving education systems' impact on equal opportunities, and 'increasing the

capacity of education systems to break the cycle of disadvantage'.

Liaising with the Cyprus government and EU officials (Semester officers and country desk officers in the European Commission) is imperative for civil society to be empowered to support such reforms. PCCPWC would like to see more meaningful dialogue between civil society and these two actors, and believes that the Semester process can encourage and promote better mechanisms to facilitate civil dialogue.



The Czech Republic

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"The Czech Republic should take action: 1) to establish a permanent independent coordinating and monitoring body for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and/or creation of an office for the Ombudsman for Children, as well as, 2) to amend legislation to improve the participation of children at all levels of decision-making (municipal, regional, national) so their voices are really heard and included."

Defence for Children has barely seen any progress in implementing the concluding observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which were submitted to the Czech government in 2011. Furthermore, neither the governmental strategy on the Right to Childhood, effective since December 2011, nor the

Respondent organisation:
Defence for Children International
- Czech Republic

first National Implementation Plan (2012-2015), have been fulfilled. The expected second phase of this plan (2016-2018) has not even been submitted for governmental approval. NGOs were not consulted in the preparatory process and have not played any part in its 'implementation'. The obstacles include a lack of political

will, but also ignorance among the media and society in general. Although the EU has brought some issues to light regarding early childhood development and social exclusion, as well as educational marginalisation of Roma children, these have not had any significant impact on political decision-makers in the Czech Republic.



10.58 millions total
19.9% under 19 yrs
5.2% under 5 yrs

Population

6.7%

Early school-leavers
rate

14.2%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

Child poverty

The Czech Country Report 2018 shows that the Czech Republic regularly features among the European countries with the lowest proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (13.3% in 2016). The figures are, however, less positive for those aged 24 and under, at around 16-18%, while the rate for under-18s is 14.2%, according to Eurostat. Furthermore, there is a rising trend of household poverty and social exclusion among persons with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, and the Roma population.

Yet investing in children is not a political priority in the Czech Republic. To adequately address child poverty, Defence for Children proposes improving the system of child benefits, prioritising socially and economically disadvantaged children, and making sure that child benefits are used for children (not for parents).

Early childhood education and care

As outlined in the 2018 Country Report, in 2016 only 4.7% of children below the age of three were in formal childcare. Reasons include low availability of affordable childcare, long parental leave entitlements, low use of flexible working arrangements, and the lack of long-term care facilities. The net cost of childcare is relatively high, which makes it inaccessible to socially excluded communities.

The Czech government has responded with some initiatives – for example, 14,000 new places in kindergartens and child groups (the latter being without accredited educators) were created over the last two years. This reduced the shortage by half. Moreover, a European Social Fund (ESF) pilot was started for micro-nurseries for children from six months to four years of age. A law on child groups was passed in 2014 which allowed for provision of childcare services for one-year-old children from poor families. A School Law amendment approved in 2016 introduced

guaranteed provision of childcare to all children from the age of five; this progressed to include four year-olds in 2018, and will include three year-olds from 2020. Unfortunately, less progress has been achieved in flexible working arrangements and inclusion of Roma children in early childhood education and care.

Education

The Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for the Czech Republic this year call for strengthening the capacity of the education system to deliver quality, inclusive education, including by promoting the teaching profession. Some headway seems to have been made already: the mid-term review of the EU framework for national Roma integration (2017) points to a fall in levels of perceived discrimination, notably in education and in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the quality of mainstream education has deteriorated, with the largest discrepancies between schools being on the basis of socioeconomic status. As the 2018 Country Report

observes: ‘the proportion of low achievers in science and reading has risen significantly since 2012 (OECD 2016a). At 30.5%, compared to an EU average of 26.2%, the country has one of the largest gaps in the proportion of low achievers in science between the bottom and top quarters of the socioeconomic index in the PISA student population (OECD, 2016b)’.

The reform on inclusive education of pupils with special needs (including socioeconomically disadvantaged children) was only introduced into mainstream education in 2016. This reform is a long-term process with many challenges, including securing national funding which must follow ESF investments; sufficient teacher and assistant teacher training; and, very importantly, raising awareness about the benefits of inclusive education. The latter is important because public opinion and media attitudes pose a significant challenge to achieving inclusive education. Defence for Children welcomes the improved financing of schools due to the 2016 reform: funding is now based on the content and quality of education provided by the school, instead of the number

of pupils. In previous years, schools have often struggled with a lack of money to support children with special educational needs. However, 72% of school headmasters confirmed that financing was no longer a major barrier.

Defence for Children is pleased, too, that the reform also raised teacher salaries by 15% and promises a further increase of 10% in 2019. These measures improve the status of teachers in society.

As mentioned, in September 2017 the final year of pre-school education was made compulsory in the Czech Republic, aiming to include more disadvantaged children and thereby create more equal opportunities later in life. Although ESF-supported programmes were launched to increase the number of five-year-old Roma children attending early

childhood education and care, these have not been very successful.

According to 2016 statistics gathered by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), it is estimated that only 34% of Roma children attend early childhood education and care from the age of four onwards. FRA also found that Roma children constitute the highest proportion of early school-leavers (72%), which significantly impacts their future job prospects. Defence for Children believes more efforts to convince Roma parents of the importance of education would increase enrolment of their children in early childhood education and care. To prevent early school leaving, Defence for Children proposes preparing more teachers and their assistants to support pupils at risk through relevant teaching methods and approaches.

Child participation

Defence for Children welcomes the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports to improve the quality of pupils' and students' engagement and participation. However, more has to be done, in particular regarding obligatory education of all school staff on the importance and value of child and youth participation at all levels of public life. Further initiatives must be developed to make young people aware that their voices are important and to establish communication with public authorities. Further, legislation should be passed to create municipal, regional and national child parliaments to complement student parliaments. Finally, more funding should be secured for child participation programmes, and made available also to NGOs.

Having witnessed the slow progress on implementing the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, civil society organisations in the Czech Republic call for the creation of a permanent, independent coordinating and monitoring body on children's rights and of an Ombudsperson for Children.

As children's rights organisations are often overlooked in EU and national processes, including the European Semester, Defence for Children is pushing for new mechanisms to enable organisations and coalitions who advocate for the rights of the child to comment on all policies and legislative amendments that may affect children, including funding programmes.

Estonia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Estonia should take action to establish a uniform national mental health policy for the purpose of tackling mental health issues among children and youth and establishing systems of prevention in this field."

Mental health problems among children and young people have increased significantly in Estonia over the past years. Recently there have been several positive policy developments; however, the focus remains predominantly on dealing with the consequences (treatment and rehabilitation) rather than on prevention strategies such as

universal prevention, early noticing and intervention. The Estonian Union for Child Welfare (EUCW) believes a clear concept of and cross-sectoral regulation for the provision of mental health services is needed to establish activities promoting mental health and prevention, in addition to treatment, rehabilitation and support services.

The most urgent situation is on the local level, where prevention and treatment services are very limited or non-existent. Hence, while the Estonian Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) have continuously pointed out the weaknesses of the Estonian health-care system, EUCW urges the European Commission to explicitly

Respondent organisation:
Estonian Union for Child Welfare (EUCW)



4.78 millions total
5.7% under 19 yrs
1.4% under 5 yrs

Population

10.8%

Early school-leavers
rate

18.8%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

mention mental health in the context of the particular needs of children in future European Semester documents.

Mental health

In 2013, mental health and behavioural disorders were diagnosed in 5,861 cases in Estonia, 481 of which were mood disorders in children and young people.¹ Indeed, one study found that the occurrence of depressive mood disorders became more frequent among school students between 2010 and 2014, with a prevalence of depression in this age group reaching about 10% and subliminal depression about 30%.² These percentages seem to continue rising. Furthermore, the prevalence of mental health disorders related to the use of narcotic substances in Estonia is now above the European average.

It has been well documented that the mental health of children deteriorates upon separation from their families – for example, one study found that 62% of children studying and staying in closed institutions (called special schools), have symptoms of attention deficit hyperactive disorder.³ In Estonia, 5% of school students have developed internet addiction, while one third of students reported having intentionally injured themselves at least once.

According to EUCW, Estonia is not ready to respond to these problems because of a lack of a clear concept and cross-sectoral regulation for the provision of mental health services. Another challenge is decentralisation on the local level where there are very limited or non-existent mental health services. As a result, many patients do not receive the treatment to which they are entitled. Hence, the CSRs for Estonia are right to continuously

call for the central government and municipalities to bring specialised medical care services to the regional/local level, and the Country Report rightly points out that ‘access to health-care is a challenge’.⁴ Yet the Country Report and CSRs fail to mention the urgency and lack of health-care services for children, particularly in the field of mental health and preventing mental health disorders.

Early childhood education and care

Despite improved access to childcare for children with disabilities, some new positive measures concerning parental leave, and the small increase in child allowances, EUCW notes that there are still insufficient childcare facilities in Estonia to achieve gender equality goals. Indeed, one of the 2018 CSRs mentions a need for

more kindergartens and day-care services in order to address the still prominent gender pay gap. Estonia's 2018 Country Report further states that, ‘beyond the established childcare facilities supported by EU funds, there are plans to support more flexible childcare services at irregular hours...’. EUCW is pushing for this to change, not only to address the gender pay gap, but also to help fulfil children's rights to quality education and equal opportunities.

EUCW believes that NGOs should exert pressure on the government and public institutions to adequately address mental health problems among children and young people. In line with this, the EUCW general assembly launched a public call for action in April 2018 calling on the State to establish uniform national mental health policies, including a focus on prevention and the transferring of most primary and secondary-level intervention funding

1 Baseline analysis of the concept of integrated child mental health services [Laste vaimse tervise integreeritud teenuste kontseptsiooni alusanalüüs] (2015): http://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Lapsed_ja_pered/Lapse_oigused_ja_heolu/laste_vaimse_tervise_alusanaluus_lopparuanne_pwc_13.03.2015_loplike_parandustega.pdf

2 Survey of the health behaviour of school students in Estonia' [Eesti Kooliõpilaste Tervisekäitumise Uuring] (2014): http://www.tai.ee/et/terviseandmed/uuringud?limit=10&filter_catid=0&filter_year=0&filter_pubid=0&filter_languageid=0&filter_hbsc&filter_order=p.publish_year&filter_order_Dir=DESC

3 Study of the cognitive and personality traits and mental health, addictive behaviour and social background of children in closed institutions' [Kinnistes asutuste viibivate laste kognitiivsete ja isiksuslike omaduste ning vaimse tervise, sõltuvuskäitumise ja sotsiaalse tausta uurimus] (2014): http://www.kriminaalpoliitika.ee/sites/kriminipoliitika/files/elfinder/dokumentid/loplik_aruanne_luhi_1.pdf

4 In 2015, 12.7 % of all Estonians reported an unmet need for medical care, the highest rate in the EU (discussed in OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies 2017).' From the EC's Country Report Estonia 2018.

to the child's daily environment at the local level.

To make these actions more sustainable and impactful, a mental health component needs to be incorporated into all educational programmes for primary-level specialists such as kindergarten teachers, school teachers, family nurses and general practitioners. These specialists should also take part in prevention work and raise awareness among parents of mental disorders and addictions.

With regard to stakeholder consultations in Estonia on the European Semester, there is ample room for improvement. To better highlight specific gaps such as services for children, and to make the European Semester process more visible and participatory, EUCW proposes to make consultations with civil society organisations obligatory for Member States and to monitor this by reporting to the European Commission.



Finland

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Finland should take action to adopt a national human rights-based strategy for children's policies together with an action plan and sufficient resources."

Respondent organisation:
Central Union of Child Welfare



5.5 millions total
21.6% under 19 yrs
5.2% under 5 yrs

Population

8.2%

Early school-leavers
rate

15.1%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

In April 2018 the current government announced that it would begin preparing a national child strategy. This was a welcome step as child and family policy in Finland lacks comprehensiveness and perseverance. Reforms and adjustments are made on a rather ad-hoc basis, and lack an overall assessment. The regional

dimension is crucial for reaching children and their families, yet there is a lack of coordination between relevant bodies and institutions at different levels of administrations. Impact assessments with a view to children or child budgeting are not commonly used by the public sector (neither by central government nor municipalities).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has long been concerned that Finland still lacks a comprehensive policy and plan of action for the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it ratified in 1991 (see Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention. Concluding

Observations: Finland, CRC/C/FIN/CO/4).

Central Union for Child Welfare calls for a national human rights-based child strategy that would guide decision-making and action on children and families in municipalities and provinces in addition to central government administration, which the European Semester should encourage Finland to develop.

Children's well-being

Unfortunately, child and family benefits and services have suffered various setbacks in recent years. The cuts have an impact especially on the everyday lives of families with low incomes. The proportion of income transfers is three-fold in low-income families compared to other families. Therefore, cuts in family benefit have impacted especially on financial resources of low-income families.

During the last year, the government has made some improvements on family benefits. For instance, childcare fees were reduced for

low- and middle-income families and guardian supplement of student allowance was restored. However, those improvements have been sporadic and there has not been an overall assessment of how numerous amendments have affected different kinds of families. The government has not addressed the negative impact of measures on child and family services and benefits during the past years. From a child rights perspective, it was also unfortunate that the government did not reach consensus concerning the reform of family leave system it had started to prepare in August 2017. The reform is not expected to take place during this parliamentary term, as stated in the Country Report of Finland (2018).

It is noteworthy that the 2018 Country Report has missed some important elements in this regard. According to the Country Report of Finland the risk of poverty has continued to decline since its peak in 2011. The risk of poverty and social exclusion is among the lowest in the EU, and Finland has one of the lowest income inequality rates. However, the report does not mention that the number of children

and families with children (especially under the age of three) living in poverty has more than doubled in the last ten years, and that the amount of child and parental benefits has de facto been reduced. According to income distribution statistics there are 101,000 deprived children in Finland, which means nearly one in ten children is living in poverty.

The overall impression is that not just the CSRs but also the Country Report of Finland focus primarily on macroeconomic policies. For instance, the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children is not mentioned in the report and the situation of children is not analysed comprehensively. This might result from the fact that Finland did not receive any recommendation concerning the well-being of children or families with children in 2017.

Services

The government continued preparatory work around social and health care reform (SOTE) and the national programme for child and

family services (LAPE) last year. The Finnish government is carrying out a national programme for child and family services as part of 26 key projects which were initiated in 2016, with the aim of pooling all services for children, adolescents and families into a set of child- and family-oriented services. The focus is on preventive services and early support and care, and where services can effectively reach those most in need. The changes also serve to curb the rise in costs for remedial services and, over a longer term, to reduce costs.

The aims of the programme are positive but though it has been running for almost three years, it is still in the pilot phase. The European Semester could be a catalyst to encourage detailed nation-wide implementation.

Finland is also preparing a broad reform of its social and health care systems, linked to the reform of regional government. The government has presented large parts of the draft legislation on the reform in Parliament and the formal adoption of the reform will take place in 2018. Child impact

assessments have not been carried out during the drafting phase, even though the reform impacts on child and family services. Central Union for Child Welfare is concerned that the government's proposition to increase clients' freedom of choice as part of the reform will increase health and well-being disparities among citizens and risk the equal availability of basic services. The freedom of choice model is problematic especially for children in vulnerable situations (e.g. children who need child welfare services, children with disabilities) and children and families who have various needs for services.

and the largest among the OECD countries.¹ As the right to education is guaranteed for children as their basic (human) right, the Country Report should include an assessment and evaluation of how those negative trends will affect children's development and the fulfilment of their rights.

Education

The 2018 Country Report correctly notes that the education system has been subject to considerable public spending cuts. It is worrying that education outcomes in Finland are weakening and divergence between different groups has been detected. The latest PISA results show a growing gap in performance between the genders,

1 Source: https://minedu.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/pisa-2015-suomalaisnuoret-edelleen-huipulla-pudotuksesta-huolimatta



France

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"France should guarantee appropriate and holistic **support for children and young people lacking family support**, especially for those at high risk of poverty (unaccompanied children and young people leaving care), which meets their universal and specific needs."

Respondent organisations:
CNAPE (Convention Nationale des Associations de Protection de l'Enfant); Apprentis d'Auteuil



67 millions total
24.5% under 19 yrs
5.8% under 5 yrs

Population

8.9%

Early school-leavers rate

22.6%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (2016)

Child welfare

France could do more to ensure holistic support for children and young people in vulnerable situations, particularly unaccompanied children and young people leaving care, in order to help protect them against adversity in later life.

In France there is little support for **young people aged 18 and over**. Indeed, according to the French National Observatory of Child Protection (ONPE), only 21,800 young people of majority age (18 and older) are supported by the French child welfare service (financed by the local council), which is just over 9% of the French

population aged 18-20. Even more striking, according to the Ministry of Justice, just 266 young people over 18 were supported by the judicial protection of the youth in 2017 (financed by the state). These figures are low, and the lack of policy and legislation concerning those 18 and older in France has a particularly **negative effect on young people**

in vulnerable situations who cannot count on family support, such as those leaving care (often previously unaccompanied children). Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish the severity of this issue as **there is no data confirming the number of 18-year-olds in care or leaving care each year in France.** CNAPE underlines that this huge gap of knowledge should be filled urgently. Indeed, several studies indicate a strong correlation between leaving care and homelessness; one study, conducted by Insee/INED between 2006 and 2012, found that 15% of homeless people experienced alternative care during their childhood – this percentage reached 40% when the age group was narrowed to homeless people between the ages of 18 and 24.

Considering this, **the continually rising number of unaccompanied children in alternative care in France is alarming.** In fact, the number of unaccompanied children officially registered in alternative care and dealt with by child welfare services as a result of a judicial decision in France has risen from 4,000 in 2012, to 13,391 in

2017 (according to the Ministry of Justice). Further, according to estimations of the French Department Assembly (ADF), which is a level of government below the national level, 2017 saw a total of 25,000 self-declared minors, including those in the midst of the evaluation stage, in the care of departments. This large group of children have no family support and **need to be provided with adequate care as children as well as a solid framework for support when they leave care.** Without this, they are more bound to be exposed to risks and adversity later in life.

The European Pillar of Social Rights states (Principle 11) that ‘children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities’. Principle 14 declares that ‘everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services’. Finally, the Recommendation on Investing in Children is pertinent to this issue, particularly the second

key pillar, which mentions access to affordable, quality services. The State should further develop these through necessary governance, implementation and monitoring measures.

As such, the French government can be commended for demonstrating willingness to improve – several public policies and dialogues regarding child protection and/or care have been initiated or reinforced in the past couple of years. Examples include the creation of the Law of 14 March 2016 (related to the protection of the child), and the current development of a national strategy on preventing and tackling poverty, as well as a national strategy for child protection. In addition, a working group on the needs of young people leaving care has been created within the national council on child protection, and a report was published in June 2018 by the French economic, social and environmental council on pathways to child protection. The French government has also given a grant to some local councils to support the care of unaccompanied minors.

Despite these positive developments, organisations working in child protection/care reported concern over the effective implementation of the provisions of the Law of 14 March 2016, particularly regarding the **adulthood preparation schemes.** In some cases, these organisations witnessed provisions of this law being misinterpreted for the purpose of lessening support for children; for example, choosing to understand that young people turning 18 must only be kept in care until the end of the school year, even though Article 16 can be read as providing for care beyond the school year. Therefore, CNAPE urges **the French government to support appropriate implementation of the law by local stakeholders by,** for example, providing guidelines and clarifications in favour of children’s rights and harmonising implementation efforts at the local level.

The European Commission’s 2018 Country Report mentioned some aspects relating to those not in education, employment or training (NEET), namely employment, education and training, minimum

income, and housing. It also included some data on poverty, mentioning that 'even though poverty rates in France are below the EU average for all age groups, 35.2% of single-parent families are at risk of poverty, followed by children (19.1%) and young people aged 18 to 24 (21.9% and up from 17.9% in 2015).' Importantly, it briefly highlighted that 'educational outcomes are highly dependent on social background... the risk of poverty for the children of low-skilled parents has been rising and is now above the EU average.' Furthermore, France's 2018 Country Specific Recommendations mentions the need for access to vocational education and training systems, and equal opportunities for all, including for people with a migrant background and those living in deprived areas. Yet, as pointed out by Geneviève Avenard, Child Ombudsman/Deputy Defender of the Rights of the Child in France, **data on child protection and social services, unaccompanied children and young people leaving care are missing from the European Commission's analysis, as are data and analysis on their access to health, education and training, and social services.** In addition,

the need to reduce school drop-out rates, which every year fuel the already very high number of NEETs in France (as highlighted in previous reports), is also missing. Finally, the statement in the Recommendations regarding the necessity to 'ensure that minimum wage developments are consistent with job creation and competitiveness' is worrying for its inevitably negative implications for France's children.

The EU has managed to influence France towards more socially-oriented policies in the past. This was the case with the Youth Guarantee: as a result of pressure from the EU to implement the Guarantee, young people under 26 in precarious situations in France were, in 2017, given the universal right to access training. As such, a Country Specific Recommendation calling for proper support for those in care and those leaving care, as well as for local data and effective investment in fighting child poverty in cooperation with parents and non-profit organisations, would be genuinely useful.



Ireland

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective


Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Ireland should enhance social infrastructure, including social housing supply, and the supply and quality of early childhood and school age childcare; as well as address child poverty through an integrated balance of universal and targeted policies on income and services; and deliver an integrated package of activation policies to increase the employment prospects of low-skilled people and to support families to engage in higher work intensity."


Child poverty

It is alarming that 11.1% of children in Ireland live in consistent poverty, i.e., are both income-poor and materially deprived. Ireland's national policy framework for children and young people, 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020', commits

Respondent organisation:
Children's Rights Alliance Ireland

 4.78 millions total
27.4% under 19 yrs
6.8% under 5 yrs

Population

5.1% 
Early school-leavers
rate

27.3% 
Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

to reducing child poverty by two thirds by 2020. To meet this target, the government must lift approximately 95,000 children out of poverty by 2020. Given that the consistent poverty rate only reduced by 0.4 percentage points from 2015 to 2016, it seems unlikely that the target will be met.

As part of its Europe 2020 poverty commitments, Ireland has set a target of reducing by a minimum of 200,000 the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion between 2010 and 2020. 29.2% of the population experienced combined poverty in 2016, compared to 33.7% in 2015. This figure reflects a decrease in those facing basic

deprivation (down 4.5 percentage points to 21%) and a marginal decrease in the at-risk-of-poverty rate by 0.4 percentage points to 16.5%, a decrease of 22,000 people from the 2010 baseline. Just over 178,000 people will have to be lifted out of combined poverty in Ireland by 2020 to meet the Europe 2020 target.

The Better Outcomes Brighter Futures Advisory Council published an NGO paper in May 2017 which included a number of recommendations to help the government achieve the child poverty target. It welcomed some of the measures announced in the 2017 budget and called for further measures to tackle child poverty in the next year's budget. The government introduced some incremental measures to help alleviate child poverty in 2018, including a €2 increase in the Qualified Child Increase (QCI) for children of parents in receipt of a social welfare payment, an increase in provision for the school meals programme for all schools (not only those in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme), and an increase in the

income disregards for single parents in employment. However, there was not enough investment in services for children.

This should be addressed in the updated National Action Plan on Social Inclusion, due out in 2018. Civil society is keen to keep child poverty on the political agenda. The Advisory Council made a submission to this process and will continue to monitor implementation once it is published. The Children's Rights Alliance Ireland has its own monitoring tool of the government's progress in the form of its Report Card series.

Housing and homelessness

The number of families with children recorded as homeless reached record levels in 2018: there were 1,778 families with 3,867 children living in emergency homeless accommodation in July 2018. Lone parent families with children continue to be the largest cohort, representing 61% of all families living in emergency accommodation.

According to 2016 census results, children under 18 represented more than a quarter of those living in homeless accommodation, while children four years and under made up the single largest age category experiencing homelessness.

In 'Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness' (July 2016), the government set a deadline to use 'emergency hotel and B&B type accommodation for families' only 'in limited circumstances' by mid-2017. This deadline was not met. By July 2017, the roll-out of family-supported accommodation facilities or 'family hubs' began as a way of enabling families to move out of unsuitable emergency hotel and B&B accommodation; the official aim of this new form of accommodation is to provide 'a greater level of stability than is possible in hotel accommodation'. The hubs support more than 500 families. While some have cooking facilities, others provide meals and families still do not have access to cooking facilities. The move away from hotels and B&Bs is welcome, but it is essential that the hubs be considered a temporary form of accommodation

so as to prevent institutionalisation and to avoid the possibility that they could serve to 'normalise family homelessness' – a concern expressed by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Even where families are living in more stable emergency placements, children and young people may face difficulties in accessing play or recreational facilities due to accessibility, affordability or availability. They should be provided with alternative recreational opportunities and access to local leisure facilities.

The social housing shortage needs to be better addressed in the 2019 European Semester to encourage government efforts for building new, affordable social housing.

Contrasting average net household income – especially among more disadvantaged families – with average monthly rent prices would be very revealing.

Early childhood education and care

As identified in the CSRs for Ireland in the last years, the net cost to parents of childcare services is very high. OECD figures show that Irish childcare costs are the highest in the EU; the net cost for a single mother with two children and low earnings amounts to 42% of the average disposable income. The Irish government's response has been to announce the Affordable Childcare Scheme (or 'the Scheme'), a statutory scheme of financial support to parents whose children receive childcare services. The Scheme is welcome: for the first time, parents in Ireland will be entitled to financial subsidies to meet childcare costs. The Scheme also includes the first universal childcare subsidy for children aged three years old and under. Children of this age, and their parents, have previously been largely absent from Irish childcare policy. Due to the higher costs associated with childcare services for children under three years as well as the unstable and lower public subsidy for this field, childcare providers concentrate

on providing places for children over this age in Ireland. As a result, there is a lack of supply of childcare places for this age group and a corresponding low participation rate of children under three in childcare services in Ireland.

The lack of affordable childcare can also impact a parent's decision to take up employment, or may result in children being cared for in an unregulated home-based child-minding sector where the cost of care is lower but where there is no oversight or inspection of quality for children. Therefore, **increased investment in services to under-threes is necessary to increase supply and to ensure quality.** It is welcome that the Scheme includes a means-tested targeted subsidy to support the parents of children experiencing poverty to enter the workforce or increase their work intensity, and thereby reduce poverty risk and incidence for children. Irish research among single parent families demonstrates repeatedly that high childcare costs, and other access issues such as supply of childcare places, is a barrier to employment and training/education. The Scheme's

underpinning legislation – the Childcare Support Act 2018 – was signed into law on 2 July 2018, and the development of an automated IT system for parents to access the subsidy is underway. Both are vital actions to implement the Scheme.

This targeted subsidy is progressive, which is a really important underlying principle: it means that the children and parents with the lowest income should get the highest subsidy. The means assessment is based on net household income, and the income thresholds increase where there is more than one child in a family. The tapering and net income assessment should mean that employment disincentives arising from taking up employment will be lessened. It also means that families that are not at risk of poverty or experiencing consistent poverty but are on the cusp should receive a level of financial support.

The Scheme's introduction was delayed in 2017 and interim measures were put in place to distribute subsidies to parents. By the end of December 2017, approximately 30,000 children

benefited from a universal subsidy for the first time, and approximately 34,000 children benefited from a targeted subsidy. Recent figures (July 2018) point to a record total number of 200,000 children benefitting from government-funded childcare schemes.

Nevertheless, there remain no price controls on Ireland's childcare system and investment in childcare in Ireland as a proportion of GDP is lower than all other OECD countries. Furthermore, Ireland needs to invest more in children's early years. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has commissioned an independent audit of the costs of childcare in Ireland in order to identify the cost base of provision. This data will inform the Irish government's investment plans in the 2019 budget and beyond.

Overall, it was useful that the 2018 Country Report included a section tracking the progress made on 2017 Country Specific Recommendations on targeted expenditure. This recommendation was particularly important as it required the government to prioritise investment in social housing and quality

childcare. The recommendation noted that the high cost of childcare acts as a barrier to female labour market participation and hinders efforts to reduce child poverty.

The fact that the 2018 recommendation highlights the need for both affordable and quality childcare is important. It recognises that childcare is not only a service for parents or a labour activation measure, it is also important from a child rights perspective in terms of their learning and development. Children's Rights Alliance Ireland encourages the 2019 European Semester to check on the delivery of both the affordability and the quality component of early childhood and school age childcare services.




Latvia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Latvia should invest in children through prevention and early intervention strategies in the most relevant fields: social protection, education and health. Complementing these strategies, Latvia should also ensure effective monitoring of children's well-being, which would allow for analyses of the relationship between early investment through support programmes and services, and children's emotional, psychological and physical well-being."

Respondent organisation:
Latvian Child Welfare Network

 1.95 millions total
19.9% under 19 yrs
5.4% under 5 yrs

Population

8.6% 

Early school-leavers
rate

23.9% 

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

Child poverty

Latvia has one of the highest rates (23.9%) of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU. Statistics show that the risk of poverty is directly related to the number of children in a Latvian family. Part of the poverty problem in Latvia can be attributed to **the lack**

of a sufficient minimum income: currently over half the population earns only €380 per month. Another dimension of the poverty problem in Latvia is the apparent **lack of political will and/or resources to implement services which fulfil children's rights.** By prioritising a fair and sufficient minimum income and an increase in the availability and

accessibility of social services, Latvia could make large strides in reducing child poverty rates and fulfilling children's rights.

A new minimum income scheme was set to be developed in 2017, but was unfortunately postponed until 2019. This means that the subsistence minimum basket

per person per month was last calculated by Latvia's statistical agency in 2013. A new scheme should be developed as soon as possible with updated figures: it is estimated that Latvians would need about double the current minimum income to keep up with continually rising prices of basic necessities such as food, rent, and electricity (which are among the highest in the EU). The lack of a decent income has also forced many families in Latvia to separate, as parents are forced to find work abroad. This 'solution' is harmful for the children left behind; research has shown that children separated from their parents experience negative developmental outcomes. Furthermore, those who decide to stay in Latvia are often driven towards the shadow economy to make ends meet, a decision that can have a negative impact on themselves and their families as they are unprotected by the law. For example, these families lack health care coverage, which means many children cannot access quality health care.

Latvia has recently implemented tax reforms, which is a good first step towards a progressive tax system

supporting those in poverty. But changes are still needed to help the average employee to achieve a basic standard of living. The European Commission has the opportunity to encourage Latvia to make positive changes in this field, for example via the Social Scoreboard. This monitoring tool has been a positive step towards a more socially-oriented assessment of a country's situation, but it could be expanded and carried out against more concrete benchmarks for a stronger impact. In cases such as Latvia, the average minimum salary to survive could be measured and considered in relation to the actual guaranteed minimum income or salary.

Latvia has a set of family policies in place, but these are not prioritising children's well-being or rights. Rather, they focus on promoting the establishment of families, high birth rates, and strengthening the institution of marriage in society. Within this set of policies, the Latvian State does provide family benefits, but **it is hard to measure the impact of these, as prices for basic necessities continue to rise**. In many rural areas, Latvian families depend on State-provided

social services for clothing and food packages. As such, Latvia should envision empowering families so they can provide for themselves, as well as investing in poverty prevention programmes for children.

There is a great need to invest in children; in many (particularly rural) areas children have no or very limited access to health and social services/ support – or even schools, due to the ongoing optimisation process in the education system. It appears that municipalities have no resources and sometimes no understanding or interest in tackling these issues alone: an integrated national policy is needed. Yet there are few State-financed prevention programmes targeting social issues and children; those that do exist are concerned with the rehabilitation of abused children, addicted youngsters and, recently, a new programme which aims to prevent anti-social behaviour of children. Latvia should incorporate this perspective into the reform, and create a national child strategy focused on early prevention strategies in the most relevant fields (social protection, education and health) to support child well-

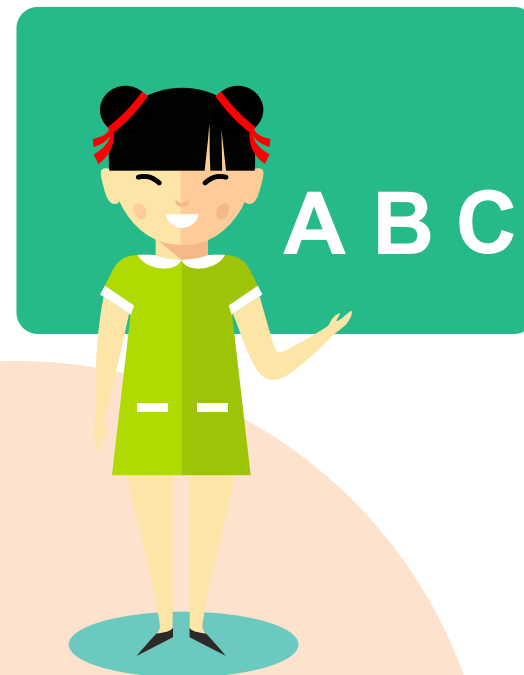
being and to tackle Latvia's poverty problem.

The European Commission has emphasised the importance of early intervention and prevention in the Recommendation on Investing in Children (2013). The European Pillar of Social Rights also mentions several points which are directly related to early prevention: Principle 11 on child poverty and the necessity for childcare and support for children; Principle 16 on healthcare, and Principle 20 which mentions access to essential services. Furthermore, the Latvian Child Welfare Network completed a 'Children's Wellbeing Survey' in the three Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) in 2017, which shed light on significant disparities among these countries and highlighted Estonia's success in this area. Subsequent analysis revealed that the defining factor is Estonia's investments in prevention programmes for the benefit of children. This **substantiates the argument that targeted investment into prevention policy and programmes help tackle identified problems and achieve positive,**

tangible results within a relatively short period of time (2-3 years).

The European Commission should therefore **push for the development of a national child strategy focused on prevention in 2019, as well as demanding mandatory government reports on the state of children's well-being and rights in Latvia** for effective evaluation and monitoring. The 2018 Country Report drafted by the European Commission did mention lack of services in Latvia, including lack of services for children. However, the issue is mentioned from the perspective of sectoral policy. For

example, reforms in the educational system are mentioned, including the closure of schools – but the report does not reflect on the impact of this measure upon children and families. The Country Report should take on a more holistic analysis, and ensure that subsequent Recommendations reflect the social situation in Latvia and encourage the **creation of a specific national strategy on poverty prevention for children through cross-sectoral programmes covering the social fields, education and health.**



Poland

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Poland should prioritise de-institutionalisation on the national and local level, and create a comprehensive national children's strategy."

Respondent organisation:
**Polish Foster Care Coalition
(PFCC) - Koalicja na rzecz
Rodzinnej Opieki Zastępczej**



38 millions total
20.1% under 19 yrs
4.9% under 5 yrs

Population

5.0%

Early school-leavers
rate

24.2%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

De-institutionalisation

Poland has made advances in de-institutionalisation of alternative care over the past few years. Nevertheless, there are still significant gaps and obstacles that it must tackle to ensure children's rights are respected and de-institutionalisation is prioritised on a

local level. In this regard, a national strategy for children founded on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child would be useful, alongside practical initiatives which enable de-institutionalisation.

Poland has a legislative framework concerning children in alternative care, the Bill on Family Support

and Alternative Care of 2011. Since 2016 another bill has been introduced – the Bill on State Aid in Raising Children – which has many positive aspects, including introducing subsidies for each child following the first worth 500 PLN (about €125) per month. These transfers effectively reduce extreme poverty for families with children

and, importantly, also apply to children placed in foster families. Nevertheless, the Bill on Family Support and Alternative Care (2011) has some critical gaps, such as the systemic institutionalisation of newborns in what are known as 'pre-adoptive centres'. Unfortunately, these are practically orphanages for newborns, including those with special needs. Similarly, urgent transitions are needed for children in regional 'therapeutic institutions', which are institutions hosting up to 45 children with special needs. These two unaddressed gaps were also identified by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which urged the closure of these institutions in line with the de-institutionalisation philosophy in its concluding observations (CRC/C/POL/CO/3-4) of 2015. It is therefore particularly disappointing that, although an amendment is underway (due to be published in autumn 2018), no mention of these institutions is made in the latest drafts.

Nevertheless, it is positive that among the proposed amendments

to the Bill of 2011 is an incentive to push more strongly for de-institutionalisation. The amendment would state that the local government's County Chief, who is in charge of alternative care systems in his or her district and the placement of children therein, would need to cover the full cost of a child's placement if placed in an institution, but only up to 50% of costs if placed with a foster family or professional foster family of up to eight children¹. However, this proposal is opposed by the Association of Polish Counties, which wants to cancel the proposal entirely or delay its implementation by five years.

It is desirable to incentivise de-institutionalisation, for example by educating local government members (the decision-makers) on the nature and benefits of the de-institutionalisation process. Positive encouragement for districts that have made significant steps towards de-institutionalisation can be a good way to continue promoting change in this arena. The most effective strategy, PFCC believes, would be organically encouraging

change by spreading information and demonstrating the value of de-institutionalisation for children's outcomes. The amendment also proposes better monitoring of international adoption – which refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 21) and which would be a welcome change – and empowering family assistants working with families in need by improving their working conditions. PFCC believes civil society should be given a bigger role in legislative processes in Poland, and, more generally, have a more proactive dialogue with relevant ministries, so that policy-makers are well-informed and can make effective decisions and avoid gaps like those on de-institutionalisation.

Ultimately, the Polish government could do more to ensure de-institutionalisation and quality care for children who do not have family support. As already noted, the legal framework for de-institutionalisation is not comprehensive enough, and while the government has vocally encouraged local authorities to implement the de-institutionalisation

philosophy, more needs to be done on the national level to ensure this is the case in practice. Poland also needs to ensure an individualised approach and quality care for children in alternative care, and, more generally, create a stronger framework for children's rights and well-being. Poland does not have a national strategy for de-institutionalisation (including for alternative care, people with disabilities, people with mental health problems and elderly people), nor a national strategy focused on children. PFCC urges the Polish government to view children as agents in their own right with special needs and rights and to create a national strategy for children, founded on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that underlies the value and necessity of de-institutionalisation.

The European Pillar of Social Rights states in Pillar 11 that '(...) children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.' Pillar

1 In Polish: Rodzinny Dom Dziecka

18 states that everyone ‘has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services.’ As such, the European Union has been pushing Poland to de-institutionalise, and indeed EU Structural Funds have been used to provide family and community-based care in Poland. The EU also funded a two-year project in Poland, which created an IT tool to measure levels of de-institutionalisation in districts, with the aim of comparing data and sharing knowledge. This project was supervised by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy and preliminary results were released in May 2018.

Yet, the 2018 Country Report for Poland does not directly refer to de-institutionalisation, nor does it mention families in need or the capacity-building needs of alternative care systems. There is also no mention of the need for effective cooperation between the national government and regional/ local (communal and district) governments in facilitating the process of de-institutionalisation. Similarly, the 2018 Country Specific Recommendations for

Poland do not take on a social perspective, nor do they mention de-institutionalisation specifically. This is a missed opportunity as EU guidance does have the potential to be a powerful tool to promote children’s rights and specifically to push Poland to develop a national children’s strategy (which mentions de-institutionalisation) or a national strategy for de-institutionalisation. The European Semester should encourage Poland to develop such a strategy – one that includes financial incentives for professional foster parents, who currently earn below the minimum wage in Poland.

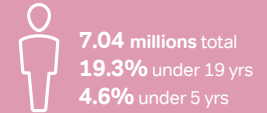
Serbia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Serbia should take action 1) to develop a new national action plan for children including the action plan for fighting violence against children; and 2) to introduce integrated, community-based services in particular at local level to ensure the provision of family- and community-based care for all children."

Respondent organisation:
Network of Organisations for
Children of Serbia - MODS



Population



Early school-leavers
rate



Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

The medium-term macroeconomic framework (2018-2020) for Serbia has been launched by the European Commission to progress with fiscal and macroeconomic frameworks and other structural reforms in Serbia. According to the assessment of the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia (MODS), this framework should prioritise more

social inclusion, poverty reduction and equal opportunities.

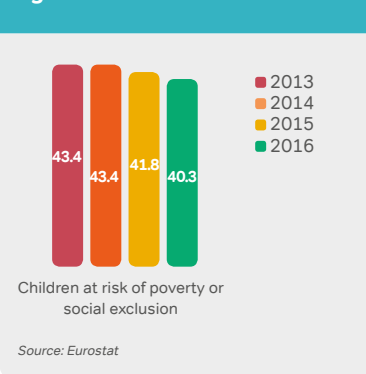
Child poverty

Serbia's 2018 Report found that the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is 38.7%, making it the highest among all European

countries gathering statistics on income and living conditions. Furthermore, it highlighted that 7.3% of the population was living in absolute poverty in 2016.

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs allocated 50% more (RSD 700 million, or almost €6 million) in 2017 than in

Figure 1



2016 for developing existing and establishing new social protection services. A Law on Financial Support to Families with Children has also been adopted, and amendments regarding laws on social welfare and family law are in development. However, MODS emphasises that this is not sufficient to cover all the urgent needs of families living in poverty and social exclusion in Serbia. The European Commission recommends that Serbia improves its social benefit system to provide more effective support for groups most in need. It further insists that the quality of social services must improve, and that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be strengthened.

The recently-adopted Law on Financial Support to Families with Children foresees increased levels of child allowance for children with disabilities and increased coverage with parental leave benefits for certain categories of women who were previously not recognised as eligible. Yet the child allowance is still very low, at €24 per child per month for the first four children and an additional one month of child allowance introduced only for high school children. MODS stresses that no progress has been achieved on the local level in terms of social care provision or the de-institutionalisation process. The system of earmarked transfers introduced by the social welfare law needs to be implemented more systematically and transparently. An undefined, nominal amount of the allowance for children is a step backwards, MODS believes, because there is no guarantee that the amount will be regularly matched with the consumer price index and inflation.

Education

Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC), in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, remains very low in Serbia. 9% of the poorest children and 6% of children from Roma settlements aged between three and five attend ECEC, compared to 82% of children from the richest households. The main reason is the state of current financing in pre-school education. In Serbia, 4% of GDP is allocated to education (UNESCO recommends 6%), of which only 20% is for pre-school education. In practice, local self-governments (local municipalities) cover about 69% of total pre-school expenses and parents contribute about 23% through monthly fees, while the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development finances just 8% (primarily to support the compulsory Pre-school Preparatory Programme for children aged 5.5 to 6.5). For low-income families, 20% or more is a big chunk of the family budget. The issue of major concern is that the latest amendments to the Law on the Basics of the Education System make it possible for local

self-government to reduce their allocations for pre-school education, which has resulted in uneven financing of pre-school education different local self-governments. Low attendance of ECEC in Serbia is also due to the priorities of working parents, insufficient places in pre-school institutions, and underdeveloped infrastructure particularly in rural parts of the country.

The rate of early school-leavers fell to 7.5% in 2015, down from 8.5% in 2014, but tertiary educational attainment remains low at 5% (the EU 2020 target is 15%).

There is no current mechanism for early identification of children at risk of dropping out. This means there is also no policy on how to respond to this, nor is there an understanding of the best or most effective prevention and intervention measures at school level. MODS highlights that a wide range of factors can contribute, but poverty and low socioeconomic status certainly increase the risk of dropping out of school.

Some progress was made in increasing the participation of Roma

students at all levels of education. However, the implementation of measures to reduce their drop-out rates and segregation should be strengthened, in particular on the local level. Similarly, integrating migrant children in the education system has been partly addressed, but further support for these efforts is needed.

Serbia has progressed with curricula reform, but training of school staff on students' key competences is needed to complement the ongoing curricular changes.

The Youth Strategy Action Plan 2018-2020 for Serbia is being drafted and coordinated by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). Its aim is to strengthen the youth policy coordination mechanisms at local level.

Alternative care

De-institutionalisation faces several challenges in Serbia. Children with a disability are overrepresented in institutional care: over 80% of children living in institutions in 2016 had a disability. The maximum

number of children allowed in each residential care home according to the State – set at 50 – is not respected. Moreover, children of all ages (including those under three) stay in the same institutions as adults. Due to the shortage of trained foster families, most children remain in institutions. There is no coordinated and planned process for advancing de-institutionalisation in Serbia, mainly due to insufficient funds and the resulting lack of alternative care services. Furthermore, no adequate measures are taken to prevent institutionalisation, and currently there are no clear estimates on existing investments and efforts to develop alternative services for children and families. Support for children and youth leaving the care system remains limited too. MODS also insists on immediate action to enforce the Rulebook on Prohibited Practices of the Employees in Social Protection, to ensure that children in institutions are free from all forms of abuse or neglect.

Consultations and civil society

MODS has been active in consultations either launched by the government or by the European Commission. MODS prepared recommendations for the European Commission's Delegation in Serbia (2016 and 2018), for some systematic laws in Serbia (Law on Social Welfare, July 2018), and the Economic Reform Programme (January 2018).

MODS's key recommendations on the Economic Reform Programme 2018-2020 include the need to improve the system of earmarked transfers by defining priority services for children and families at risk; to develop guidelines for the transformation of institutions for children; and to re-allocate funds for children and family support services. To monitor progress on these, MODS recommends establishing continuous and sustainable monitoring and evaluation of social protection support programmes and services, especially those under the mandate of local self-governments.

Similarly, MODS has established good working contact with the European Commission Delegation in Serbia and provided child-oriented priorities to both progress reports in 2016 and 2018. MODS finds the progress report of 2018 more specific and targeted at the main social issues of the country. MODS's key recommendations included strengthening the role of the Council for the Rights of the Child to become a leading coordination mechanism with core competences in child protection. In addition, MODS proposed that the new Action Plan for Children (the previous one having ended in 2015) as well as the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence, with concrete actions plans, should be adopted.

Slovakia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Respondent organisation:
Coalition for Children Slovakia (CCS)

 **5.43** millions total
20.5% under 19 yrs
5.2% under 5 yrs

.....
Population

9.3% 

.....
**Early school-leavers
rate**

24.4% 

.....
**Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion**



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Slovakia should take action 1) to provide equal access to early childhood education and care for all children – including children with disabilities and children from marginalised Roma communities – by speeding up and implementing the National Programme for Development of Upbringing and Education; and 2) to implement approved policies and legislation to prevent any form of systemic segregation and discrimination of Roma children by placing them in special schools.”

The policy priority for Slovakia remains a complex school reform focusing on inclusive education: despite slight improvements in this area, there is still much to be accomplished. The quality of education in Slovakian schools has been deteriorating over the years and children are achieving worse results in PISA testing.

To its credit, the European Commission looks for ways to make teaching a more attractive profession in the 2018 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). However, this is only one aspect of the overall problem. Coalition for Children Slovakia calls also for speedier implementation of a long-pending

reform programme, the ‘National Programme for Development of Upbringing and Education’, which would introduce concrete measures and actions towards inclusive education for children with disabilities and Roma children.

Early childhood education and care

Overall enrolment in pre-school education in Slovakia remains below both the OECD average and Europe 2020 goals – the share of three-year-olds attending kindergarten was 64% in 2014 (74% of four-year-olds, 90% of six-year-olds).¹ The situation is worse for Roma children: among this group, only 12.5% of 3-4 year-olds and 28.9% of 5-6 year-olds attended kindergarten in 2014.² Segregated Roma communities have the lowest share of children in formal pre-school education: 5.6% of children aged three and four years from segregated communities attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), compared to 14% of Roma children within certain Roma settlements, and 20.4% of those integrated into society.³

By reviewing 125 kindergartens (state, private and church) in 2015 and 2016, which made up 4.3% of all kindergartens in the country, the main school inspector established that quality and access to ECEC for disadvantaged children should be significantly improved. The inspector also reported that basic communication skills and hygiene were not properly taught to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴

For several decades, Slovakia has barely invested in developing kindergarten facilities. An analysis by the Ministry of Education in January 2017 predicted a shortage of around 22,000 kindergarten places in 2020.⁵ The OECD also ranks Slovakia among countries with the lowest GDP investment in ECEC.⁶

Although pre-school education is not compulsory in Slovakia, the

Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities⁷ has attempted to introduce obligatory pre-school education for children from the age of five, or one year before starting school. His office has also proposed mechanisms to support poor Roma families to enrol their children in ECEC.

The CSRs for Slovakia have repeatedly mentioned the need to include Roma children in mainstream education, and, as of 2018, the CSRs also mention the need for their inclusion from early childhood. Several policies and measures have been introduced to tackle this issue but have failed to result in any tangible actions. The European Commission repeatedly criticises the segregation of Roma children in Roma-only classes and schools, as well as misdiagnosing Roma children and the resulting misplacement of many of these

children into special schools. CSRs have also criticised the long-term discriminatory practice of how Roma children are tested in school, as well their overrepresentation in special schools. It is believed that more than 80% of Roma pupils of special schools were misdiagnosed.⁸ Moreover, research conducted by the Public Defender of Rights in 2014 confirmed that the testing of educational ability of Roma children from socially disadvantaged environments did not take into account the child's socio-economic background.⁹

All these findings plus pressure from the EU have prompted some action from the Slovak government. Legislative amendment §107 to the School Act in 2015 envisaging inclusion of Roma children into mainstream education was an important step forward although it was not adequately supported

1 OECD, Education at a Glance 2016, Slovak Republic, at 4, online at: http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/EAGCountryNotes/EAG2016_CN_SVK.pdf

2 UNDP, Report on the Living Conditions of Romani Households in Slovakia in 2010 (Bratislava: UNDP, 2012)

3 UNDP, Report on the Living Conditions of Romani Households in Slovakia in 2010 (Bratislava: UNDP, 2012) at 109, online at: <http://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/Report-on-the-living-conditions-of-Roma-households-in-Slovakia-2010.pdf>

4 http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RCM_2017_Slovakia_EC_approved.pdf

5 Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu, "Analýza situácie – kapacity materských škôl", January 2017, at 5, online at: <https://www.minedu.sk/analiza-situacie—kapacity-materskych-skol/>

6 <http://osf.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Slovakia-report-4-pager-English-final.pdf>

7 SITA, "Bezplatná materská škôlka. Most-Híd chce zmeny v predškolskej príprave", 24 April 2017, online at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20516112/bezplatna-povinna-skolka-most-hid-chce-zmeny-v-predscolskej-priprave.html>

8 The Equality organization asked 61 Slovak and Czech students in British schools and came up with embarrassing results - up to 85 % of respondents attended a special school in their home country. Of this, only four % of pupils defined a special approach in Britain. <https://www.tyzden.sk/temy/49339/keby-sme-boli-romovia-z-britanie-by-sme-sa-uz-nevratili/#.W1Wh7DjDL3E.facebook>

9 <http://www.vop.gov.sk/files/Sprava%20VOP%20FINALNA%20VERZIA.pdf>

by funding and other measures. The Slovak government has also introduced a regulation to prevent misplaced incentives in diagnosing special education needs of students. This regulation established that an independent expertise centre will conduct special needs assessments so as to avoid biased decisions by centres who are running (and profiting from) special schools. Despite these positive developments, the legal change in definition regarding who is a 'child from a socially disadvantaged environment' and the subsequent change in financial support for those who are no longer included in this definition is more likely to impact children from marginalised communities, than the positive legislation introduced in this arena.¹⁰ Hence, Coalition for Children Slovakia believes that more has to be done in these areas, perhaps by learning from good practices for inclusive education (e.g. inclusive teaching in the UK).

The needs of children with disabilities who are placed in

special institutions and schools are overlooked by both Slovakia's 2018 Country Report and CSRs. Coalition for Children Slovakia emphasises that there is a lack of community-based services for helping children with disabilities. In addition, mainstream schools avoid enrolling children with disabilities.

Teachers' education and in-service training courses do not prepare teachers to work either with children from diverse socio-cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, nor with children with special needs. Hence, teacher training is desperately needed in Slovakia.

In order to address both open and hidden segregation in education, new civil society platforms were established in 2018. 'Inclu-coalition' aims at inclusive education and consists of parents, educators and NGOs, and 'Initiative for Civic Education' is a platform striving to discuss and move forward innovative legislative measures to improve civic education in schools.

Civil society has been a vital actor in promoting inclusive education and is a contributor to the reform agenda of 'Learning Slovakia' – a proposed national educational strategy for the next 10 years. In the three-year consultation, civil society organisations brought many good practices and innovative projects to the forefront. However, the National Programme for Development of Upbringing and Education approved in June 2018 included only a few of them. This demonstrates what is now a common practice of relations between the state and civil society in Slovakia. NGOs are consulted and invited to join various working groups, common platforms and governmental committees to demonstrate that Slovakia is 'participatory' in developing policy, but in the end the government does not transfer evidence-based best practice into national policies and action plans.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-1-slovakia-2018.pdf>

¹¹ Politicians in general try to ignore CSOs by labelling them as proxies of foreign interests and thus undermining 'traditional national values'. As a response of the government to control civil society, new legislation related to NGOs' financing is expected to be introduced before the parliamentary elections in 2020.

Slovenia

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Slovenia should take action to adopt a strategic National Programme for Children that integrates all policies concerning children, including those related to child participation. Participation should be strengthened and made more effective."

The Slovenian government is making progress in the field of children's policies and policies affecting children. The past year has seen significant positive steps in this arena. New laws adopted in 2017/2018 include: a new Family Code, a new Resolution on Family Policy, a new Ombudsman Law (which, among other resolutions,

Respondent organisation:
Slovenian Association of Friends
of Youth (SAFY) on behalf of the
Slovenian NGO network ZIPOM



2.07 millions total
19.4% under 19 yrs
5.1% under 5 yrs

Population

4.3%

Early school-leavers
rate

15.1%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

enables institutionalisation of child advocates), and a new Resolution on the National Health Programme. The Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was also ratified. Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice has established a safe house for child victims of violence called 'A House for Children', which follows

the Icelandic 'Barnahus' model. **Such improvements in the field of children's rights in Slovenia have been significant.** However, there is room for improvement in supporting **children in vulnerable positions**, specifically migrant children, Roma children, and children who are victims of trafficking. More work also needs to be done in enabling

effective **child participation**.

Notably, Slovenia has yet to adopt a new National Programme for Children (the previous one expired in 2016).

Yet there is little mention of these issues, or of the positive planned reforms in Slovenia's Country Report and Country Specific Recommendation (CSR). To ensure that a future National Programme for Children is in line with existing EU guidance – the EU Recommendation on Investing in Children, and the European Pillar of Social Rights – the 2019 country report and CSR should go beyond encouraging Slovenia to develop a new Programme for Children which is holistic and integrates existing policies, and also push to specifically address child participation and increased support for children in vulnerable situations.

In Slovenia the culture of **child participation** is to some extent embedded at local level, including within the family and in schools. There is an informal mechanism which would allow children to participate in the shaping of laws and policies which affect them on a national level, but without a

specific legal mandate, Slovenian politicians are not giving children a real or effective voice. The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY), which is part of the coalition of NGOs working on children's rights (ZIPOM), runs a well-established Children's Parliament that has been running for 28 years, with yearly feedback to national politicians on their concerns and priorities. However, these priorities, including better cooperation with national politicians on matters which concern them, have yet to be discussed at the Slovenian National Assembly. The government has shown that it is prepared to listen to children – but when it comes to concrete action, promised collaboration does not materialise.

Child participation links directly to the Recommendation on Investing in Children and to the 11th Principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights by virtue of its role in giving a voice to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The EU should therefore recommend that Slovenia adopt a strategic National Programme for Children which highlights the right to participate

and ensures that children's voices are effectively considered.

The Slovenian NGO network ZIPOM has noted that **EU guidance has been instrumental in pushing for reform**. Many adopted resolutions, recommendations or directives concerning children's rights have been helpful in pressuring the government to implement policy reforms. One clear example of the influence of these on national policy is the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children. The new Slovenian Resolution on Family Policy, for example, mentions a better health system to address the needs of disadvantaged children and reducing inequality by investing in early childhood education and care.

It is also unfortunate that the issue of child participation, to date, has not been highlighted in either Slovenia's Country Report, nor in any of its CSRs. While the 2018 CSRs brought up some important issues for Slovenia, such as to adopt and implement the Healthcare and Health Insurance Act, in general children are not mentioned specifically in the CSR and not expanded upon in the Country Report. The 2018 CSRs, as

always, prioritise economic, fiscal and business topics. In turn, Slovenia's National Reform Programmes (NRPs) mention positive developments regarding early school leaving but do not expand on it or highlight problematic areas such as the lack of effective child participation at national level. Also, according to the Statistical Office of Slovenia the percentage of children living below the poverty threshold was higher in 2017 (12.8%) than in 2016 (11.9%), yet child poverty is not highlighted in either the Country Report or the CSR.

Overall, stakeholder engagement in decision-making functions relatively well in Slovenia. Although this varies depending on the topic (environment, children's rights, volunteering etc.), in general, ZIPOM feels that the State is prepared to listen. However, the outreach on the European Semester is not that broad across civil society. 2018 was the first time ZIPOM was involved in the Semester process through Slovenia's Semester Officer.

Spain

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Spain should increase child and family income support and use a child-rights approach in the preparation of any public budget by implementing a tracking system for the allocation and use of resources for children throughout the budget."

There is definitely room for improvement in terms of investing in children in Spain. The outgoing government was seen as being less active in its last months in office on the fight against child poverty and promoting children's rights more generally. It remains to be seen how the new government (in place since May 2018) will tackle the

issue, but the fact that a minister for children was appointed is a sign of commitment.

Spain's most recent National Child Strategy (PENIA) ended in 2016, and while a possible national anti-poverty strategy and national childhood plan were announced in the National Reform Programme

(NRP) of 2017, progress is lagging in terms of content, timeline and budget. Plataforma de Infancia believes that **a new children's strategy which prioritises tackling child poverty**, and ensures quality and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for 0-3 year-olds, as well as tangible child protection measures, should

Respondent organisation:
**Plataforma de Infancia (The Spanish
Children's Rights Coalition)**



46.5 millions total
19.8% under 19 yrs
4.6% under 5 yrs

Population

18.3%

Early school-leavers
rate

31.3%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

be created and implemented. This would be in line with the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children from 2013, and would contribute greatly to improving children's well-being in Spain. Indeed, according to Eurostat, children's relative poverty levels in Spain are high: around 29.7% (after social transfers), and unfortunately, according to data from Eurostat ESSPROS¹, the Spanish government invests only 1.3% of its GDP on children. This compares to the European Union average of 2.4%.

Contributing to these child poverty levels is the fact that **Spain has one of the lowest family benefits of the European Union in terms of quantity and coverage**. The annual subsidy given per child to low-income families is about €291 per year and is only for families with an income below €11,548 per year. Additionally, ECEC service provision has been privatised in Spain, which means those most in need do not have access to quality, affordable childcare. The 2018 CSRs for Spain importantly mentioned the need to improve family support, reduce early

school leaving rates and provide better support for students and teachers. However, unlike the 2017 CSRs, no special mention was given to the lack of access and affordability of ECEC. As the situation regarding ECEC has not yet improved over the last year the CSR should have again mentioned the lack of quality and affordable childcare by highlighting the share of children below 3 years old enrolled in formal childcare in public centres. It is necessary to increase the educational offer for the 0-3 age group with the aim of guaranteeing that this education is accessible to the most vulnerable groups. This policy should be reinforced with an adequate scholarship policy oriented towards equity.

It can be argued that EU guidance has the potential to be a powerful tool to promote children's rights and push for a more social dimension in Spanish politics. For example, the second PENIA (National Child Strategy), which ended in 2016, was developed because of a Country Specific Recommendation (CSR). Sadly, in recent years, while child

poverty rates in Spain are frequently highlighted by the EU's analysis, major improvements have not followed. The Spanish government has addressed child poverty through tax reductions for middle-class families, some initiatives on reconciliation, and through improvements in the employment rate. However, **tackling child poverty through the labour market perspective is not sufficient** and can create a greater degree of social exclusion. Other initiatives have such a low impact on the overall poverty figure that they cannot be considered meaningful.

Identifying budget lines would allow better analysis on the subject of child poverty and is a specific recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as specified in General Comment 19 on public budgeting for the realisation of children's rights.²

Yet, while in Spain the new law of 2015 established the obligation to make impact reports on all new regulations, the Spanish general budget is exempt from

any impact report on children. As such, Plataforma de Infancia urges the Spanish State to remove this exemption and implement a tracking system for the allocation and use of resources for children throughout the budget. This would ensure a political impact which can drive proper allocation of funds for investing in children. The European Commission (EC) should also push for the removal of this exemption and more generally call for the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children (2013) to guide the Spanish government in the creation of all policies and future plans.

It is positive that the 2018 Country Report for Spain provided relevant and important information on social policies (pp. 43-46) and education (pp. 40-43). Notably, the EC highlighted the low impact of social transfers on reducing child poverty (below the EU average), the high rates of early school leavers, the low participation of children aged 0-3 in public childcare, the difference in coverage and adequacy of the regional minimum income

¹ European System of Integrated Social Protection Statistics

² [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 19 \(2016\) on public budgeting for the realization of children's rights \(art. 4\)](#)

schemes between regions, and the low investment in education (below the EU average). It is necessary to bring these issues to the attention of the Spanish government; however, it would be better and more effective to place these observations within a holistic vision which pinpoints how these policies affect the children and their ability to exercise their rights. It would also be useful to provide more CSRs regarding child policy which are concrete and can easily be translated into country or region-specific reports.

However, it is important to be cautious when placing a social CSR next to stringent demands to reduce public spending.

It is difficult to reconcile the 2018 CSR to reduce the Spanish public deficit by 0.65% of GDP (around €7 billion), with recommendations such as improving family support. The European Commission could better support national policy making decisions in Spain by addressing this contradiction and taking on a more holistic vision when drafting their reports.

Plataforma de Infancia participates in the European Semester process indirectly through the 'Third Sector Platform', which represents civil society towards the government. Although child rights organisations are thereby consulted in the European Semester process in Spain, the process is not meaningful enough as there is only one meeting per cycle and it is not influential. Civil society would like to secure stronger involvement throughout the Semester process, and more transparency in this process both towards other stakeholders, and towards the public.



The Netherlands

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"The Netherlands should combat poverty among children by withdrawing its reservation to Article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as making sure that in-kind assistance is spent appropriately and that municipalities involve children in drawing up policies that affect them."


Respondent organisation:
Defence for Children - the Netherlands

Save the Children and Defence for Children commend the involvement and effort of the Cabinet towards advancing a child-centric poverty reduction policy. However, the recent report by the Social Economic Council (SER) 'Growing up without Poverty' indicated that while the government signals wanting to invest in tackling the structural

causes of poverty, it is yet unclear how it will achieve this. Defence for Children has identified some key obstacles that are persistently disregarded in the Netherlands, but which must be tackled in order to successfully combat poverty and social exclusion among children. These are: the reservation to Article 26 of the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the lack of effective monitoring to ensure that in-kind assistance will be spent appropriately, and the lack of consistency in anti-poverty policies in all Dutch municipalities.

Furthermore, and related to child poverty, Defence for Children has found that the Dutch government

 17.01 millions total
22.3% under 19 yrs
5.1% under 5 yrs

Population

7.1% 

Early school-leavers
rate

17.6% 

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion (2016)

could improve child participation. Children have the right to give their opinion on decisions that affect them, including policies relating to poverty, and their input increases the likelihood of policies being successful.

On the EU level, unfortunately, Country Reports for the Netherlands consistently emphasise economic growth and hardly mention children. Additionally, the Social Scoreboard presents figures without the necessary explanations alongside. Since the Scoreboard compares one country's result to that of other EU countries, the Netherlands appears to be doing very well – but this is not a fair representation of the state of play within the country.

Child poverty

Despite economic progress in the Netherlands, the number of children in long-term poverty has not decreased. According to the latest figures from the Netherlands Statistics, 292,000 children in the country run the risk of being poor and socially excluded. 117,000 are growing up in families with long-term

low incomes (at least four years in a row).

Some key obstacles need to be tackled to decrease the number of children living in poverty: the first, as identified by Defence for Children, is the lack of access to social security for Dutch children. The Dutch government is the **only country in the world that has made a reservation to Article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** on a child's right to independent social security. In this reservation the government argues that the provision is unnecessary because children can claim social security through their parents. However, the Children's Rights Helpdesk, as well as other professionals such as lawyers specialising in juvenile law, underline a direct link between this reservation to Article 26 and cases of families with young children who do not have enough food, water or heating and/or are removed from their homes (often to emergency accommodation, for long periods of time). Indeed, due to this reservation the Dutch government has received a red card from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every time

it has evaluated the Netherlands (1999, 2004, 2009, 2015). Children should not bear the brunt of restrictions due to the situation of their parents; when at risk of falling below the poverty line, they should be eligible to receive social security and insurances regardless of their parents' financial or personal situation. Unfortunately, the former Secretary of State of Social Affairs and Employment of the Netherlands did not see the point in withdrawing the reservation to Article 26 of the UNCRC. Defence for Children and Save the Children in the Netherlands continue to put this item on the agenda and are actively trying to find other ways to ensure that – in line with the concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – the reservation will be withdrawn. This would create a stable base for a child-friendly policy on poverty.

The second obstacle is the **lack of effective monitoring to ensure that in-kind assistance is spent appropriately**. The extra €100 million that the Cabinet sets aside every year for combatting child poverty – €85 million of which goes to municipalities – is very welcome

and of the utmost importance. This money is made available for municipalities to support in-kind assistance for children (for books, electronic devices, swimming lessons, etc.), in line with the Dutch government's wish to compensate for the consequences of poverty by enabling cultural, social and school activities for all. However, these are not properly earmarked. So while the growing attention towards combatting child poverty and putting it high on the (local) political agenda is a positive development, this is an insufficient guarantee that these extra means are being made available. Defence for Children has found through discussions with policy-makers from municipalities that some municipalities use this money to close a general budget gap, which means they are not supporting children who need it most. Considering the dire consequence, it is welcome that the Dutch government is now conducting research on how municipalities are spending the money received from the Cabinet; hopefully this will lead to better monitoring of allocated funds and effective earmarking. Dutch Council members, as well as some Aldermen

(municipal government members), have expressed their concerns on this topic on the Dutch television programme 'Nieuwsuur'.

Thirdly, there is the issue of **lack of equal poverty policies in all municipalities**. Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that children have the right to protection from poverty, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. Defence for Children and Save the Children note that due to decentralisation, poverty and debt policies are not the same in all municipalities – some municipalities provide adequate care to families in poverty, plus financial compensation per child, while in others families in need end up on the street. This is worrying because it creates a high rate of inequality. As such, policymakers in all municipalities should take into account the rights of the child and place the interests of the child first. To achieve this, it would be useful if the national government would take the lead by, for example, setting a minimum standard on child welfare.

Defence for Children and Save the Children, together with a group of children and young people, have recently pitched five action points to the municipal councils which would help combat child poverty: 1) actually use the in-kind assistance for children (*Klijnsmagelden*) to advance the fight against child poverty; 2) offer a Child Package (*Kindpakket*) so that children can, for example, play sports and participate in cultural activities; 3) make the policy available in understandable language for children and young people; 4) involve children and young people in issues related to poverty and social exclusion; and 5) break through the taboo and address the issue of poverty in public debates.

Child participation

Dutch municipalities are responsible for anti-poverty policies in their area and are obliged to involve citizens, including children and young adults, in shaping policy. Yet, according to the Child Ombudsman (2014) only 4.6% of municipalities (for instance the Hague, Tilburg and Zoetermeer) guarantee their participation.

Among this low proportion, one tends to find young people who are better educated and have positive role models at school and in the home, rather than those from vulnerable backgrounds. As a result, municipalities have insufficient knowledge on whether provisions set aside for children and young adults (especially in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations) are either appropriate or well-implemented. Indeed, one of the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the last periodic report of the Netherlands stated that it was concerned about the limited opportunities for children to participate in decisions and policies that affect them. Unfortunately, Country Reports for the Netherlands have not picked up on this issue.

This is an issue addressed by the project 'Speaking Minds', a collaboration between Save the Children, Defence for Children and Stimulansz (a consultancy firm for municipalities). 'Speaking Minds' gives young people a voice on issues of poverty and debt policy at municipal level. Young people have ten weeks to think about a

(local) poverty issue submitted by policy-makers before presenting their concrete advice on this. After a certain period (usually three months) policy-makers give feedback to the youth about what has been done with their advice.

Despite this initiative, it is clear that more concrete measures must be created by the national government to make sure that participation is achieved in municipalities (as well as at national level). A national minimum standard on child participation would be useful, as the Dutch government is decentralised and initiatives are now very fragmented. Another possibility could be to integrate the participation of children in the Dutch school curriculum.

United Kingdom

Country Profile on the 2018 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Eurochild's Recommendation for 2018-2019

"The upcoming year (2019) will be the last year that the UK is part of the European Semester cycle. As such, the UK nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) urge the European Commission to create a report and corresponding recommendations which establish a strong base for civil society lobbying in the field of children's rights for the upcoming years, particularly with regard to child poverty, which is stubbornly high and on the rise across the UK."

Respondent organisations:
Children's Rights Alliance for England,
Children in Northern Ireland, Children
in Scotland, Children in Wales

Common message to the European Commission from the four nations

The respondent organisations are disappointed that, yet again, the European Semester documents and figures take a UK-wide approach and fail to account for the fact that

responsibility for many relevant policy areas has been devolved to the governments of Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland – including education, health, housing, family support, childcare, mental health and children in care. The situation in England is often conflated with the situation in the UK as a whole, leading to a **lack of detailed**

understanding of realities in the four nations and insufficient targeting of recommendations.

Furthermore, the Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) for the UK 2018 did not mention rights, only mentioned children once, and again did not reference the three pillars of the Recommendation on Investing in



65.81 millions total
23.5% under 19 yrs
6% under 5 yrs

Population

10.6%

Early school-leavers
rate

27.2%

Children at risk of
poverty or social
exclusion

Children (2013). Additionally, **while poverty figures were mentioned in the UK Country Report 2018, no explanation or contextualisation was offered, nor a recognition that the child poverty rate is stubbornly high** (and highest in Wales of the UK nations) and on the rise across the UK, with poverty disproportionately affecting households with children. Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) is concerned about the rise in child poverty in England and the UK more broadly. According to a recent report by CRAE, child poverty in the UK is predicted to rise from 27% in 2015/16 to 31% (4.4 million children) by 2021/22. Of that increase, around three quarters (equivalent to 400,300 children) is a result of benefit reforms. As such, CRAE is worried about Brexit shutting out space for positive policy development for children, including on addressing child poverty. It also urges decision-makers to bear in mind the consequences of Brexit on children in the UK, particularly the loss of funding from the EU which will cause areas of deprivation. Furthermore, CRAE recommends that the government create a plan to tackle child poverty and put a stop

to the four-year freeze of children's benefits.

Two years ago the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child called for the UK government to re-establish concrete targets for the eradication of poverty and for a comprehensive assessment of the cumulative impact of social security and tax credit reform on children. So far no progress has been made in this arena.

Also, while point three of the CSR for the UK outlines the reasoning behind the European Commission not commenting on post-Brexit arrangements, respondent organisations feel this is a missed opportunity to reference the European funding which the UK enjoys through the European Structural Funds and other benefits received through EU legislation. **The UK government must fully engage with the devolved governments and put in place an adequate plan with resources to ensure that disadvantaged communities (especially children within these) currently supported by the EU do not suffer as a result of Brexit.** Young people were not allowed to

participate in the referendum on leaving the EU, yet they will be most affected by its outcome, hence their fundamental rights and guarantees must be maintained, social cohesion strengthened, and their voices heard and considered as Brexit moves forward.

Wales

Children in Wales points out that **child poverty levels in Wales** are higher than for the other three UK nations; disappointingly, this is not explicitly reported in the Country Report on the UK. Furthermore, while the UK's CSR of 2018 recognises under point eleven that the impact of some welfare reforms and cutbacks are yet to be fully felt (particularly for in-work families), there are no recommendations on tackling the issue. Similarly, point eleven mentions that social protections and issues around inclusion 'need attention going forward' but this is not developed further, nor is there an outline of what attention it wishes to see, and the report avoids presenting any recommendations on this topic. Welfare reform in Wales is already having a devastating effect

on many children and families, with independent projections of a sharp increase over the coming years as a result of actions on the UK level.

The **need for quality apprenticeships (a devolved matter)** is repeated in the CSR for the third year running. Children in Wales welcomes this recommendation as young people still face many barriers to accessing and completing apprenticeships in Wales. In addition, there are issues around gender segregation, which is not unique to Wales. **Boosting the housing supply (another devolved matter)** is also repeated for the third year running. Children in Wales is pleased that the Welsh government has committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing, as well as putting statutory duties in place to tackle homelessness and housing need. However, while **tackling growing levels of homelessness is an urgent priority throughout the UK**, and one of the consequences of a lack of affordable homes, it fails to get a mention in the CSR.

Childcare reforms (a devolved matter) are briefly mentioned within the CSR and the gaps in existing

provision (and forward plans) are noted, but – yet again – there is no recommendation. In the 2016 CSR, the European Commission recommended to ‘further improve the availability of affordable, high-quality, full-time childcare’: this should still be a priority. The Welsh government is in the process of rolling out childcare for working parents of 3 and 4 year-olds, presented in Wales as the most generous childcare offer across the UK. Yet issues for non-working parents, children under 3, children living in rural areas, children with disabilities, children whose first language is Welsh, childcare costs outside the free provision, and childcare for older children all remain a challenge.

The Welsh government must **prioritise actions which seek to invest in children and prevent poverty**. The challenge for the Welsh government will be how to respond to pressures beyond its control and with ever-decreasing resources from the central government. Particularly during the important negotiations regarding **Brexit**, children’s rights and well-being must be prioritised on all levels.

Scotland

Children in Scotland highlights that the Country Specific Recommendations for the UK 2018 were not particularly relevant for Scotland. For example, point two on the necessity of boosting the housing supply does not pertain to Scotland as the Scottish government has increased the building of public, social and affordable housing in recent years. Point three on investing in upskilling is also not very relevant, as Scotland actually performs relatively well in enabling apprenticeships – over 26,000 last year compared with 48,000 in England, which has ten times the population. However, point one demands a specific cap on UK government expenditure: this inevitably has significant implications in terms of the impact of continued austerity on public services, and affects everyone in the UK, particularly those in poverty and/or otherwise disproportionately disadvantaged.

As **child poverty in Scotland is on the rise**, Children in Scotland is pleased that child poverty and child well-being have been subjects of

recent legislation in the country. Key elements of the legislation include non-stigmatised support for families and access to secure and sufficiently remunerative employment to address family poverty. Overall, the Scottish government is willing to tackle the issue of child poverty; however, the fact that it is not high on the agenda on the UK level makes it difficult to move forward. Due to Brexit, attention towards social issues such as child poverty are likely to decrease even more on the UK level. The situation for children in poverty in Scotland (and all over the UK) is therefore unlikely to improve in the coming years.

Nevertheless, civil society must continue to bring the issue of child poverty to the attention of decision-makers at all levels; this is consistent with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Recommendation on Investing in Children of 2013. Therefore, Children in Scotland urges the final European Semester documents for the UK to really focus on this topic and, specifically, to **encourage investment in universal services with proportionate and appropriate additional support for those who need it**.

Northern Ireland

According to Children in Northern Ireland, the Country Specific Recommendations for the UK 2018 fall short in terms of helping children, young people and families in Northern Ireland as information from the ground in Northern Ireland is clearly lacking and **Northern Ireland is hardly mentioned**. For example, the CSR mentions that ‘childcare reforms are being rolled out, but more provision may be needed...’. However, in Northern Ireland, **childcare reforms are not being rolled out at all**. Northern Ireland hasn’t had a childcare strategy since 1999, and will not have one any time soon because it has no government minister to sign off on the childcare consultation that took place in 2016.

The fact that Northern Ireland is hardly mentioned in the CSR is particularly worrying as Northern Ireland currently has no government. With the institutions collapsed, **Westminster should step in to make policy decisions**. It has not done so for fear of creating friction with regard to their demand/supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party. In the meantime, as

a result of the roll out of Universal Credit, all the mitigations that the previous Assembly put in place will run out soon and there are no ministers to make decisions. Families are facing a reduction in income and are struggling to make ends meet. **Poverty and holiday hunger are on the rise in Northern Ireland.** In fact, the Department of Education recently cut extended school budgets that were providing breakfast clubs to feed children – many breakfast clubs are now closing. Children in Northern Ireland would have liked to see the levy from the Sugar Tax used for holiday hunger and breakfast clubs in Northern Ireland; sadly, this is not the case. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that the Department of Finance will now divide the additional money granted from the Barnett formula between all the government departments, rather than allocating this money specifically to projects that support the health and well-being of children. As such, Children in Northern Ireland urges the European Commission to **mention the issue of child poverty, and particularly child hunger, in Northern Ireland in the 2019 CSR.**

There are many pressing social issues affecting children in Northern Ireland, as well as many policy decisions in long-term limbo. Decision-makers need to step up and take responsibility for the deteriorating state of children's rights and well-being in Northern Ireland.





Statistics explained

Early school-leavers rate: population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training.

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion: the risk of poverty or social exclusion is a combination of 3 indicators: the risk of poverty after social transfers (income poverty), severe material deprivation and living in a household with very low work intensity. This is broken down by for the population aged 0-17.

All data on population, early school leaving and child poverty provided in country profiles was retrieved from: Eurostat, 2017

Other recent Eurochild publications

Eurochild's Strategic Plan 2019-2021, 2018: https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/04_News/Eurochild/Eurochild_Strategic_Plan_2019-2021.pdf

Investing in children through the post-2020 European Multiannual Financial Framework, 2018: https://www.eurochild.org/news/news-details/article/investing-in-children-through-the-post-2020-european-multiannual-financial-framework/?no_cache=1

Opening Doors for Europe's Children campaign, Maintain, strengthen and expand EU's pivotal role towards children's deinstitutionalisation, 2018 <https://bit.ly/2PRRFfZ>

Childonomics Measuring the long-term social and economic value of investing in children; Summary of Findings, 2018 <https://bit.ly/2MN9Txt>

Eurochild's Policy Position on the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2017: https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/02_Child_Poverty/Eurochild/Eurochild_s_Policy_Position_on_the_European_Pillar_of_Social_Rights.pdf

Investing in children in the era of social rights; 2017 Eurochild Report on the European Semester, 2017 <https://bit.ly/2ML9UBT>

Childonomics Introduction to the conceptual framework and methodology, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2jMBpzj>

Eurochild's Policy Position on the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2fr8TAY>

Working Paper on Child Guarantee, 2016 - <http://bit.ly/2en2loz>

Is Europe doing enough to invest in children? 2016 Eurochild Report on the European Semester, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2xxqEce>



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe



This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014-2020. For further information please consult <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>. The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

© Eurochild 2018

Design: inextremis.be - mp 5846. Photos: AdobeStock