



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

New opportunities for investing in children

2019 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.



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Purpose of the report

- 1 Assess the progress of EU Member States 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 2019 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 to advocate on the European Semester at national and European level 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 rights perspective for addressing child poverty to policymakers at EU level who are responsible for monitoring and evaluating countries' progress towards economic and social objectives.

Acknowledgements

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1 Background

The 22.7 million children at risk of poverty or social exclusion represent one of the most vulnerable population groups in the European Union.¹ Children who grow up in poverty have less opportunities than their peers. They have less access to quality education starting from early childhood education until higher education, and are more likely than

children from better-off families to face difficulties such as: school drop-out; lower educational attainment; health problems (including mental health issues), being in contact with the law, or being in the child protection system.

Child poverty can have lifelong effects on children's lives, including

leading to poverty in adulthood, and passing it on to the next generation. According to OECD estimates, it takes on average five generations to exit poverty in its member countries.²

Yet there is ample evidence that inequality in society can be best addressed in childhood, which is why both governments and

EU decision-makers prioritise prevention and universal support policies. 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.

1.1 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)³ – known as the 'EC Recommendation on Investing in Children' – 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 EC Recommendation on Investing in Children, 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.

1 Based on latest data available from Eurostat for 2018.

2 OECD (2018), *A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

3 The European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (2013).

The EC 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.

The EC Recommendation on Investing in Children encourages Member States to develop necessary implementation and monitoring mechanisms, national strategies and targets, and to make use of relevant EU instruments and financial instruments.

Despite the comprehensive policy framework of the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children, it has not had the expected impact on policy reform in the Member States. Investments in the 2014-2020 EU funding period were not directed sufficiently towards its implementation. Most EU Member States did not develop comprehensive national strategies to implement the principles of the Recommendation and investments were made on an ad-hoc basis.

1.2 The European Semester

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. 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 European Semester cycle

Annual Growth Survey - November: 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.

The 'National Semester' - July to November: In this 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.

Country Specific Recommendations - May: Recommendations from the European Commission to each Member State, adopted soon after by Council.

Country Reports - February: The European Commission's analysis of the economic and social situation in each Member State. There has been increased visibility of the 'social dimension' in the past few years, including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Social Scoreboard.

National Reform Programmes and National Stability and Convergence Programmes - April: Member States submit reports on implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy and on their commitments on budgetary policy.

1.3 The European Pillar of Social Rights

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.

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 Pillar⁴ 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 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."

A notable impact of the Pillar on the European Semester has been the update of the Employment Guidelines.⁵ Two years after its proclamation, **Eurochild assesses the Pillar to have 'socialised' the European Semester to a larger extent than before, without however, increasing the number of CSRs dedicated to preventing and tackling child poverty.**

The Pillar of Social Rights remains an opportunity to give more visibility to policies directly affecting children,

especially as the incoming European Commission committed to put in place an Action Plan to implement it.

The Social Scoreboard

Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is monitored through the Social Scoreboard, as part of the Country Reports. The Scoreboard includes a number of indicators structured around: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions; and public support / social protection and inclusion.

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

⁴ Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document, Communication: Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights, European Commission, April 2017.

⁵ Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States COM(2017).

1.4 Looking to the new EU policy and financial frameworks

transfers, showing (to some extent) Member States' progress in implementing dimensions of the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children. Its main added value is in making effective links between the Recommendation, the Pillar of Social Rights and the Semester Process. However, it does not provide the level of detail necessary to understand the situation of children in a particular country. The data needs to be broken down by age where relevant and include more child-specific indicators, such as children's material deprivation.

The next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will start in 2021 and be in place for seven years. As negotiations between the EU institutions on the various instruments are progressing, there is pressure to reduce financial expenditure across the board. At the same time, the next funding period offers a significant opportunity to ensure that EU investments tackle child poverty and social exclusion across the Member States. In the case of the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), €101 billion has been set aside to support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Common Provisions Regulation for the 2021-2027 EU funding period furthermore includes an enabling condition for Member States, requiring the development of national strategies and action plans on poverty reduction and social inclusion - including a diagnosis of child poverty.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

In the 2019 Country Reports, the European Commission included a new section, 'Annex D: Investment Guidance on Cohesion Policy Funding 2021-2027', which identifies investment priorities for Member States when designing their Operational Programmes for the next period.⁶

As set out in the European Commission's Communication accompanying the 2019 Country Reports, the purpose of the new Annex Ds is to identify how EU funds can better address specific investment priorities in Member States, based on the Commission's underpinning Semester analysis. The identification of investment needs is based on the shared understanding that investments should have as high an impact on economic, social

and territorial cohesion as possible. Of these, Policy Objective 4: 'A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' is of particular interest to Eurochild and its members.

The Child Guarantee

Given the persistent high levels of child poverty across EU Member States, the European Parliament has specifically proposed the allocation of an additional budget of €5.9 billion to implement a new 'European Child Guarantee' under the ESF+ in the next EU funding period.⁷ Under the Parliament's proposals, Member States would put aside 5% of their ESF+ resources for the implementation of the Child Guarantee, which would contribute to the aim that all children - and in particular those in the most vulnerable situations - **have access to free healthcare, free education,**

6 As established in the Common Provisions Regulation 2021-27.

7 Debates between the 3 EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament and the Council of the EU), known as trilogues, started in late 2019. The Council has not yet taken a position on the Child Guarantee proposal

free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition.

Prior to her confirmation, President-elect of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, confirmed the development of a Child Guarantee as part of the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. She explicitly requested Commissioner-designate for Jobs, Mr Nicolas Schmit, to lead on the development of the Child Guarantee; and she entrusted the coordination to Vice President-designate for Democracy and Demography, Ms Dubravka Šuica. With such political backing from the European Parliament and Commission, there is a likelihood of the Child Guarantee being established with resources from the EU budget – to be confirmed in 2020.

Sustainable Development Goals and child poverty

The next funding period of the EU offers an opportunity to align the European Semester with the commitments of the EU and its

Member States to realise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda is anchored on international human rights standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Several SDG targets are directly related to promoting children's rights. For example, SDG 1 aims to “reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty”. The 2030 Agenda also aims to end inequalities (SDG 10), end hunger (SDG 2), promote good health and well-being (SDG 4), and achieve gender equality (SDG 5). However, despite Member States’ commitment to realise these goals, child poverty has received no, or very limited, reference in the annual voluntary national reports submitted to the UN High Level Political Forum on the implementation of the SDGs.⁸ Greater alignment of the 2030 Agenda framework with the European Semester process would allow for greater and combined political pressure for the EU and its Member States to comprehensively address child poverty.

1.5 Key Findings

1. Member States give insufficient attention to child poverty

Child poverty is a common issue for all countries in the report, ranging from countries with high GDP (such as AT, DE & DK), to lower GDP countries (such as HR, HU, PL & PT). So far, measures and funding did not provide adequate solutions. The need for a comprehensive national strategy for reducing child poverty and social exclusion was raised across several alternative country recommendations. Reducing child poverty needs to be higher on national agendas.

⁸ See the Fundamental Rights Report, 2019.

2. No child should be forgotten or left behind in Europe
.....

Member States need to ensure that all children are included in society, and can fully exercise their rights in accessing the services they are entitled to. Particular attention is needed for children with a migration background, from ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. Inclusive education and healthcare are vital, but inclusive education without segregation remains a challenge for many countries. Healthcare services have been deteriorating across several countries (e.g. BG, HU, EE & LV) with some regions and rural areas in particular failing to provide quality care for children.

3. Early childhood is a key priority for further investment
.....

Focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) in this year's European Semester is welcomed (quoted in country specific recommendations for AT, CY, CZ, IE, IT, PL, & SK). However, early childhood policies need to go beyond a simple focus on improving participation rates. ECEC needs to be of high quality and accessible to all families. Early childhood development is a crucial area of social investment for Europe.

4. Further support is needed for family- and community-based alternative care
.....

Visible progress has been made in deinstitutionalisation reforms by 12 European countries (BG, HR, CZ, EE, GR, HU, LT, LV, PL, RO, SK & SL) identified by the European Commission - supported by national deinstitutionalisation strategies and associated EU funding. However, more efforts are needed to increase and improve family- and community-based alternative care provision and to support family strengthening programmes, by which family separation can be prevented. The transition from institutional to family- and community-based care for children is still a cross-European issue that is missing its spotlight in the European Semester.

5. Participation of children is still underdeveloped
.....

'Children's Right to Participate' is the third pillar of the European Commission's Recommendation on Investing in Children, both in terms of participation in society and in decision-making that affects their lives. There are a few examples of good practice in child participation (such as BG, CY, FI, IE, MT). Overall interest appears to be growing. However, there is a need for systematic child participation - building on successful practice - to ensure that children's rights are respected. Eurochild members (from HR, CZ, NL, PT and SI) have all called on their national governments to ensure that the voices of children are heard in decision-making processes.

1.6 Alternative CSRs for each Member State

Having assessed the European Commission's recommendations, Eurochild members issue alternative country specific recommendations to prioritise children for the coming year:

Country	Alternative CSR for 2020
Austria	<i>Austria should take action to reduce the poverty and social exclusion of children and properly treat refugee children so they receive the same care and education as Austrian children. A National Strategy for Children and related action plan are required to provide comprehensive and direct policy solutions.</i>
Bulgaria	<i>Bulgaria should take action to reform and increase the capacity of its child protection systems and early childhood care, and to actively promote child well-being and family-support policies through a new National Strategy for the Child.</i>
Croatia	<i>Croatia should take action to create and implement specific measures to reduce child poverty (including increased allocations for children), increase and sustain the inclusion of children in quality early childhood education and care, and ensure accessible programmes for preventing violence against children. In addition, Croatia should adopt the systematic practice of consulting children on the measures that apply to them.</i>
Cyprus	<i>Cyprus should take action to put emphasis on education as a right of all children (not only a means of entering the labour market) and conclude the long-pending reform of the social protection system to address children's needs and eliminate child poverty and exclusion.</i>
Czechia	<i>Czechia should take action to put children's rights on a priority agenda with a special emphasis on children's right to be heard, the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care of children, and fulfilment of basic needs of children from socially marginalised backgrounds.</i>
Denmark	<i>Denmark should take action to prevent the rising inequality between the various groups of society, with particular focus on the lowest-income households, migrants and the socially vulnerable.</i>
Estonia	<i>Estonia should take action to invest in the early identification of special needs and related support services, the availability of mental health services and better health promotion and disease prevention.</i>
Finland	<i>Finland should take action to ensure child rights impact assessment is conducted whenever laws or budgets are developed.</i>
France	<i>France should take action to develop a real prevention policy for children and families, to better prevent risks of poverty and social exclusion and contribute to the well-being of children.</i>
Germany	<i>Germany should take action to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in all types of schools and in all areas of life.</i>

Country	Alternative CSR for 2020
Hungary	<i>Hungary should take action to prepare a comprehensive strategy including measurement and evaluation to tackle social exclusion and the limited resources available for education, health and social support.</i>
Ireland	<i>Ireland should take action to develop, fund and implement a credible five-year plan (with a national lead) to end child poverty, including investing in school meals, free schoolbooks, medical cards, housing and subsidies to take part in cultural activities.</i>
Latvia	<i>Latvia should take action to invest in children through prevention and early intervention strategies in social protection, education and health across all regions of Latvia. It should also monitor implementation of deinstitutionalisation processes to ensure family- and community-based services are provided according to needs.</i>
Malta	<i>Malta should continue investing more in open spaces, public gardens, environmental protection and afforestation as an investment in the well-being of adults and children today and for future generations to come.</i>
The Netherlands	<i>Netherlands should take action to increase the knowledge and understanding of children's rights among children, young people and professionals who work with them in order to ensure meaningful participation of children and young people, and make the interests of the child central.</i>
Poland	<i>Poland should take action to significantly reinforce efforts to transition from institutional to family- and community-based care for children, including for children with special needs.</i>
Portugal	<i>Portugal should take action to develop a comprehensive national strategy to tackle child poverty and promote the social integration of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. It should also take action to reduce inequalities in timely access to high-quality healthcare and to ensure that the right of children to be heard in matters that affect their lives is fully respected.</i>
Serbia	<i>Serbia should take action to support families, prevent family separation and facilitate family reunification for children already placed in alternative care.</i>
Slovakia	<i>Slovakia should take immediate action to boost the reform process in education, with special focus on inclusion and especially the inclusion of children from marginalised communities.</i>
Slovenia	<i>Slovenia should take action to set children's rights as a priority agenda with a special emphasis on children's right to be heard and the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care of children.</i>
Spain	<i>Spain should take action to reduce poverty rates, especially child poverty rates. Increasing the amount and coverage of family benefits and social transfers for families at risk of poverty or exclusion should be prioritised. There should also be clear investment to increase the public offer of early childhood education.</i>
United Kingdom	<i>The United Kingdom and its devolved nations should take urgent action to eradicate child poverty, reduce social inequalities, tackle homelessness and improve health and well-being outcomes for all, including by fully accepting and delivering on the Recommendations of the 2019 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.</i>

1.7 Recommendations to the 2020 European Semester

1. Ensure that children are included in the next policy framework driving the European Semester

With the Europe 2020 strategy coming to an end, the efforts in 2020 will be focused on the design of the next ten years policy framework. Eurochild recommends using the Sustainable Development Goals as a basis for the future strategy, and adopting SDG 1 to reduce child poverty by half by 2030. The future strategy must take a child-rights perspective and adopt corresponding EU targets, set to benchmark development in Europe.

2. Use the link between EU funding and the European Semester to promote the social dimension of policies

The 2020 European Semester can lay the ground for even greater coherence between policy reforms and financial priorities:

- The investment needs identified in the 2019 Country Reports are an important milestone for engaging in the design of operational programmes for cohesion policy 2021-2027. These should be a reference point in 2020 to assess the state of play on design of the Operational Programmes.
- A specific focus on measures aimed at tackling child poverty can reinforce and help make the best use of the Child Guarantee.
- Targeted efforts are needed for the regular monitoring of national strategic frameworks for poverty reduction and social inclusion (and their respective sections on child poverty), as required by the Common Provisions Regulation. These should cover both the fulfilment and quality of the strategies and be realised in consultation with civil society organisations.

3. Include a focus on children’s well-being in the EU’s analysis of national policy development in the Country Reports

The country reports are valuable regular assessments of national policy developments. However, more attention is needed to demonstrate the situation of children in each country, including more indicators disaggregated by age and more child-specific data in the interpretation of the Social Scoreboard.

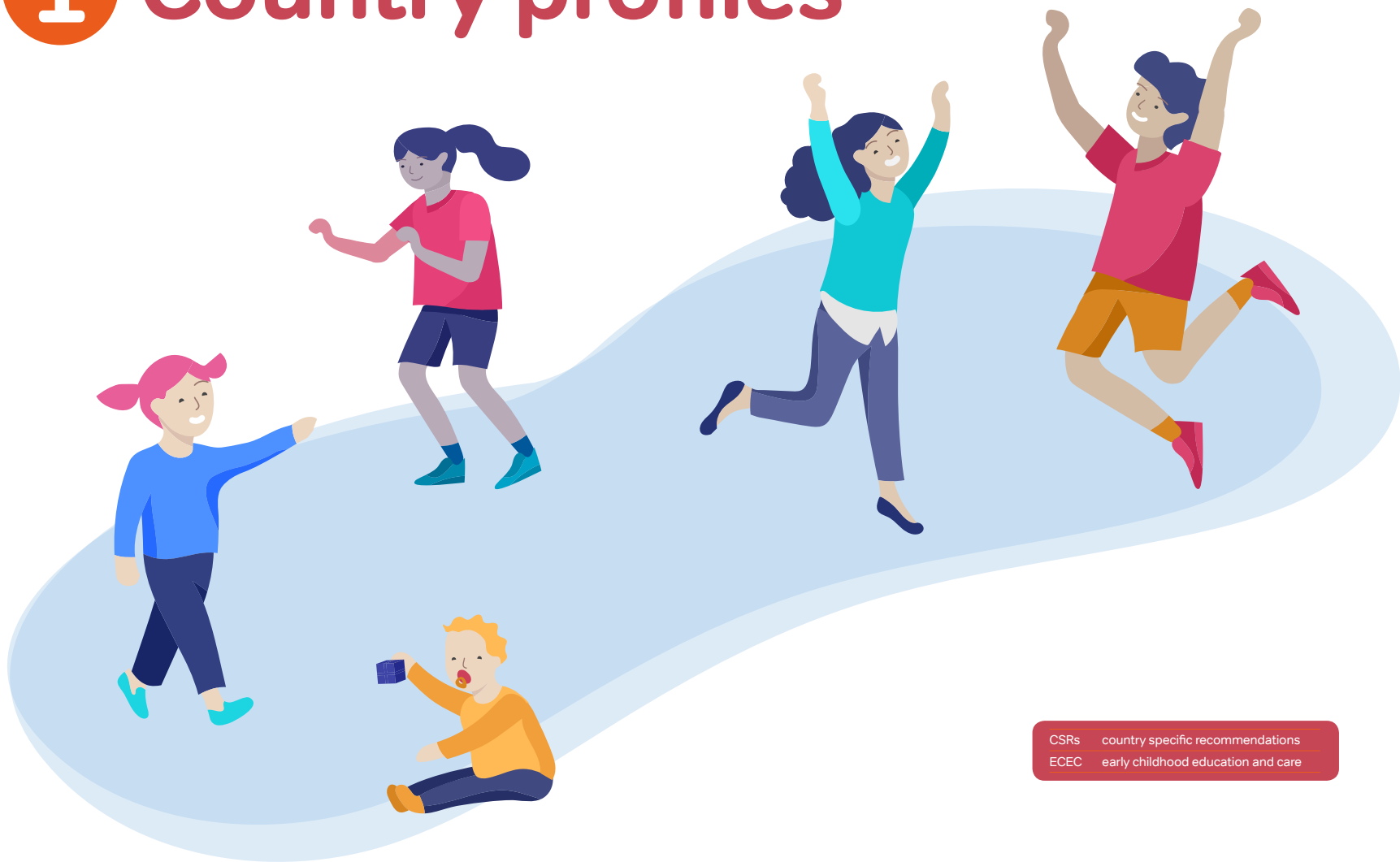
Furthermore, the Country Reports could also be used to recognise positive policy commitments of Member States, which have yet to be enacted – particularly in areas linked to the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children. This will not only encourage governments to complete roll out of initiatives in the pipeline, but also demonstrate the impact of EU processes and frameworks.

Finally, the Country Reports can be an occasion to further encourage Member States to develop child poverty reduction plans, in which they define the universal policy measures they have/aim to put in place; as well as the targeted measures to take to prevent and tackle child poverty, at national, regional and local levels.

4. Make the engagement of civil society in the European Semester a requirement for both Member States and the European Commission

The EU is struggling to effectively harness the full potential of the European Semester process to influence policy change at national level. Accountability and ownership are key and could be strengthened with more meaningful civil dialogue. 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. For instance, the European Commission could issue and make public its guidelines on stakeholder consultation in the Semester, which are addressed both to European Semester Officers and to governments. The roles of European Semester Officers could be further reinforced, by designating one Officer responsible for liaison with civil society.

1 Country profiles



CSRs country specific recommendations
ECEC early childhood education and care

Austria

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Austria should take action to reduce the poverty and social exclusion of children and properly treat refugee children so they receive the same care and education as Austrian children. A National Strategy for Children and related action plan are required to provide comprehensive and direct policy solutions.

Respondent organisation:
National Coalition for the
Implementation of the UN CRC -
Austria

The National Coalition emphasises that Austria has neither a Children's Rights Strategy nor a National Action Plan for Children's Rights. The implementation of a document adopted in 2004 was discontinued shortly afterwards due to a lack of political will. The reference in the current report of the Federal Government to individual existing

strategy documents (e.g. National Action Plan Disability, National Action Plan Violence against Women, Child Health Strategy) cannot replace comprehensive instruments that combine responsibilities and are based on children's rights.



8,858,775* total
19.5%** under 19 yrs
4.9%** under 4 yrs

Population

21.6%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

In 2018, however, following a political agreement between the provincial governors and the Federal Government on the issue of the decentralisation of competences, an amendment to the Federal Constitution was adopted without prior consultation of experts, according to which, responsibility for legislation and implementation in

the field of child and youth welfare would in future (from 2020) lie exclusively with the nine federal states.

This severe shift in competence has called into question the guarantee of common, non-discriminatory standards in such key areas of child rights as the protection of children from violence, preventative measures, access to social services (to support parents and families), and the nationwide anchoring and definition of Ombuds offices for children and youths in all federal states. It was rejected by a broad alliance of Ombuds offices for children and youths, child protection institutions, service providers, research and practice, including the National Coalition Austria.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Currently, 339,000 children and adolescents in Austria are at risk of poverty. They experience poverty in various areas such as education,

housing, health, clothing, food and social life. Poverty does not only mean monetary poverty and exclusion, but also restrictions in daily life and simple basic needs. Even in a rich country like Austria, about 54,000 children currently have to do without a nutritious meal; 118,000 cannot go on holiday. 180,000 children live in households that cannot cope with unexpected expenses.

Poverty deprives children and young people of their opportunities for social participation and has an impact on all aspects of their lives.¹ Similarly, as noted in the 2019 Country Report for Austria: “inequality of opportunity for children is high. The AROPE rate for the children of low-skilled parents was 57.7% higher than for the children of high-skilled parents in 2017, a gap that is greater than the EU average”. The 2019 Country Report outlines that appropriate investment in the employability and social inclusion of these vulnerable groups could alleviate this risk.

Child benefit of currently around 863 Euros for a single parent is regarded as the maximum amount; children are assigned percentages of this maximum figure depending on the number of children. For the first child, this amounts to around €215 per month, for the second child €130 per month; from the third child onwards only €43 per month.

The law of the former Austrian Federal Government, adopted in 2019, changes this and provides for a basic federal legislation on social welfare. Although the law proposes an “equal” distribution among all children, that does not increase the total amount of child-related benefits. In particular, for multi-child families, which are already affected by an increased risk of poverty, it is to be assumed that fewer financial resources are available per month for the children.

Another measure aimed at supporting families is the family bonus: a tax deduction of 1,500 Euros per child per year, which is paid out up to the child's 18th birthday. The National Coalition

Austria believes that in some respects this tax benefit is very problematic in terms of distribution policy, because families with a very low income and those who depend on social benefits – for example due to unemployment – receive nothing. This means that families at risk of poverty are excluded from the new benefit.

Furthermore, evaluations by the National Statistics Office with regard to the living conditions of children in the minimum benefit system show cuts in children's everyday lives: more than half (53%) of the children in the minimum benefit system have to live in overcrowded flats (this is only true for 6% of all children), almost one in three children (29%) cannot afford new clothing and almost one in five children (19%) cannot take part in school activities/trips. Although the law contains proposals for additional benefits for single parents and their children, these are only “optional benefits” which the federal states can provide or not.

1 Statistik Austria, 2018: Table volume EU SILC 2017: Income, poverty, living conditions. (Tabellenband EU SILC 2017: Einkommen, Armut, Lebensbedingungen)

Child protection reforms

According to a report,² the number of children placed in alternative care, the size of the groups and the staffing ratios vary between regions. In Upper Austria and Carinthia, six per 1,000 children were placed in alternative care. The size of the groups varies from eight children per supervised shared accommodation in Salzburg to sixteen children in Burgenland.

Prevention still receives far too little attention in child and youth welfare services in Austria. Appropriate services such as counselling centres, school social work or early intervention are not available everywhere.

New legislation will significantly influence child protection systems with the creation of nine different child and youth welfare systems in Austria. This gives rise to fears of further unequal treatment and a deterioration in child protection. The compilation of meaningful nationwide statistics, the mandatory participation of children and the

establishment of independent Ombuds offices for Children and Youths, as currently provided for by the Child and Youth Services Act, will then no longer be guaranteed.

The National Coalition Austria therefore calls for further harmonisation of standards and professionalisation rather than decentralisation without adoption of unified standards.

Austrian legislation does not explicitly make any distinction between children of Austrian descent and children of foreign descent, yet unaccompanied child refugees are treated unequally in child and youth welfare. In particular, unaccompanied child refugees aged 14 and over do not have their needs and potentials assessed. There are fewer therapies and educational measures offered and the daily fee for care is about 50% lower than for Austrian children. This lower daily fee equates to large group sizes (up to 50 young people in one institution) and a lower quality of care. Also, quality control by child and youth welfare is not carried out throughout

the refugee institutions, which results in significantly lower child protection.³

Austria still lacks a comprehensive deinstitutionalisation plan for children and adolescents with disabilities who live in large institutions and without their families. In large institutions there is a hierarchical power imbalance, so structural violence is encouraged.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The following priorities on children's rights and well-being are included in the framework of 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights':

- promotion of women's labour market participation by enhancing access to affordable, accessible, high-quality, full-time childcare and all day schools,
- support to the development and implementation of a quality

framework in early childhood education and care.

Another investment priority for children and young people, including children and youth in migration, focuses on promotion of equal access to, and completion of, quality and inclusive education and training.

² Special Report on Children and their Rights in Public Institutions (Sonderbericht Kinder und ihre Rechte in öffentlichen Einrichtungen) 2017.

³ Gutachten zu Rechtsproblemen von SOS-Kinderdorf... Österreich mit unbegleiteten minderjährigen Flüchtlingen (2016).

Bulgaria

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Bulgaria should take action to reform and increase the capacity of its child protection systems and early childhood care, and to actively promote child well-being and family-support policies through a new National Strategy for the Child.

Respondent organisation:
National Network for
Children Bulgaria (NNC)

The National Network for Children Bulgaria (NNC) notes that although all Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria in 2019 are relevant, there is no specific focus on the family and the child.

One of the most important developments that would have significantly contributed to children's

rights and well-being in Bulgaria was approval of the new National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 that was widely debated and consulted for more than a year. The NNC was involved in this process and supports the draft strategy, which was innovative and enables flexible three-year programmes to be planned and rolled out over the following 10 years.



7 millions* total
18.7%** under 19 yrs
4.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

33.7%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

Unfortunately, the draft strategy was attacked with false claims that it would diminish the rights of parents and that social services would be able to take children away from their families for minor reasons. Despite all attempts to encourage the government to clarify the new policies for children, the government failed to defend it and it was

suspended by the Prime Minister in May 2019. At the time of publication (October 2019), it is unclear if and when work will be resumed, even though the existence of an up-to-date strategy is mandatory by law. The previous one expired in 2018.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Child poverty remains one of the major challenges for Bulgaria and despite positive change it remains among the highest in Europe. Data from 2018 shows that 33.7% of Bulgarian children – or over 400,000 children – are categorised as being ‘at risk of poverty or social exclusion’. Every third child lives in material deprivation and 25% of children live in households with severe material deprivation. For Roma communities, the situation is especially severe, with 89% living at risk of poverty.

The 2019 Country Report for Bulgaria includes an analysis of child poverty; however, it fails to assess whether measures taken by the government have been effective: “Poverty among children

with low-skilled parents is 15 times higher than it is among children with high-skilled parents [...]. Children, the elderly and people with disabilities face an even higher risk of poverty [...]. When it comes to children, the situation is particularly severe among disadvantaged groups such as Roma and for those living in rural areas.”

There have been some positive trends in tackling child mortality over the past years. In 2017, it stood at 6.4 per 1,000 live births (by the age of 1), which is still higher than the EU average of 3.7 (2016). It is alarming that there are areas in the country where the infant mortality rate is very high, without any specifically targeted measures to improve the situation.

The Bulgarian government introduced a new Social Services Act in March 2019 aiming to improve access to social services and enhance efficiency. It introduces an entirely new philosophy and changes the legal framework for planning, providing, financing and monitoring social services. The new law universalises the approach to service delivery, providing

more accessible services for the population across the country and clearer criteria for accessing available services. It also regulates services to guarantee child rights: if a child who is excluded from education or health services accesses a social service, this should lead to access to the required services. Other changes include the introduction of clear standards for the professional competences of social workers.

It is expected that the new Act will promote the exercise of children’s fundamental rights, help prevent or overcome some forms of social exclusion and improve quality of life, ensuring better access to social services for all parents, not only for families at risk. There are no other measures that would aim at combating child poverty and child mortality, indicators, for which Bulgaria scores above the European average.

Child protection reforms

The government continues to make progress on deinstitutionalisation for children. The state-of-play on

deinstitutionalisation is included in the Country Report, but there is no critique of effective implementation of the measures, nor the effect on children and families: “There has been an 80% decrease in the number of children placed in institutional care, to below 1,000 in 2017. All specialised institutions for children with disabilities have been closed following the implementation of the national ‘Vision for Deinstitutionalisation’ strategy and its action plans. EU funds catalysed this change from institutional to community-based care, but it certainly would not have been achieved without political commitment.”

We welcome that the 2019 Country Report for Bulgaria acknowledged this, however, even with clear progress, challenges still exist. It is a concern that 49% of children in institutional care in Bulgaria are in the 0-3 year-old group, which is considered the most vulnerable in any care system.

The Transitional and Final Provisions of the new Social Services Act announce the final closure of all medical and social care homes

for children by 2021 and their transformation into new types of services. The development of supporting regulations is expected to be forthcoming.

At the same time, civil society raises serious concerns about the quality of all types of alternative care placements and the ways in which decisions in relation to children are made, implemented and monitored. Notably, problems related to the work of small group homes remain unresolved, although these are the main services that provide alternative care to children who were removed from the institutions.

Furthermore, unaccompanied and separated children arriving into Bulgaria continue to be placed mainly in Reception and Registration Centres for refugees (RRCs) where there are no suitable conditions to provide adequate care and to ensure children's safety.

Healthcare

Several campaigns have been launched to raise funds for severely sick children to receive treatment abroad due to lack of access to healthcare services in Bulgaria. Since 2019, the National Health Insurance Fund will also need to provide treatment for such children. However, because the Bulgarian healthcare system still lacks the capacity to meet all the demand, it is expected that this will cause more delays in the provision of children's treatment. NNC expects that parents will continue to seek healthcare services for their children abroad.

Inadequate financial remuneration and professional training for health and social care professionals working with children is identified as another important gap in the child-protection system in Bulgaria. Currently, the wages of midwives, nurses, social services' workers and child protection officers remain critically low. Despite the introduced legislation, the child protection system has not increased its capacity and fails to provide the required assistance and services.

Early childhood development

Some progress has been made in implementing measures such as the inter-institutional mechanism to identify out-of-school children and return them to school, support for students to overcome learning gaps, as well as reforming funding standards to allocate additional funding to disadvantaged schools and kindergartens. As the 2019 Country Report says: "the adoption of the Pre-school and School Education Act is another example of successful CSR implementation in relation to disadvantaged groups/Roma".

However, currently, there is no comprehensive strategy in Bulgaria on early childhood development. Therefore, young children and their families lack sufficient support. As outlined in the 2019 Country Report: "the very low enrolment rate of young children in formal childcare continues to be a challenge. Only 9.4% of children aged 0 to 3 are enrolled, significantly below the EU average of over 30%. It is due to the significant shortages of

nurseries and/or other appropriate arrangements."

The NNC believes that early childhood development deserves to be prioritised and to be specifically mentioned in the Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria. Our recommendation is a National Early Childhood Strategy and a top-level structure responsible for its implementation. Work began on a similar document, but was stopped early - mainly because of the dynamics surrounding the Children's Strategy.

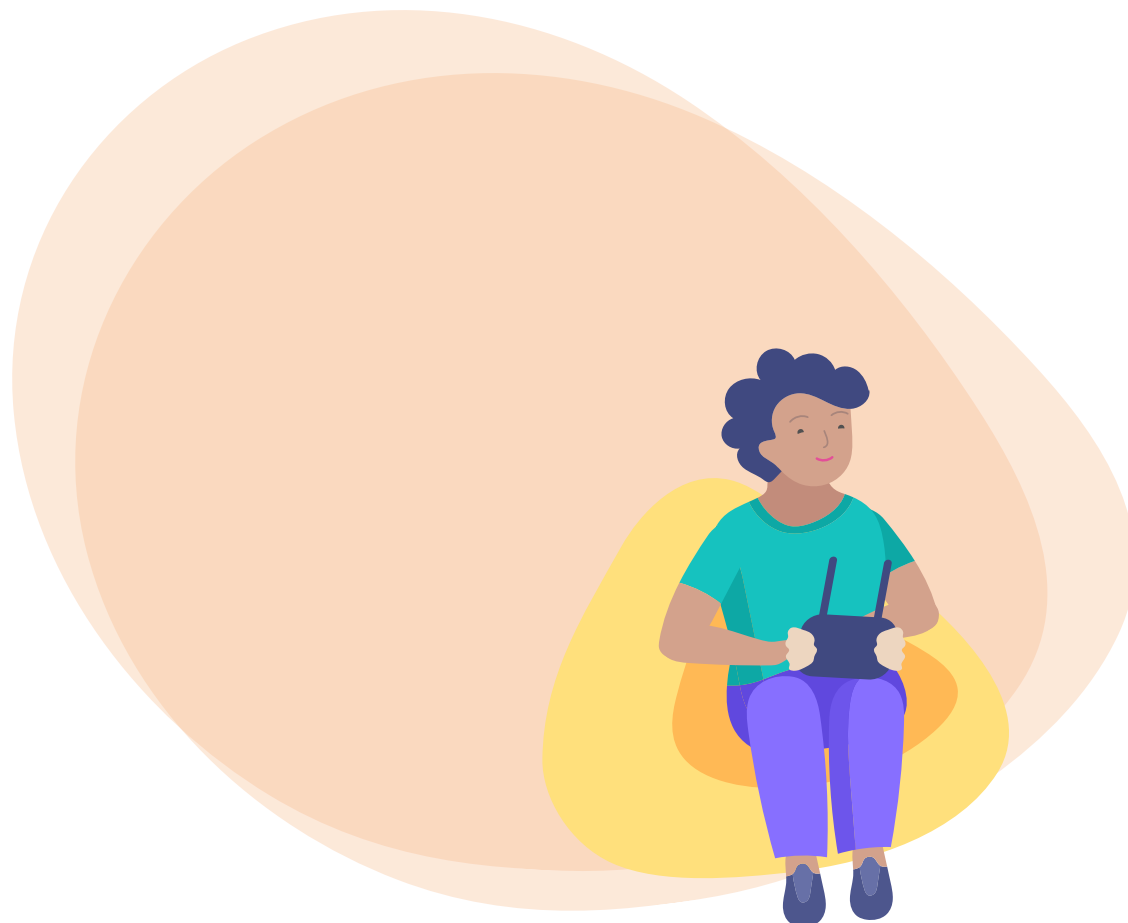
Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

All planned actions under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' would have a positive effect on investing in children, including directing investments at measures such as:

- improving the inclusiveness and quality of education; and
- improving the accessibility, quality and capacity of the health

sector and social benefits system to address social inclusion.

The NNC suggests that the planned measures to fight the social exclusion of adults could prevent the transmission of poverty from parents to children. We regret however, that Annex D of the Country Report failed to mention early childhood development. It is an aspect deserving more attention, including from European Cohesion Policy. Another important aspect of planning the next Operational Programmes is coordination among ministries, in particular the Ministries of Labour, Healthcare and Education. The NNC plans to be part of designing, planning and monitoring the Operational Programmes of the European Social Fund+.



Croatia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Croatia should take action to create and implement specific measures to reduce child poverty (including increased allocations for children), increase and sustain the inclusion of children in quality early childhood education and care, and ensure accessible programmes for preventing violence against children. In addition, Croatia should adopt the systematic practice of consulting children on the measures that apply to them.

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

In 2019, Croatia's Country Specific Recommendations¹ (CSRs) call for: education reform in terms of access, quality and labour market relevance; improving the social benefit system; and strengthening labour market measures and institutions, including their coordination with

social services. While these recommendations can positively impact on the lives of children, the Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) calls for a more specific focus on children.



4.08 millions* total
19.7%** under 19 yrs
4.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

23.7%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018.

1 [Country Specific Recommendations for Croatia, 2019](#)

2 [Croatia Country Report \(2019\)](#)

A focus on children is lacking in other important areas, including education, employment, housing, social services etc. CAC suggests incorporating a separate section on child rights in Country Reports, which should then be reflected in the CSRs. This would enable an impact assessment of the European Commission's 'Investing in Children' Recommendation on national policies and actions.

The role of civil society is also very important in the promotion of child rights and welfare. However civil society was mentioned only once in the Country Report in the context of allocation of EU funds. Meanwhile, Croatia's National Reform Programme³ lacks information about civil society organisation activities in child protection, highlighting only the involvement of social partners. To address current social challenges, public authorities should cooperate more strategically with civil society organisations (including learning from international experience) in the framework of the European Semester. This requires an effective cooperation framework and financial

support for NGOs to enable their effective participation.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The 2019 Country Report mentions that children's risk of poverty and social exclusion has continued to decline - from 26.6% in 2016 to 25.8% in 2017 – whilst remaining above the EU average of 24.9%. Indeed, the child-poverty rate has now dropped to 23.7% - below the EU average – in 2018. The main cause seems to be the fall in Croatia's unemployment rate from 13.4% in 2016 to 8.5% in 2018 (attributed to solid GDP growth and job creation, as well as emigration and ageing). The Country Report states that more than 70% of poor people who get a job also escape from poverty.

Despite these positive developments, CAC notes there has been limited progress in consolidating social benefits and improving their capacity to reduce

poverty, which remains weaker than the EU average. Croatia needs to address its structural weaknesses in the promotion of employability and social protection. Positive efforts have been started to improve the recording of social benefits, which can inform increased effectiveness in reaching those most in need. However, still more efforts are needed to address ongoing and significant regional disparities in the concentration of poverty and social exclusion.

A crucial issue identified by the Country Report is that “the powers granted to local government units often do not match their administrative and financial capacities. This results in an uneven provision of public services, including social services, across financially strong and financially weak local units.” CAC welcomes the focus on public administrative reform in this year's CSRs to reduce territorial fragmentation and increase capacities to design and implement public projects and policies. Currently, reforms are progressing only slowly.

Child protection reform

The 2019 Country Report highlights the importance of “the move from a model based on institutional care to one relying on support for family- and community-based care for children who cannot stay with their families and the disabled” and identifies that this move “faces challenges.” It also points out that the number of children growing up without parental care is growing.

However, neither a major legislative framework to consolidate the shift towards community-based support, nor sufficient funding for this shift, has been secured. Coordination between different sectors (health, social, education) as well as local governments also remains a challenge. Consequently, the process of deinstitutionalisation of children (and adults) has practically come to a halt in recent years.

Whilst the investment in education, social inclusion and labour market measures called for by the 2019 CSRs are important elements of deinstitutionalisation, it is important

3 Croatia's National Reform Programme 2019.

to ensure that they are accompanied by increased investment in good quality, accessible mainstream and community-based services.

Early childhood development

Both the Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Croatia emphasise that socio-economic inequalities are an important factor determining participation in education, from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to tertiary education. Thus, while CSRs on labour market relevance of education are welcomed, CAC also highlights a need to invest in quality and inclusive education to enable the system to challenge disadvantage rather than solidifying it.

Although the authorities announced plans to increase participation in ECEC to 95% by 2020 (in line with the Barcelona targets), Croatia

continues to have one of the lowest rates of young children aged 0-3 attending formal childcare, with children of low-skilled parents especially affected. The 2019 Country Report has recognised this issue. However, one of the EU's 'Barcelona targets' for ECEC⁴ – enrolment of children in ECEC from four years old to compulsory school age – is not addressed.

A major challenge is that regional disparities are high and persistent with the decentralised financing of ECEC resulting in levels of local authority spending on ECEC ranging from 5.7% to 14.1%⁵ of their budgets (in 2015). Many areas of the country lack sufficient resources to provide services to all children in need. Some ECEC programmes supported by the European Social Fund had to close when the funding stopped. Without a review of the overall ECEC funding model, Croatia is highly likely to remain below the 2020 targets.

There is also a significant shortage of services aimed at strengthening parental skills in Croatia – a crucial aspect of early education and care – particularly in poorer regions. Currently, most programmes for parents of children with disabilities, children with behavioural problems and Roma children are provided by non-government organisations who are dependent on insecure project-based funding.

With these challenges in mind, CAC reiterates its 2018 recommendation for the adoption of a national strategy for ECEC. This strategy should entail clear and measurable indicators and be supported by investment to balance regional disparities, improve participation and prevent the trans-generational transmission of poverty, social exclusion and unequal opportunities.

Child participation

CAC is disappointed to see that child participation is not mentioned at all

in this year's Country Report. This is despite it being one of the three pillars of the Commission's 'Investing in Children' Recommendation and some highly positive examples of child participation structures in Croatia, including the Children's Forum coordinated by Society Our Children⁶ and the Children's City Council of Opatija.⁷ In 2018, over 100 children attended and added their voice at Eurochild's conference on child participation, hosted by Society Our Child.⁸

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

In the 2019 Country Report, Annex D, investment needs under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' focused on employment and skills, education and training, fostering active inclusion and improving healthcare and long-term care services.

4 European Commission, Early childhood education and care

5 'An analysis of the accessibility, quality, capacities and financing of the early childhood education and care system in Croatia', Dobrotić, Matković & Menger (May 2018)

6 See Children's Forums in Croatia

7 See Dječje gradsko vijeće - XI XI Saziv Dječjeg Gradskog Vijeća Grada Opatije

8 See: Eurochild Conference 2018 Report

CAC stresses the need for an integrated policy strategy and long-term investment plan to reduce child poverty, increase and sustain inclusive and quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and prevent violence against children, incorporating measures to:

1. Ensure equal access to inclusive quality education at all levels, but especially in early childhood education and care, in particular for vulnerable groups and in less developed areas
2. Provide education and training on child development to teachers, trainers and child protection and legal professionals working with children
3. Improve formal and informal cooperation between employment and social services, employers and social services providers in education, social protection and health
4. Improve the transition from institutional care to family and community-based care and further develop the network of community-based social services for children and families
5. Tackle the drivers of inactivity, including undeclared work.



Cyprus

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Cyprus should take action to put emphasis on education as a right of all children (not only a means of entering the labour market) and conclude the long-pending reform of the social protection system to address children's needs and eliminate child poverty and exclusion.

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

The Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)'s recommendations for the 2019 European Semester reiterate its recommendations from the previous year – strengthening Cyprus education system and reforming the social protection system. It is regrettable that

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, especially in relation to education, early childhood development and social protection reform.



876,000* total
21.9%** under 19 yrs
5.4%** under 5 yrs

Population

25.5%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

The detailed measures to be taken to eliminate child poverty and exclusion, along with educational reforms, continue to be fragmented and with the intention to meet the needs of the labour market, not of children. PCCPWC regrets to see that the situation of children, other than a statistical number on child poverty, is entirely missing from

this year's Country Report. The social protection system, and its stalled reform, is not mentioned. Furthermore, child participation is not mentioned anywhere and children (3-17) seem to have been left out from the report altogether.

In relation to the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs), PCCPWC feels that most of the reforms suggested will benefit the economy. In turn, this may provide the government with more funds to be spent on social issues, but further emphasis is required. The third CSR for 2019, which calls for labour market support for young people, education reform including early education and care, and health system reform, is directly relevant for improving the situation for Cypriot children. However, it fails to put targets for children in is rather education-labour market oriented.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Child poverty remains unchanged since 2017, with latest data for 2018 showing that 25.5% of Cypriot children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Despite this, PCCPWC highlights that social protection system reform – which was supposed to have been completed in 2015 – continues to be delayed. As with Cyprus' childcare system, the social protection system is fragmented - as is the existing Law on Children. PCCPWC is calling for this reform to finally conclude and address children's needs and eliminate child poverty and exclusion.

This year's Country Report correctly states that the targets set for reducing poverty by 2020 are unlikely to be achieved. Child poverty is not reflected in the CSRs, despite being explicitly referenced in the Country Report, in relation to Cyprus' guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme (p. 44).¹ The PCCPWC welcomed this scheme

when it was introduced in 2015 and while it has the potential to fight poverty, it needs to expand and reform to become more efficient and encourage re-entrance to the labour market. Poverty, including child poverty, is somewhat reflected in Annex D, Policy Objective 4.

Employment rose in 2018 and unemployment fell to 8.4% in the third quarter of 2018, which is almost half of peak unemployment levels during the financial crisis. However, as noted in the Country Report, this positive growth is concentrated in only a few sectors of the economy (such as construction and tourism) and the European Commission calls for greater investment in vocational education and training, adult learning, childcare and health. PCCPWC agrees with this approach as growth should benefit all society and more investment is needed in education, childcare and health.

PCCPWC identified migrant and children in vulnerable situations as a priority within the education system, healthcare and well-being,

and protection schemes. Actions to support these groups should be developed and implemented as soon as possible.

Early childhood development

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fundamental to child well-being and PCCPWC welcomes that this is a recurring theme throughout the 2019 Country Report, including the statement that childcare and health are important for improving Cyprus' productivity and long-term inclusive growth (p.47). This is a positive development and gives hope for further comments regarding children's rights and well-being and demonstrates that the European Commission understands that childcare and health are fundamental to inclusive growth.

The Country Report also correctly identifies that participation in ECEC settings in 2016 (89.7%) was below the EU average (95.3%) and is falling short of the Barcelona targets

1 This year's Country Report for Cyprus.

of having 95% of children aged 4-6 enrolled in childcare. The report also noted that the rate for children under 3 has increased (from 20.8% to 24.8%), but this is also below the Barcelona target of 33%.

To address low participation rates, the European Commission has recommended that Cyprus deliver more affordable early childhood education and care. This recommendation has both labour market and social objectives. More affordable childcare will improve labour activation for the country's high rate of informal carers. Equally, providing more affordable formal early childhood services will make childcare more inclusive for families at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and is welcomed by the PCCPWC. However, there is a need to address other barriers to participation in ECEC (such as those detailed under education below), as well as ensuring that the care provided is of high quality.

While this CSR from the Commission is promising, it remains to be seen how the Cypriot government will

implement it. In its National Reform Programme², while the government outlines its national education targets, there remains a need for a detailed and a whole-of-government response to ensure that reform benefits children and not only the labour market.

Education

According to the PCCPWC, quality, accessible and inclusive education should be a priority in Cyprus, not just for the sake of the labour market (as stated in Cyprus' past three Country Specific Recommendations), but rather to fulfil a child's right to education and acknowledge its contribution to a child's personal development. Education should take a child-rights approach and be inclusive for all children.

In Cyprus' 2019 Country Report, education is mentioned but only linked to "market needs" and youth unemployment. When reform is mentioned, the report states that there is slow and fragmented

progress, and the reform is not directly linked to children. Also, it is noted that there has been no recorded progress as regards the capacity (infrastructure and facilities) in the education system. The Country Report correctly states that the relatively high public spending on education is not reflected in observed outcomes, and that reform progress is uneven. In the recitals of the CSRs for Cyprus, there is an explicit connection made by the European Commission that modernising the education and training system will help improve educational outcomes and increase the potential for sustainable growth in Cyprus. However, this has not translated to its CSR, which only broadly recommends reform of the education and training system, including teacher evaluation. PCCPWC calls for this CSR to be interpreted as encouraging investment in quality of education systems with better outcomes for children in mind.

In the Cypriot government's National Reform Programme, the education targets are useful for signposting

how Cyprus will seek to address challenges to implementation. The national targets are to "reduce the dropout rate to 10% by 2020 from 11.9% in 2009", and to "increase the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to at least 46% by 2020".

An action plan submitted by an interdepartmental committee of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) shows the identification of measures to integrate children with a migrant background. Focus will include areas of reception of newcomers, teaching Greek as a second language, mapping out migrant populations, teacher training and intercultural and antiracist dimensions in education. Funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund has been utilised to support this work by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute between 2016 and 2018.³

A new Action Plan 2019-2021 of the Interdepartmental Committee is also being formulated to achieve better student assessment, with a focus on supporting newly arrived students

² National Reform Programme, Cyprus 2019.

³ For example, see the Program "Greek Language Program and Mediation Services for Minor Third-Country Nationals".

and their parents. One of the aims of this Committee will also be to collect data on EU co-financed programmes and other funding sources that could cover the needs of migrant students (such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, European Social Fund, etc.) and the involvement of external stakeholders.⁴

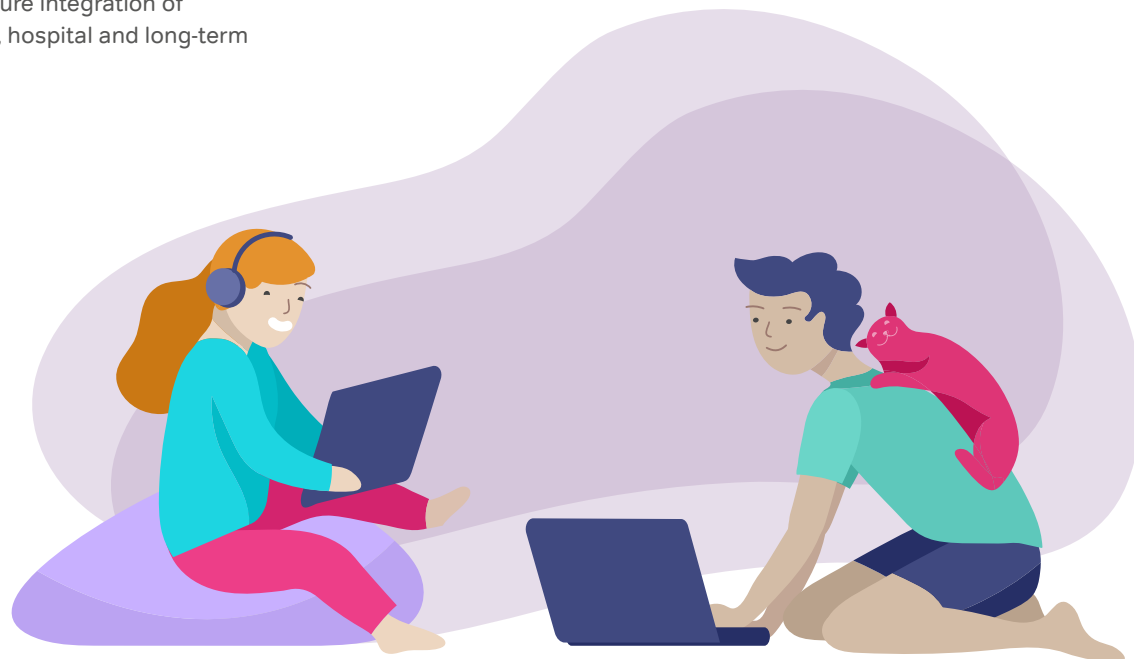
Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

When reviewing the Annex D, 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' for Cyprus in the 2019 Country Report, PCCPWC found that the last four priorities are directly linked to children. Investment in these areas should be strengthened. These four areas are as follows:

- Increase the provision of affordable high-quality early childhood education and care
- Deliver basic material assistance to people most in need, including migrants and

refugees, and community-based services for vulnerable groups

- Strengthen cooperation between relevant stakeholders for increased outreach and personalised services to disadvantaged people and provide social inclusion and long-term integration measures
- Improve the healthcare system and ensure integration of primary, hospital and long-term care.



⁴ Cyprus Government, National Reform Programme, 2019, p.70

Czechia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Czechia should take action to put children's rights on a priority agenda with a special emphasis on children's right to be heard, the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care of children, and fulfilment of basic needs of children from socially marginalised backgrounds.

Respondent organisation:
The Alliance for the
Rights of the Child

The Alliance for the Rights of the Child notes that Czechia currently faces five particular problem areas in its promotion of children's rights:

- A lack of respect for children and their rights in society
- The absence of a coordinated system or an independent

monitoring body, e.g. a Children's Rights Ombudsman

- The increasing number of children placed in institutions where there is a lack of conditions to fulfil all their rights
- Deprivation of basic needs of children living in marginalised, socially excluded communities



10,649,800* total
20.1%** under 19 yrs
5.3%** under 5 yrs

Population

13.2%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

- The resulting social stigmatisation.

Despite the efforts of NGOs and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to unify services for vulnerable children and their families, this proposal was dropped in August 2017 and care for vulnerable children is still fragmented between

the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, Education, Youth and Sports, and Health. The Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for juvenile justice, is also involved.

Furthermore, the governmental strategy on the Right to Childhood, established in December 2011, has not been implemented. The country is left without an overall state policy on the protection and promotion of children's rights. The National Action Plan for 2012-2015 was insufficient: it did not include an adequate budget to improve protection of children's rights; as a result, its basic objectives – such as legislative adjustments, unification of care, etc. – were not implemented. Furthermore, no National Action Plan for 2016-2018, as foreseen by the Strategy, was ever adopted. A new draft Strategy for 2018-2025 has not yet been published, or consulted with the professional community and civil society.

Child protection reforms

The deinstitutionalisation of care for vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, has not moved forward. The law on age limits restricting the placement of the youngest children into institutional care has not yet been adopted. In general, there is a lack of preventive services in Czechia, especially field and outpatient services, that would enable children, if possible, to stay in their original families. Even less available are support services for families whose children have been taken away and which would help to return the child to their family quickly (social activation services). Early detection services for families at risk are missing altogether.

This area has been underfunded for a long time; only 8% of the total volume of funds for the care of vulnerable children is spent on preventive services.¹ According to a report by Lumos Czech Republic, approximately CZK 2,684 million is spent each year on the operation of

former infant homes and children's homes in which approximately 5,000 children live. The same amount of resources could be used to support field social work with the family for over 100,000 children living in the community.² While the numbers of social protection authorities have increased since 2012, they are still insufficient over the long term.

Early childhood development

Lack of childcare facilities is one of the major reasons why there were only 4.7% of children younger than 3 placed in formal care and education in 2016, as the 2019 Country Report notes. Furthermore, it is estimated that only about 34% of Roma children from the age of four participate in this level of education (FRA, 2016). The 2019 Country Report for Czechia emphasises that “it is crucial to maintain the recently established right of all children over 3 years to attend pre-school and, subsequently, to guarantee places

in kindergartens”. However, the planned child's right to be placed in a pre-school facility as early as two years old was abolished in 2019 before it became effective.

To tackle the low participation of young children in childcare, the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Czechia ask to “foster the employment of women with young children, including by improving access to affordable childcare, and of disadvantaged groups”. The Alliance call for a comprehensive national policy on childhood care, taking into consideration the European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow.³

Education

As outlined in the 2019 Country Report for Czechia, educational outcomes vary considerably. In 2015, the variation in science PISA scores, which could be attributed to

1 Miloslav Macela, 'Analysis of the Financing of the Endangered Children System in the Czech Republic', 2018

2 Lumos, 'Investing in Children – The case for diverting Czech government finances away from institutions', 2018

3 European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow (2011)

parental background, was one of the highest in the EU.

In relation to education, the biggest challenge remains inclusion of marginalised groups such as Roma children in mainstream education. Government-led inclusive-education measures – including school financial support - are slowly improving access to education for Roma children and other children with specific educational needs; although there is not yet a national curriculum, nor a comprehensive childcare policy.

However, despite such initial improvements in inclusive education, there are still politicians, including parliamentary political parties, who insist the already adopted inclusive measures should be reduced or even cancelled. There are serious concerns that attitudes of the majority public, mainstream media and politicians are turning further against many vulnerable minorities – especially since the 2015 migration flows.

According to the Alliance for the Rights of the Child, another major shortcoming is the lack of an overall

National Action Plan to prevent racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance (never adopted since the Durban UN conference in 2001).

The Alliance points out that the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Czechia focus mainly on increasing the quality and inclusiveness of the education and training systems, but fail to mention the need for anti-discrimination and anti-xenophobia policies and actions.

Child participation

Courts are obliged to hear the opinion of a child over 12 years of age, whilst the opinion of younger children should be ascertained by the court if it is justified to assume that the child will understand and comment on the situation sufficiently. In recent years, some improvements to the processes have been observed, such as reduced decision-making time, increased use of substitute family care, strengthened education, and more specialised guardianship judges.

However, the situation in different courts varies. It is therefore necessary to unify decision-making practice to ensure that the rights of children and other persons involved in each procedure are respected. Furthermore, it is necessary to strengthen the training of judges – especially in child-friendly approaches that enable children to express their views. The unification of case law on matters relating to the care of minors by the Supreme Court should be strengthened.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

According to the Alliance, investment priorities under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' reflect well the needs of children and young people in Czechia, in particular, the priorities to support flexible working arrangements, increase the number of childcare places for children below 3 years and support the deinstitutionalisation of care, particularly for children under 3.

However, another area that requires investment, which was not included, is social housing, especially for families with children, young adults leaving alternative care and young adults with disabilities. Although the Bill on Social Housing was submitted to the government, it was not approved.

The Alliance also expresses its concerns about the fact that EU funds are used for running educational activities of state institutions that should be provided and financed within the scope of its competence by the Ministry. Another challenge of EU-funded projects is a lack of sustainability.

Denmark

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Denmark should take action to prevent the rising inequality between the various groups of society, with particular focus on the lowest-income households, migrants and the socially vulnerable.

Respondent organisation: Joint Council for Child Issues in Denmark

In its review of the 2019 European Semester, the Joint Council for Child Issues in Denmark welcomes the European Commission pointing out rising inequality in Denmark, specifically between households above median income levels, those below the median, and the poorest households. As outlined in the [2019 Country Report](#), there is a widening

inequality and difference in the levels of income growth for families in Denmark.



5.8 millions* total
22.6%** under 19 yrs
5.2%** under 5 yrs

Population

15.2%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

Child poverty and social exclusion

While Danish society has high rates of tax and a social welfare system that helps reduce the effects of income inequality, these benefits have degraded since 2015. This has made the poorest families

more vulnerable and economically challenged, reflected in the growing rates of children living at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which, according to Eurostat, stood at 15.2% in 2018, up from 14.5% in 2017.

The Country Report highlights that the increased inequality in Danish society is leading to “challenges in ensuring equality of opportunity, in particular for children of migrant families”. The Joint Council for Child Issues recommends the European Commission to focus on the consequences of child poverty in its analysis of Denmark, recognising the urgency to take action to prevent child poverty.

Early childhood development

In Denmark, the early childhood education and care system covers almost all children above the age of four (98.1%), but conditions vary across municipalities at local level. In

the Finance Act of 2019, the former Coalition government of Denmark proposed DKK 1 billion for a new initiative called the “1,000-days programme – *a better start to life*” (“1.000-dages-program – *en bedre start på livet*”).¹ Reference to the programme in Denmark’s Country Report explains how it proposes to invest in measures to improve the quality of early childhood education and care.

While this is one core component, the Joint Council for Child Issues highlights that a more thorough analysis of the initiative within a wider understanding of early childhood development would be helpful. The 1,000-days programme is not just about education, but more broadly about helping socially challenged families during the child’s first years that are crucial for later development. In its National Reform Programme for 2019², the Danish government states that the programme aims to “help the socially most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in the first 1,000 days of the child’s

life” in three core areas: quality of early childhood education and care; support within the family; and healthcare.

Education and children in migration

In recent years, Denmark’s government has pursued policies to discourage new migrants from entering the country while improving the outcomes for those who did enter. However, the results are yet to be seen, as the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion for foreign-born adults is 38.1%, more than double the rate of those born in Denmark at 16.3%. The challenges around social inclusion are worryingly being passed on to children with migrant backgrounds.

Pupils from migrant backgrounds have poorer outcomes in education, with the 2019 Country Report showing that they are 3.4 times more likely to underachieve in science-related subjects. This

underachievement remains even after accounting for the social economic background of students, pointing towards broader challenges around integration in the education system.

The educational performance of children with a migrant background is cited as a challenge in this year’s preamble to the Country Specific Recommendation³ for Denmark, as is the need for better integration of people with a migrant background into the labour market (within a wider frame of marginalised and disadvantaged groups). However, neither of Denmark’s two recommendations directly address this challenge or the concerns of children directly. More broadly, Denmark is recommended to focus investment-related economic policy on education and skills.

At a national level, efforts to address the negative outcomes for children with migration backgrounds have been proposed in the Danish government’s contentious “No-Ghetto” plan, highlighted

1 [1,000-dages-program – en bedre start på livet](#)

2 [Denmark National Reform Programme for 2019](#)

3 [2019 Denmark Country Specific Recommendation](#)

by the European Commission in the Country Report. These initiatives include: compulsory childcare for children in vulnerable neighbourhoods; Danish language tests in preschool classes (Grade 0); and better allocation of children with a migrant background in secondary schools. As the plan is not referenced in Denmark's National Reform Programme, the Joint Council on Child Issues awaits further development before making an assessment of its impact.

The Joint Council also notes that this year's European Semester did not focus on the rights of refugee children (and their right to be heard in the decisions that affect them). Specifically, the asylum centre Sjealsmark and the poor conditions in which the children and families are living requires greater attention and critique. A report from the Danish Red Cross in April 2019 found that the risk of mental health illnesses among children aged 11-17 residing at Sjealsmark was twice as high as children who have just arrived in Denmark.⁴

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The Joint Council for Child Issues welcomes that there are a number of planned investment areas highlighted under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' in the Annex D of this year's Country Report that would have a positive effect on investing in children in Denmark. There is a positive recognition that investing in early childhood development will assist in combating poverty and social exclusion for children from disadvantaged groups, and it is good that children with a migration background are specifically highlighted as a target group.

Targeted outreach with the goal of reducing rates of early school leaving for disadvantaged groups is also recommended to address Denmark's rising rates of young people who leave school early. The most recent early school leaving rate stood at 10.2% in 2018, having risen

for the third year in a row since 2016 when it stood at 7.2%.

Finally, the recommendation to develop and implement life-long learning strategies in cooperation with social partners, civil society and other stakeholders is welcomed, and the Joint Council of Child Issues hopes to see greater involvement of civil society expanded beyond the area of life-long learning in the new Social Democratic government.

⁴ Røde Kors. (2019). Trivsel hos børn på Udrejsecenter Sjealsmark

Estonia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Estonia should take action to invest in the early identification of special needs and related support services, the availability of mental health services and better health promotion and disease prevention.

Respondent organisation:
**Estonian Union for
Child Welfare**

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare (EUCW) welcomes the thorough discussion of the divergence in access to services, infrastructure and economic prosperity between the capital Tallinn and the rest of the country. However, EUCW believes that children and their rights are clearly not a focus of this year's European Semester process in

Estonia. There is little discussion of alternative care (transition from institutional to family and community-based care), the right to be heard or the involvement of civil society. Similarly, there is no thorough discussion of key issues related to inclusive education or the growing shortage of specialised educational support.



1,32 millions* total
20.9%** under 19 yrs
5.3%** under 5 yrs

Population

17.9%**

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

EUCW welcomes that the European Commission recognises the problem of “lack of access to affordable and good quality social services” as a key challenge for Estonia's economy and hopes that this will apply pressure to Estonia to act.

Child poverty and social exclusion

EUCW welcomes that the 2019 Country Report contains a poverty indicator for children, and that it shows that child-poverty rates have fallen in the past year (down to 17.9% in 2018 from 18.8% in 2017).¹ However, this indicator is only included as part of a general population overview and does not get much analysis.

The Report notes that social transfers are not effective in reducing poverty and there is a weak social safety net, although both of these indicators have shown signs of improvement. The Social Scoreboard indicators show that families with one parent are still at high poverty risk.

EUCW recommends further investment in supporting parenting and families, and providing safe environments for raising children, including through:

- promoting positive and violence-free raising methods that include children
- mandatory conciliation services in family law disputes available equally across regions
- raising the skills and competence of specialists working with children and parents
- raising awareness of children and families of the risks associated with internet use
- Measures are also needed to address high inequality of incomes, especially regionally, and the disadvantageous position of women entering the labour market after parental leave.

Child protection system

EUCW has called for children's rights to be protected in Estonia's ongoing administrative-territorial reforms and hopes that the aim set in the enforced coalition agreement "that every local government would have at least 1 child welfare specialist for every 1,000 children" will soon be realised. The UN Child Rights

Committee has also recommended (in 2017) further local government obligations to create positions for child welfare specialists.

Promisingly, in its 2019 National Reform Programme², Estonia has set out that it will prepare an analysis and issue proposals to increase the amount of child welfare workers and improve the quality of child welfare services, including improvements to the support system for children with special needs. However, recently, according to the child welfare department of the National Social Insurance Board, the number of child welfare specialists in Estonia dropped from 311 in 2017 to 248 in 2018. This threatens the capacity of local governments to deliver effective prevention and early intervention.

Still further efforts are needed in Estonia to support raising children in families and to ensure quality family-based replacement and after-care for children removed from their families. A countrywide register of foster families is expected to support these aims. But, a greater focus on

public awareness and educating society is also needed. There is also need to support the transition of care leavers to independent living, including teaching social skills and sex education, and training people to work with the large share of children in alternative care with special needs.

EUCW recommends that Estonia allocates substantial resources to:

- Ensure the necessary implementing provisions and state resources for systematic development of child protection and welfare services, with a focus on prevention
- Create a common system for monitoring the use, impact and cost-effectiveness of budgetary means aimed at ensuring children's rights and well-being
- Promote multidisciplinary cooperation on different levels
- Increase knowledge and skills in child protection, including among specialists working with children, legal and law enforcement professionals and foster families.

¹ See the Estonian Country Report 2019, p.53

² Estonian National Reform Programme

Early childhood development

The Estonian Country Report highlights improvements in enrolment in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Estonian children aged 3-7 have a higher enrolment rate (93%) than the EU average (86% in 2016). This is welcome, but it is still necessary to increase the share of children aged up to 3 who attend childcare. The rate of enrolment for this age group (27%) has fallen below the Barcelona target (33%).

EUCW welcomes recent commitments on updating the national preschool curriculum to ensure the quality and available of services, and organising the support system for children with special needs. However, measures to provide greater support for parental leave and increase flexibility in compensation will not completely address the needs of parents participating in the labour

market. The care duties of parents are still considerable and greater flexibility is needed to fulfil children's rights to quality education and equal opportunities, and address the significant gender pay gap in Estonia, which remains among the highest in the EU.

Healthcare

Among Estonia's below-average health indicators, obesity and mental health continue to be pressing issues for children in Estonia. The country has one of the highest rates of cyberbullying in the EU, with 38% of children aged 11, 13 and 15 reporting experiences in 2013-2014.³ Meanwhile, the number of people on the waiting list for mental health services has grown to around 1,300.⁴ Significant differences in access to health services across the country are also negatively affecting many children.

EUCW welcomes that Estonia has identified responses to some of

these issues in its National Reform Programme and looks forward to monitoring these developments, namely: the establishment and implementation of a green book for mental health to ensure necessary support, treatment and prevention services; and to strengthen measures to reduce bullying and domestic violence.

With this in mind, EUCW recommends that Estonia should allocate budgetary resources towards improving cooperation among the various health, social and education services to ensure access to quality support services for children regardless of their place of residence or special needs. It should also make first-level screenings mandatory to ensure early discovery of developmental and health disorders in children up to 1 year old, improve the health education of parents, and improve prevention and treatment of underage drug addiction.

Education

The 2019 Country Report highlights an increase in the share of people without secondary education and gender gaps in educational paths after basic school (6% of women and 16% of men with lower education level are not studying). However, it does not discuss what to do with people who have dropped out of formal education.

Despite the Country Report noting that Estonia is one of the best performers in the EU when it comes to employment, the share of NEET (not in employment education or training) youth has increased since 2016 from 9.1% to 9.8% in 2018.⁵ A holistic approach is needed, covering prevention, intervention and compensation. Measures should be taken to encourage flexible age-appropriate work experience and skills in cooperation with the private sector.⁶

The Estonian government's National Reform Programme has identified

³ OECD. (2018). *Health at a Glance: Europe 2018*.

⁴ European Social Policy Network. (2018).

⁵ See the Estonian Country Report for 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

the recognition, motivation and continued training for teachers, education sector leaders and support specialists as a policy priority for the years ahead. The EUWC stresses⁷ the need to ensure the availability of support systems for all children, regardless of their location or special needs, and promoting inclusion, tolerance and understanding of child rights.

- early discovery of special needs
- availability of mental health services
- availability of support services regardless of the child's place of residence and presence of educational special needs or
- the child protection system – particularly to ensure new services continue to be sustained after EU-funded interventions have ended.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare welcomes that all sub-clauses of 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' concern children directly or indirectly. However, it is unfortunate that the investment guide does not discuss specific topics that the National Reform Programme identifies, including the need to invest in:

The activities of EUCW are integrally aimed to promote the well-being of children, including the Free of Bullying! and Smartly on the Web⁸ programmes, both of which EUCW has been organising since 2010.

⁷ MTÜ Lastekaitse Liit ettepanekud Eesti erakondadele Eesti laste õiguste ja heaolu tagamiseks.

⁸ Free of Bullying!, Smartly on the Web.

Finland

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Finland should take action to ensure child rights impact assessment is conducted whenever laws or budgets are developed.

Respondent organisation:
Central Union of Child Welfare

The 2019 European Semester comes at an opportune time, not just due to the role that the European Commission intends to play in defining investment guidance for EU funding in the 2021-2027 period, but also because it coincides with the Finnish Presidency of the EU (July-

December 2019). The Presidency aims to work towards achieving an 'economy of well-being' and to give special attention to the social inclusion of young people.¹

According to the Finnish Central Union of Child Welfare (CUCW),



5.5 millions* total
21.5%** under 19 yrs
5.1%** under 5 yrs

Population

16%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [Read Finland's priorities for its EU Presidency.](#)

plan and sufficient resources for its implementation” has been included in the new government’s programme. However, it is too early to assess any impact as the strategy is not yet implemented.

Similar to the two previous years, the CUCW finds that the 2019 European Semester and its Country Specific Recommendations for Finland are based on an economic framework; therefore assessing the Semester’s impact from a children’s rights perspective is difficult. For example, in the 2019 Country Report, the chapters on social policies and education are short and therefore cannot provide a thorough analysis of the situation of children’s rights. In part, the situation analysis is vague, comparing Finland against EU averages instead of examining national trends or specific national developments over recent years. For example, the Country Report does not mention regional disparities concerning the subjective right to early education.²

Child poverty and social exclusion

According to Eurostat (2018), the number of Finnish children living in or who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion has risen and now sits at 16% (up from 15.1% in 2017). While overall inequalities remain low, the 2019 Country Report notes that there is a growing gap for children with low-skilled parents (from 45% in 2010 to 63.1% in 2017), with Finland rising just above the EU average (62.9%). The report also states that children with a migrant background also face a higher risk of poverty.

According to the latest income distribution statistics (published in 2019), in 2017, 25% of one-parent households were ‘low-income’ (while in 2016 the figure was 22%). In two-parent households, the figures are 8% (in 2017) and 7% (in 2016). However, the Central Union for Child Welfare points out that this year’s Semester fails to provide details for single-parent households, or the

growing degree of poverty among families with two incomes.

Early childhood development

Following the 2016 reform of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, some municipalities chose to limit the subjective right to 20 weekly hours while others maintained it at 40. The Country Report correctly notes the negative developments in learning results, but does not analyse the reasons behind this.

Health and social services

When discussing the ‘regional government, health and social services’ reform, the report refers to the work of the previous government. However, this was never approved by the previous parliament. Furthermore, given Finland’s new government taking

office in June 2019, these reforms are likely to change shape yet again.

In 2019, Finland received a CSR for improving equal access to social and healthcare services, which is of course an important goal from a child rights perspective, as is ecologically sustainable development. This is welcome, but CUCW believes that a child rights impact assessment should be integral to the implementation of any reform, law or budget that relates to children’s issues.

Education

The new government has stated that it plans to extend compulsory education to upper secondary level and to 19 years of age. This will support efforts to tackle Finland’s high rates of early school leaving, and it is anticipated that this will have a knock-on effect on reducing inactivity rates and unemployment among the youth demographic while also responding to labour market shortages.

² In Finland, responsibility for the delivery of ECEC is under municipal authority.

However, this year's European Semester does not mention that very significant budget cuts coincided with reform of Finnish vocational education and training. Promisingly, Finland received a CSR in 2019 to enhance active inclusion through well-integrated services for people who are unemployed and/or inactive in the labour market.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

All planned actions under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' would have a positive effect on investing in children in Finland. In particular, CUCW supports the priority investment in Annex D of the Country Report that Finland should invest to "fight early school leaving for at-risk groups and improve transitions from school to work". CUCW believes there is opportunity for investment in improving the support for students in vocational education and training, linked to the 2019 CSR for well-integrated services for the unemployed and the inactive.

It also calls on the government to develop work-life balance policies, more broadly address the gender pay gap that persists in Finland and invest in integrated policies and services to improve social and labour inclusion, including for people with migrant backgrounds and disabilities.



France

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

France should take action to develop a real prevention policy for children and families, to better prevent risks of poverty and social exclusion and contribute to the well-being of children.

Respondent organisation:
**CNAPE (Convention
Nationale des Associations
de Protection de l'Enfant);**

There is considerable discussion in the 2019 Country Report¹ and the Country Specific Recommendations² (CSRs) for France on employment of vulnerable groups, including youth. In line with this focus, France received a CSR in 2019 to foster

“labour market integration for all job seekers, ensure equal opportunities with a particular focus on vulnerable groups including people with a migrant background and address skill shortages and mismatches.”



67 millions* total
24.3%** under 19 yrs
5.7%** under 5 yrs

Population

22.9%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [European Commission, Country Report France, 2019](#)

² [European Commission, Country Specific Recommendations for France, 2019](#)

The recommendation in the Country Report that France should invest to reduce disparity in opportunities does, however, give hope for a shift towards preventive policymaking so that children living in vulnerable situations and poorly served by society are allowed to flourish and succeed just like other children.

Child poverty and social exclusion

In its assessment of the 2019 Country Report for France, the Convention Nationale des Associations de Protection de l'Enfant (CNAPE) found that child poverty is mentioned once, with regards to the situation of children with parents born outside of France. This demographic had a 41.3% risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2017, far higher than the average for all French children for the same year.

CNAPE welcomes the attention paid to the experiences of children and families with migrant backgrounds, yet regrets that other children

exposed to poverty and social exclusion are not discussed in any detail elsewhere in the Country Report. For example, many children are not provided with sufficient after-care support upon leaving the national child welfare system on reaching adult age. CNAPE believes that this vulnerable demographic of children deserves greater attention.

Child protection reforms

As with its 2018 assessment, CNAPE calls for implementation of the child protection laws enacted in 2007 and 2016. France needs to do more to deliver holistic support for children and young people in the current social service system and to put in place effective preventive policies and actions. There is a lack of family support, financial resources and access to housing for young adults leaving care. This means they face significant risks of poverty, social exclusion, violence and abuse – cementing, rather than breaking, cycles of disadvantage.

Positively, a draft law is being considered by the Senate to improve support for young adults ('loi Bourguignon') and the post of Secretary of State for Childhood Protection was created in 2018, showing the government's interest in child protection and raising hopes for the development of children's rights in France. However, there is still an urgent need for much greater preparation of children to be autonomous and CNAPE regrets that this has not been addressed in the 2019 Country Report.

Education

CNAPE welcomes that education and the widening inequality of opportunities among children receives attention in the 2019 European Semester. In the case of France, this widening is especially based on socio-economic differences.

In response to persistent inequalities, and emerging skills shortages that are linked to these inequalities, the French government

adopted a comprehensive reform package in 2018 to raise basic skills and increase the relevance, attractiveness and quality of vocational education and training. This seeks to address, among other challenges, France's higher-than-EU-average rate of young people not in education, employment, education or training (NEET) (11.1% compared to EU28 average of 10.5%).

Furthermore, a wider reform of the education system has just been adopted. Dubbed Blanquer's 'trusted schools' Law³ (after Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer), the law of July 2019 is based on the following measures:

- Lowering the age of compulsory education from six to three from the next school year (targeting those few children who are not participating in early childhood education and care⁴)
- obligatory training up to the age of 18 to 'combat early school leaving and social exclusion of the most vulnerable young people' starting from 2020

³ LOI n° 2019-791 du 26 juillet 2019 "pour une école de la confiance"

⁴ Eurydice, France Overview: Key features of the Education System, 2019.

- a new ‘pre-professionalisation’ system for gradual introduction to the profession
- strengthening of an inclusive public school service to improve access to the education system for students with disabilities.

CNAPE welcomes the objectives of these reforms that are aimed at addressing inequalities in both the education system and the labour market for disadvantaged groups. CNAPE looks forward to monitoring their implementation in the years to come to ensure they have a positive impact on children’s outcomes in France.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

Ahead of the new EU funding period for 2021-2027, CNAPE regretted to see that none of the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations directly concerned children. Instead, they focused on reducing debt, labour market integration (notably, for vulnerable groups, including people with a migrant background),

research and innovation and tax system reform.

While the recommendations were disappointing from a children’s rights perspective, CNAPE welcomes a number of recommended investment priorities highlighted in Annex D, under ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’ of the 2019 Country Report.

Recommended investment in the integration of young people into the labour market and efforts to tackle early school leaving are particularly welcomed as this should contribute to the reduction of young people not in employment, education or training in France.

In addition, the European Commission has recommended that France “provides targeted support for early intervention, including second-chance schools” and “integrated active inclusion policies” that pave the way for use of future European funds to improve the situation for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in France.

Germany

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Germany should take action to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in all types of schools and in all areas of life.

Respondent organisation:

The Alliance of German child and youth welfare organisations (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe) and the National Coalition Germany (Network for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)

The European Commission's 2019 Country Report for Germany¹ recognises important inequalities facing many groups of children. It highlights that children of low-skilled parents are more likely to face poverty and social exclusion, whilst children belonging to

disadvantaged groups have worse educational outcomes. The 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Germany² contained important recommendations for education reform in Germany that can have a positive impact, particularly for disadvantaged children and youth.

¹ European Commission, Country Report for Germany, 2019.

² European Commission, Country Specific Recommendations for Germany, 2019.



83.9 millions* total
18.4%** under 19 yrs
4.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

17.3%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

However, the Semester process misses important developments in Germany to tackle the social exclusion of children with disabilities and does not address the fact that the German constitution fails to adequately protect child rights or

promote the participation of children in decisions which affect their lives.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Although children in Germany have a much lower risk of poverty or social exclusion (17.3%) than children in the EU as a whole (24%), child poverty has actually been on the rise in Germany in recent years. Furthermore, the picture is strikingly less favourable for certain types of families. Approximately 40% of families with a single parent and around 30% of families with three or more children are considered poor, as are nearly 30% of children with a migrant background.

The 2019 Country Report for Germany recognises that “[c]hildren of low-skilled parents have a substantially greater risk of poverty or social exclusion than children of highly skilled parents.” More specifically, it identified the gap between the risk of poverty or social

exclusion facing children of low-skilled (often migrant) parents and those with highly skilled parents as 67%.

A positive development in the social inclusion of children with disabilities in Germany is the current reform of the social security code VIII (Sozialgesetzbuch VIII). This aims to remove the legal divide between children without and children with disabilities and to establish a child and youth welfare system that is responsible for every child and every youth. The Alliance of German child and youth welfare organisations (AGJ) is deeply involved in the consultation process and has published a number of statements.³ However, the 2019 Country Report is missing this important development.

The rise of far-right views and anti-democratic attitudes continues to be a serious problem in Germany. The National Coalition calls for the German government to take greater account of the needs of children and adolescents particularly affected

by discrimination, disadvantage or bullying due to their social and cultural background or their disabilities and limitations.⁴

As AGJ has previously highlighted, there is still an urgent need for greater research on the requirements and conditions for good social integration of unaccompanied children with a migrant background.

Early childhood development

Developing high-quality early childhood education with the aim of breaking the cycle of poverty has been an aim of the German federal government. Since the introduction of a legal right to early-childhood support through a day-care facility in 2013, participation in early childhood has grown considerably in Germany. AGJ supports the development and promotion of early childhood education with the

expansion of a full-time childcare system.

However, the National Coalition notes that by 2017, the demand for care for children under the age of three outgrew available supply in all 16 federal states. By 2025, at least 600,000 additional placements are expected to be required for children in the years before they commence school.⁵ Another area of concern is that the participation of children with a migrant background in education before starting school is lower than that of their peers.

Education

The 2019 Country Report outlines that children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, with a migrant background, Roma children, children with disabilities and those who identify as LGBTI are all facing structural and institutional discrimination in the education system and worse educational outcomes.

³ For more on AGJ's involvement in the Sozialgesetzbuch VIII reform, visit the SGB VIII section of the AGJ website (in German).

⁴ National Coalition Germany, 'Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Germany, 5th/6th supplementary report to the United Nations'.

⁵ Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 'Bildung in Deutschland 2018'. Bielefeld, p. 68

To make the system more inclusive, “the Federal Government plans to make placement in all-day primary schools a legal entitlement and to further expand provision of all-day schools.” Other measures at both Federal and Länder levels are also being planned to improve equity in education. Investment in all-day schools is potentially an important investment in children, however there is a need to ensure that this reform is based on a holistic understanding of education, including input from professionals.⁶

The 2019 European Semester contained important recommendations for education reform in Germany that can have a positive impact for children and youth. The first recommendation calls for Germany to “[f]ocus investment-related economic policy on education”, whilst the second identifies the need to “[i]mprove educational outcomes and skills levels for disadvantaged groups”.⁷

AGJ advocates for increased investment in child and youth work to support child welfare, which is so important in supporting children in their educational aspirations. It also calls for improved access to and increased recognition of non-formal education across Germany as part of implementing the European Qualifications Framework. This can provide a more flexible education system and a variety of pathways to reaching higher qualification levels and improved educational outcomes, which can particularly benefit disadvantaged young people.⁸

Child participation

In its 2019 submission on the ‘Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’⁹, the National Coalition Germany states that the German constitution, known as the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), continues to inadequately provide for children’s rights. According to the National

Coalition, children are not expressly named as ‘original legal subjects’; nor are the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child duly reflected in the Basic Law.

The National Coalition argues that the current legal situation of children in Germany means that there are considerable shortcomings in the way in which child participation is implemented at national level. Both the way children’s interests are taken into account, and the way children are promoted and involved in decision-making are affected.

The current coalition government had previously stated in its 2018 ‘governing agreement’ that children’s rights are to be enshrined in the Basic Law, though the National Coalition notes that the details and exact formulation remain open and this topic is not addressed by the Semester documents. At the federal level, there has been more success in the recognition of children’s rights, with 15 out of 16 state constitutions

recognising children’s rights explicitly.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

In the 2019 Country Report, under Annex D ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’, the European Commission’s recommendations on investment priorities for Germany include: addressing women’s labour market participation through early childhood education and care; investing in the quality, equity, effectiveness and labour market relevance of education and training, and investing in skills; promoting socio-economic integration of migrant populations; and promoting the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived and children.

Calls to expand the number of childcare placements and all-

⁶ Members of the AGJ network are developing a policy paper on the expansion of all-day schools, expected late 2019

⁷ European Commission, Country Specific Recommendations for Germany, 2019

⁸ AGJ, ‘Non-formally acquired competencies – Challenges and impulses for the allocation of the continuing education offers of child and youth welfare in the DQR’, 2018 (in German)

⁹ National Coalition Germany, ‘Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Germany: 5th/6th supplementary report to the United Nations’

day schools are welcomed, but it is important that the quality of these educational opportunities is ensured. Investment of EU funds should also contribute towards access to and recognition of non-formal education, and investment in research concerning the conditions for effective social integration of unaccompanied children with a migrant background.

More broadly, there is a greater need for the assessment and evaluation of children's rights needs for social policy in Germany. The contributors to this report hope that the 2021-2027 EU funding period will see greater embedding of this child-rights based approach.



Hungary

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Hungary should take action to prepare a comprehensive strategy including measurement and evaluation to tackle social exclusion and the limited resources available for education, health and social support.

Respondent organisation:
Family, Child, Youth
Association

The 2019 Country Report for Hungary identified that the country has made limited progress in addressing the 2018 Country Specific Recommendations. In particular, "limited progress has been made to improve educational outcomes and to increase the

participation of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma, in inclusive mainstream education."¹ The Family, Child, Youth Association finds this statement accurate.

The Country Report would benefit from further analysis of the socio-



9,772,756 * total
19.5%** under 19 yrs
4.8%** under 5 yrs

Population

23.8%**

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [European Commission, Country Report Hungary, 2019](#)

economic conditions of children. Currently, the situation of children is only partially covered. The National Reform Programme is missing an overall analysis of the situation of children and policies aimed at their social inclusion. Moreover, the proposed policies and practices

envisaged in the National Reform Programme have been only rarely implemented in practice. The 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Hungary could be more explicit regarding political, social and economic challenges, and future EU funding.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The 2019 Country Report for Hungary outlines that: “Poverty risks faced by children, families with three or more children and single-parent families are decreasing, but remain higher than the EU average. In 2018, they amounted to 23.8%, 25.5% and 40.0%, respectively. The adequacy and coverage of tailored early-childhood development services for disadvantaged families, such as the Sure Start Children Centres do not meet all demand.”

However, the 2019 Country Report underestimates the level of child poverty caused by the lack of basic services, such as lack of access to

healthcare, education and social services, and underdeveloped transportation. While mentioning segregation, it does not elaborate on the fast-growing prejudice and discrimination faced by some children and families, including Roma, the poor and those with disabilities.

Child protection reform

The 2019 Country Report fails to assess the level of progress on deinstitutionalisation and development of family- and community-based services for children without parental care. Despite the growing number of children in alternative care, the Association emphasises that there is decreasing quality of care, shortage of foster carers, high fluctuation and lack of proper resources in residential homes and group homes. Children under two are particularly at risk. Despite the evidence-based recommendations prepared by the Hungarian Commissioner for Fundamental Rights concerning the root causes and proposing

measures and solutions, there has been no official government reply, nor action.

The Country Report recognises improvement in care for children with disabilities: “in line with the Pillar principle on inclusion of people with disabilities, in 2018 the Hungarian government revised the nursing allowance for home care: it committed to a 30% increase of the amount in four years, and introduced a higher amount for care by parents. At the end of the four-year period, the allowance for care by parents will reach the minimum wage, recognising care similar to employment. The decision is a significant step in preventing institutional care”. However, this only covers a small proportion of the parents and carers of persons with disabilities, while the high number of children with disabilities in large institutions has not changed.

Early childhood development

The 2019 Country Report identifies the shortage of services for children under the age of three without elaborating on the challenges of overcrowded and under-staffed kindergartens or addressing the lack of inclusion, especially for children with disabilities. Additionally, barriers – such as transportation, material deprivation, disability, etc. – preventing the compulsory attendance of children from certain marginalised groups could be better described.

The Country Report mentions that “participation of Roma children in early childhood education and care and recent measures (including anti-segregation officers and working groups and new rules defining school catchment areas) are meant to prevent segregation. However, their impact is limited by the exemption of non-state schools from the requirement to take disadvantaged pupils.² However, this does not recognise the fast-

² See Ercse, Krisztina, (2018). Az állam által ösztönzött, egyházasszisztált szegregáció mechanizmusa, in *En Vétkem: Helyzetkép az oktatási szegregációról*, ed. Fejes, József Balázs, and Szűcs, Norbert (2018); and Ercse, Krisztina and Radó, Péter (2019, forthcoming). The impact of the privatisation of school network in Hungary.

growing segregation being seen in kindergartens.

Education

The challenges for the education system in Hungary include: deterioration of educational achievements; a high rate of early school leaving; segregation; and a lack of inclusive education. The 2019 Country Report outlines that: “By the age of 15, basic skills are significantly below the EU and regional averages (PISA, 2015) ... Students’ achievement shows strong correlations with their socio-economic background. The study shows that 37% of Hungarian students go to schools where disadvantaged students are the majority...” However, whilst mentioning challenges - such as a high rate of early school leaving and the low level of digital skills - the report does not provide analysis of drivers.

Currently, parents are under pressure to opt for technical or vocational, rather than comprehensive (gymnasium) schools. However, the quality of

technical and vocational schools appears to be decreasing to the detriment of the socially vulnerable and deprived children facing low career prospects. There is also shortage of after-school and second-chance opportunities, lack of free access to sports, cultural programmes, and language courses, further widening the gap between the deprived and the well-off.

Furthermore, there is currently specific support, including excessive funding, for church-run schools that tend to exclude socially vulnerable and deprived children, increasing segregation and unequal opportunities. Meanwhile, the public education system obliges one set of books in all schools with limited opportunities for alternative schools. Starting school at six years old is compulsory even in cases of developmental delay, without programmes to support catch up.

Although the Country Report identifies that “the share of primary schools with 50% or higher Roma participation increased from 10% in 2008 to 15% in 2017”, it does not mention the extent of segregation,

lack of resources and growing shortages of qualified teachers.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The Family, Child and Youth Association finds the investment priorities in ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’ of the 2019 Country Report well identified, especially in reference to:

- improving access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality childcare, healthcare and social services, including through infrastructure and with a focus on rural areas
- better sharing of responsibilities among parents and flexible working arrangements to prevent early school leaving and support young people not in education or training
- providing better services for families and children, including transportation, flexible opening of facilities (etc.)
- reducing exclusion and supporting access to, and

completion of, higher levels of education and training among disadvantaged groups, including Roma

- integration of marginalised communities and tackling material deprivation by provision of social housing.

However, the Association proposes the following additional priority:

- Implementation of local prevention programmes in order to avoid out-of-home placement of children and promote re-integration with own family, including after-school and out-of-school activities.

With the Association’s expertise, it would like to participate in the programming to influence the design of Operational Programmes of the European Social Fund Plus. However, civil society organisations’ engagement in consultations is not supported by the Hungarian government.

Ireland

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Ireland should take action to develop, fund and implement a credible five-year plan (with a national lead) to end child poverty, including investing in school meals, free schoolbooks, medical cards, housing and subsidies to take part in cultural activities.

Respondent organisation:
Children's Rights
Alliance Ireland

The 2019 Country Report notes that child poverty remains a challenge and that one in ten children are in persistent poverty. However, it is disappointing that this is not reflected in the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations, as it was in previous years, for example in 2014. While the child poverty figures have shown some improvement

- and there is focus on important areas such as childcare - it is an opportunity lost not to continue to focus on child poverty given the level of children at risk and its long-term societal impact.

Child poverty cannot be addressed by childcare alone or by parental access to the labour market if the



4.9 millions* total
27.3%** under 19 yrs
6.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

25.2%***



Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018 ***2017

quality of employment is low. A bigger vision for Irish Government action on child poverty should be set by the Commission here, including action in relation to education, health, housing and food in line with the EU Recommendation on Investing in Children.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Ireland's 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014)¹ has contributed to significant reductions in child poverty in recent years. However, building on this momentum to end child poverty requires a stronger and more coordinated 'whole of government' approach.

The 2019 Country Report for Ireland² recognises that "fighting child poverty remains a challenge", but lacks nuance and detail on how this might be accomplished. It does refer to the creation of an interdepartmental group to "improve synergies and policies across departments to further tackle child poverty", but there is no public information available on the group as of publication (October 2019).

Much more attention is needed on supporting vulnerable families,

including those headed by lone parents, which are five times more likely to live in consistent poverty, four times as likely to be at risk of poverty, and almost three times as likely to experience deprivation as two-parent households.³ Possible responses could include restoring the earnings disregard for all lone parents to the 2011 levels in terms of hours worked in National Minimum Wage employment.

Another urgent issue is Ireland's growing homelessness crisis that affected over 3,800 children in April 2019. It is welcome that the 2019 Country Report recognises the urgency of the situation, however, a more child-specific analysis would be helpful. The government's use of family hubs as its main response to child and family homelessness was recently the subject of a report by the Ombudsman for Children⁴, which rightfully questioned the effectiveness of existing measures and called for urgent "investments in social housing infrastructure and social services".

Reference in the Country Report to the 'No Child 2020' national dialogue is welcome; but this is a joint initiative to end child poverty by the Children's Rights Alliance and Irish Times - it is not a government initiative. A new national lead with dedicated staff and an implementation plan should be established to encourage, facilitate and push the child poverty agenda at the highest levels of government. There is also a need for more transparent and meaningful consultation and dialogue with civil society.

Early childhood development

The 2019 Country Report has captured the complexity of early childhood development in Ireland. Both the Country Report and the Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) call for "increased access to affordable and quality childcare"

and it is welcome that this CSR is included again this year.

However, while a lot of the debate has necessarily focused on affordability - given that the cost of childcare in Ireland is one of the highest in the EU - a focus on the safety and quality of care provided to children is essential. A recent television exposé on privately run childcare facilities by the national broadcaster has resulted in a government commitment to review the national Child and Family Agency's monitoring and enforcement powers.

The inclusion of 'childminding' in the 2019 European Semester is also an important marker. Again though, there is a series of initiatives listed but no analysis or impact assessment on the need for greater registration and regulation.

An important and positive development that has been missed by the Country Report is the launch in 2018 of 'First 5: A Whole-of-

1 Latest implementation update from the Irish government in 2019.

2 European Commission, 2019 Country Report, Ireland.

3 Calculated using Table 3.1 from Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2017 Results', Dublin: Government Publications, 2018.

4 Ombudsman for Children's Office 2019, 'No Place Like Home' Report, 2019.

Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028⁵ and its Implementation Plan 2019-2021.⁶

Education

Concerning education, this year's European Semester mostly addresses tertiary education ignoring the education of children. In terms of primary and secondary education, the report provides no context or detail into its statement that pupil performance is benefiting from investment in support for disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs (although it does refer to Ireland's higher-than-EU-average early school leaving for children with disabilities).

It mentions a 2017 Delivering Opportunity of Equality in Schools (DEIS) programme but does not give any sort of analysis or critique of it, which would have been particularly useful in light of the 2019 Action Plan for Education which has as

a goal to "advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential".

The lack of a focus on educational welfare is a missed opportunity to reflect ongoing issues in the education system, such as food poverty, reduced timetables for certain children and the impact on the poorest families of the costs of primary and secondary education (including schoolbooks, uniforms, and voluntary contributions requested of parents). Furthermore, there are a lack of strategies for children who face disadvantage, but who do not live in an area which has schools that are part of the DEIS programme.

Healthcare

With regards to healthcare in Ireland, the overarching issue with the duplicate and market-driven system

is captured in the 2019 Country Report, albeit once again without a nuanced examination of the issues relating to children. Traditionally, there has been a disparity of access to healthcare based on income. Those with the means have accessed healthcare privately, while those without have had to wait for care.

A 2017 report of the all-party Committee on the Future of Healthcare⁷ recommended the delivery of expanded primary-care services by the introduction, among other measures, of universal access to General Practitioner (GP) care without fees. The government committed to the roll-out of free GP care to all children up to the age of 18 and so far has fulfilled this for children up to the age of six. Extension to older children was delayed due to a failure to agree contacts with GPs. However, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) pledged that it will be extended to seven- and eight-year olds in 2020 and, in April 2019, the government agreed a new

contract intended to extend free GP care to the under-12s.⁸

Unfortunately, children with mental health and speech and language issues continue to have to wait to access appropriate support due to under-resourced services and long waiting lists. In addition, there was an increase of €25 in the GP visit card thresholds in Budget 2019. None of this is reflected in the Country report.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

All planned actions under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' would have a positive effect on investing in children in Ireland, in particular with regard to the following three areas:

Childcare: providing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality childcare to support women

⁵ Department of Children and Youth Affairs Ireland, First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2018.

⁶ Department of Children and Youth Affairs Ireland, First 5 Implementation Plan 2019-2021, 2019.

⁷ Sláintecare Report, 2017.

⁸ Merriamstreet.ie, 'Taoiseach and Minister for Health welcome agreement on GP contractual reform' [Press Release], 6 April 2019.

in their access to the labour market. Specific attention should be given to supporting lone parents.

Education: specifically, the Children's Rights Alliance recommends large-scale provision of food for students in primary and secondary education to address food poverty.

Housing: supporting the pursuit of a housing-first approach by increasing the output of built and acquired social housing units to meet targets set in the government's action plan for housing and homelessness 'Rebuilding Ireland'⁹, and ending the long-term use of 'self-accommodation' and emergency accommodation for families with children.



9 Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness

Latvia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Latvia should take action to invest in children through prevention and early intervention strategies in social protection, education and health across all regions of Latvia. It should also monitor implementation of deinstitutionalisation processes to ensure family- and community-based services are provided according to needs.

Respondent organisation:
Latvian Child Welfare Network

The Latvian Child Welfare Network sees improvement in both the 2019 Country Report for Latvia¹ and the Latvian National Reform Programme² in terms of giving prioritisation to social issues, notably on the adequacy of social benefits, access to quality early

childhood education and care, and progress on deinstitutionalisation. It also provides reasonable analysis, including quantitative data on the situation of children in Latvia.

Nevertheless, the Latvian Child Welfare Network continues to



1,919,968* total
20.3%** under 19 yrs
5.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

22.5%*

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ European Commission, Country Report for Latvia, 2019.

² Government of Latvia, National Reform Programme, 2019.

education and child rights. It needs to build an integrated, coordinated strategy with corresponding goals, measures and budget for reaching the set targets.

It is also important that civil society is actively involved in the policy development process in a timely manner, ensuring that the new policy is both universal and specific, targeting all vulnerable groups of children and families. The Latvian Child Welfare Network is setting up a partnership with other civil society organisations to pull expertise and resources together, in order to boost development and positively influence the state's policies for children and families.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The 2019 Country Report for Latvia identifies that wages have been increasing at a rapid pace since the minimum wage was raised in 2018. An important factor driving wage increases has also been that Latvia

has lost over 20% of its working-age population due to emigration in the past 20 years.

Despite wage increases, regional disparities play a significant role in child poverty and social exclusion, and actually mirror disparities in employment across regions. Unemployment is most seriously affecting people with low skills, those living in regions furthest from the capital Riga and those aged 50+. The at-risk-of-poverty rate of unemployed persons is as high as 59.6% and increasing.

Furthermore, overall income inequality remains high partly due to the low redistributive power of the tax and benefits system. Those who are most affected by the risk of poverty or social exclusion are people with disabilities, families with three or more children, the elderly, the unemployed, and children living within those family-types. Moreover, plans to improve the minimum income benefits in 2019 have not yet been implemented, and this negatively affects the poorest households.

The Country Report also identifies that unequal opportunities persist in access to education and healthcare, which both disproportionately affect Latvian children living in poverty or social exclusion. In response, the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Latvia³ call for an improvement to the adequacy of social benefits so as to positively impact on poverty reduction.

Child protection reforms

The Latvian Child Welfare Network has assessed that social topics are much better covered in the National Reform Programme, in particular, the progress towards deinstitutionalisation of alternative care for children. Similarly, the 2019 Country Report for Latvia summarises that the transition from institutional to community-based care has been ongoing while the provision of family- and community-based care for children, including children with disabilities, needs to be further developed and supported.

In 2018, financial support for foster care was increased to promote foster care as well as increase the number of foster parents in Latvia. Deinstitutionalisation reform is mainly supported by EU funds. However, the Latvian Child Welfare Network emphasises that to secure better outcomes for vulnerable children, the funding needs to be increased through national- and local-government funding.

The National Reform Programme outlines a more detailed plan to proceed with deinstitutionalisation. It proposes a number of activities targeting both children and adults residing in institutions. It also envisages new community-based services for vulnerable families with children. According to the Latvian Child Welfare Network this is a step forward since these topics were not mentioned in previous National Reform Programmes.

This agenda remains high for Latvia as it has also been identified as one of the funding priorities for the next EU funding period 2021-27: “to ensure equal access to affordable,

3 European Commission, Country Specific Recommendation for Latvia, 2019.

accessible and good quality social services and healthcare and support the transition from institutional care to independent living and community-based care services with a focus on cooperation between health and social services."

Early childhood development

As the 2019 Country Report for Latvia outlines, access to childcare facilities is low in the country's main centres of economic activity. Availability of affordable (mainly public) kindergartens is a challenge in Riga and in other large cities where young people tend to migrate.⁴ In 2017, 28.4% of all 0-3 year olds were enrolled in formal childcare; this is below both the Barcelona target of 33% and the EU average of 34.2%.⁵

Compensation for the inability to find a place in municipal kindergartens does not cover the costs of private child-minding services, which can cause people to choose

unemployment rather than low-wage employment.

Based on these findings, the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Latvia recommend, "improving access to quality and affordable early childhood education and care." In addition, the European Commission's analysis of Latvia for 2019 outlines that infrastructure investments are needed to improve access to childcare.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The Latvian Child Welfare Network calls for an improvement in the management of EU funds as, for example, delays of almost two years in the implementation of EU-funded projects is jeopardising the completion of the deinstitutionalisation reform planned by 2023.

New investment priorities included in Annex D of the Country Report for 'Policy Objective 4: A more

social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' identify how the Latvian government can address the needs of children and families in Latvia, in particular by:

- supporting integrated active inclusion measures with involvement of local communities and civil society
- improving access to personalised and integrated social services for disadvantaged groups
- reducing homelessness and housing exclusion, and improving access to social housing including through infrastructure
- ensuring equal access to affordable, accessible and good-quality social services and healthcare; and
- supporting the transition from institutional care to independent living and community-based care services with a focus on cooperation between health and social services.

⁴ Eurofound, 2018, cited in the 2019 Country Report for Latvia, p.32

⁵ EU-SILC, cited in the 2019 Country Report for Latvia, p.32

Malta

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Malta should continue devoting resources to creation of open spaces, public gardens, environmental protection and afforestation as an investment in the well-being of adults and children today and for future generations to come.

Respondent organisation:
The Malta Foundation for
the Wellbeing of Society

The 2019 Country Report for Malta¹ highlights that single parents, large families, people with disabilities and those with a migrant background are at particular risk of poverty and social exclusion in the country – with children disproportionately affected. It also makes specific calls for

investment in inclusive education and improved outcomes for disadvantaged groups starting from early childhood.

Nevertheless, the investment in early childhood care is still mainly framed as boosting parents' labour



493,559 millions* total
18.7%** under 19 yrs
4.8%** under 5 yrs

Population

22.8%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [European Commission, Country Report for Malta, 2019.](#)

Child poverty and social exclusion

Malta is experiencing buoyant economic activity with a strong focus on international businesses in the past decade. This has led to economic growth, but not all groups in Maltese society have benefited equally. The 2019 Country Report notes this development. Specifically, in its analysis the European Commission identifies that single parents and large families in particular are struggling, and the percentage at risk of poverty and social exclusion for both demographics is higher than the EU average.

The report identifies that children whose parents are low- and medium-skilled face higher poverty and social exclusion risks than pre-crisis (2008) levels. The European Commission's analysis also identifies that people with disabilities and those with a migrant background are facing higher risks of poverty in Malta. Housing and social security systems are contributing to a widening

inequality gap. As always, children are disproportionately affected as the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion remains high at 22.8% (in 2018).

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society also highlights that in its engagement with professionals working in the field of children, a common issue that keeps emerging is the need for more resources. This issue is reported across most sectors related to children including schools, community, family, alternative care and in other services such as mental health and those relating to young offenders. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society calls for the allocation of better resources to meet these needs, including financial, human resources, expertise, training and professional development.

It is essential that all sectors working with children are adequately resourced to cater for each child with experiences of disadvantage and to meet the needs of children and families with a migrant background.

The staff, experts and personnel involved need to be sensitised better to this new environment and given appropriate training in this respect.

Early childhood development

Participation in early childhood education is improving in Malta. Provision of free childcare has visibly improved participation rates in formal childcare to 31.3% in 2016 from 17.9% in 2015 and has also facilitated the employment of younger mothers.

While this investment is framed as an economic benefit in terms of boosting labour market activity and promoting women's labour market participation, it is also integral to ensuring the development and well-being of children and their families, no matter their socio-economic or legal status.

Importantly, the Country Report calls for increased investment in inclusive education and training for Malta,

and explicitly identifies the need to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged groups starting from early childhood (aged 0-3 years).

Education

This year's European Semester identifies early school leaving as the biggest challenge for the Maltese education system. Malta has a 'Europe 2020 Strategy' national target of 10% early school leaving. However, in 2018, 17.5% of young people left school before the end of secondary education in Malta, making it the second highest in the EU (behind Spain at 17.9%) and well above the EU average of 10.6%.² Investment in inclusive education and training was included in the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for Malta.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has further identified the need to cater for a growing multicultural environment in schools, especially as more foreigners settle in Malta. Educators need more support and training

² Eurostat, 2018

to address and work with these new realities. Children themselves need more psychosocial support to be assisted to integrate better, in school and outside. Effective child participation will help embed the well-being of students at the heart of any education reform.

Children's rights and the environment

An area that the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society would like to see further emphasised in the European Semester is the state of the environment. Specifically, children need to be able to enjoy open green spaces vital to their well-being. Spaces for children to play and enjoy nature are few in Malta. To address this, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, together with a number of crucial partners including public authorities, are embarking on a project addressing clean, safe and green spaces from an environmental point of view and setting up child participation in communities.

The Country Report notes that Malta's challenges of limited space and natural resources have intensified due to high population density and increased investment in response to its growing industries. This year's Country Specific Recommendations touch on the need for investment in the management of natural resources. Unfortunately, these challenges are considered as economic, and not with any regard to their impact on children.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

In this year's Country Report under Annex D 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights', all recommended investment priorities will have a positive impact on children in Malta.

Instilling a more pronounced work-life balance through all employment sectors, including the private sector, is essential for the well-being of guardians and children. Such an approach needs to be backed more

effectively by government policy and guidance and information needs to be made accessible for everyone. Holistic education reform, focusing not only on academic or market relevance but also the well-being of each student is key. Finally, the call to promote the socio-economic integration of people with migrant backgrounds and enhancing access to quality services are also essential for ensuring that children and other disadvantaged groups are able to live fulfilling lives.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is looking forward to working with the newly established MaltaCAN network to ensure that children are at the heart of all policies and reforms.

The Netherlands

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Netherlands should take action to increase the knowledge and understanding of children's rights among children, young people and professionals who work with them in order to ensure meaningful participation of children and young people, and make the interests of the child central.

Respondent organisation:
**Save the Children and
Defence for Children on
behalf of the Dutch Coalition
on Children's Rights.**

The European Commission's 2019 Country Report for the Netherlands¹ refers to the "weakening of the situation with regard to the risk of poverty", albeit without specifying how this affects children. The unequal opportunities and segregation in the education system,

including teacher shortages, is also mentioned.

While this analysis from an EU perspective is welcomed, Save the Children and Defence for Children note that comparing across the EU28 tends to favourably portray



17.28 millions* total
22.2%** under 19 yrs
5.1%** under 5 yrs

Population

15.2%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [European Commission, Country Report Netherlands, 2019](#)

Child poverty and social exclusion

Although the 2019 Country Report references that the overall situation with regard to poverty has weakened in the Netherlands, the country is once again cited as being among the top performers of the EU. However, the Netherlands should be compared against its own capacity as a prosperous country to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure that no child grows up in poverty. This would strengthen the case of NGOs and advocates working at national level to address lasting difficulties in reducing poverty.

Both the Country Report and the Country Specific Recommendations highlight the need to improve measures of inclusion for people with a migrant background, in particular in relation to employment and education. The Country Report identifies some of the challenges faced as the lack of recognition of qualifications, language skills, limited professional networks

and discrimination. Their lower employment rates are also having a negative effect on the social inclusion of second-generation children and young people.

Two other recommendations are indirectly relevant for tackling child poverty and social exclusion. The former recommends that the Netherlands reduce the debt bias for households and the distortions in the housing market. The latter calls for reform in policies for self-employed workers to tackle bogus self-employment, while promoting adequate social protection for the self-employed.

Whilst welcome, it is important to mention that although the Country Report sees the Dutch allowance system as a successful factor for tackling problem indebtedness, the Netherlands Court of Audit recently published a report that shows that the allowance system is way too complicated and leads to debt.² Households with children in particular, have to contend with allowance debts more often and for longer.

What is missing from this year's recommendations is a solution for 'systemic challenges'. Given the structural poverty that persists in the Netherlands, the current system, including the social safety net (minimum wages, benefits, etc.) is insufficient. Furthermore, distortions in the housing market must be solved. There is a lack of cheap houses and long waiting times for social rent. With private rental prices rising, it is not clear that supporting the development of the private rental sector is the best way forward.

Child protection reforms

Although an important step took place in July 2018 when the Netherlands extended the age for leaving foster care for unaccompanied young adults up to the age of 21, issues related to children in alternative care and the lack of suitable places in the Netherlands were not mentioned in the Semester process.

The size and composition of groups of children in care settings - together with the absence of enough qualified personnel to be able to respond adequately - often means that, instead of promoting alternative pedagogic approaches, securing the safety of children often becomes the dominant priority in alternative care settings. The lack of suitable places also often means that it is not possible to place siblings in foster care together, causing separation even when not in the best interests of the children.

Other problematic issues concern the use of liberty-restricting measures, including: the lack of a uniform definition or description of which measures constitute a deprivation of liberty; no direct and effective oversight of their use; and children with different kinds of authorisations for care placements (open and closed, youth help and mental health) being housed on the same premises with no clear differentiation in care. Structured consultations with peers and between institutions on the use of liberty-restricting measures is

² 'Toeslagen terugbetalen', Netherlands Court of Auditors, 2019.

lacking, typically resulting in random practices dependent on the board or staff of the institutions.

Education

In the field of education, Save the Children and Defence for Children stress the unequal opportunities and segregation in the education system, including teacher shortages. The Netherlands needs to work towards education that is more inclusive.

References to children with a disability or the need for more inclusive education were notably absent from the 2019 Country Report, although young people with disability and people with a migrant background were identified as target groups under 'Investment needs' in the section on Education and Skills.

Child participation

Recent years have seen a gradual increase of attention to ensuring meaningful and impactful

participation of children and young people. This has been most visible with the child ministers and local youth councils at municipality level, within the police force, and in institutional care settings for young people.³

However, Save the Children and Defence for Children regret that there continues to be real gaps in knowledge of children's rights among both children and adults and there is no assessment to check in advance whether new regulations or policies are in line with the children's rights laid down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

A National Youth Council Survey found that only 34% of young people know about the CRC.⁴ Efforts to raise their awareness have already started at national level. There is also an ongoing need to raise understanding of child rights among politicians and policymakers, local and regional administrators and professionals working with children. It is positive that there is a reference to human

and children's rights education in the text and explanatory memorandum of the citizenship education bill⁵, although its implementation is not yet certain.

Finally, despite an increasingly child-rights-centred approach in police training, further training is still needed as well as some reflection on whether the current behaviour of professionals in the criminal justice system is sufficiently child friendly and child-oriented. That the participation of children was not mentioned in this year's Country Report serves to reiterate the need for this work.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

In responding to this year's newly added Annex D, under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights', Save the Children and Defence for Children welcome the call for empowering

vulnerable groups and recommend this be accomplished through fostering active inclusion, improving employability and promoting the socio-economic integration of third country nationals.

Child participation will play an important role in fostering active inclusion. However, currently the participation of children and young people is not standardised in the training for professionals who work with children and youth in legal, care, or counselling contexts. EU investment therefore needs to support measures to stimulate active (child) participation and make sure that meaningful (rather than ad hoc) participation of children is structurally guaranteed in all facets of policy and practice. Participation should be representative in terms of the education level of children and families, as well as taking into account regional variance.

Save the Children, Defence for Children and Stimulansz are working to tackle challenges in the Netherlands around investing in

³ Children's Rights in the Netherlands: Input to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, prepared by the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights, 2019

⁴ 'There to Talk, dare to Listen. Dutch Youth on the Children's Rights treaty', National Youth Council, 2019

⁵ For more information (in NL), see: Wetsvoorstel aanscherping Burgerschapsopdracht Onderwijs

basic skills and flexible upskilling and reskilling of families in vulnerable situations. The project Speakingminds.nl aims to ensure that the voice of vulnerable youth is included, while at the same time working on empowering them and increasing trust in the government.⁶ By taking children seriously, projects such as this can boost self-confidence and in turn encourage active participation in society. Funding from the EU's new operational programmes would provide an important boost to this work.



6 Speaking Minds.

Poland

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Poland should take action to significantly reinforce efforts to transition from institutional to family- and community-based care for children, including for children with special needs.

Respondent organisation:
Polish Foster Care Coalition

Both the 2019 Country Report¹ and the Country Specific Recommendations for Poland call for increased labour market participation, including by improving access to childcare and long-term care, and removing remaining obstacles to more permanent types

of employment. Such measures can benefit children in Poland. However, the Polish Foster Care Coalition regrets that the Country Report's analysis says little about quality of care for young children, taking primarily a labour market perspective.



37,972,812* total
20.1%** under 19 yrs
4.1%** under 5 yrs

Population

17.2%***

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ [European Commission, Country Report for Poland, 2019](#)

placed on speeding up this reform, which is crucial for the rights and well-being of children and their opportunities to break cycles of disadvantage that can impact on their long-term social inclusion and labour-market integration.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The situation of poor families in Poland has improved following the introduction of the '500+' law, which attempts to resolve the situation of the most deprived families by supporting them with child allowances. Since 2016, this has provided a cash transfer of 500 PLN (around €118) to support families with more than one child.

Positively, since July 2019, it also applies to the first child or the only child of a family. Furthermore, every child placed in alternative care gets this support as well, since it is no longer intended only for children in family-type care or placed in a family-type residential facility.

Child protection reforms

According to a 2018 report on the progress of deinstitutionalisation in Poland, nearly 75,000 children were growing up in alternative care in Poland, of which 22% remained in institutional care and 78% were placed in Poland's nearly 40,000 family-based care settings, comprising: kinship foster families (65%); non-professional foster families (30%); professional foster families (4%); professional 'emergency' foster families (1%), plus 244 specialist professional families and 553 multi-child foster families.

The share of family-type care compared to institutional care has increased over the past five years, but progress has been slow. At the same time, there has been a stable rise in the number of residential care facilities, most recently from 1,108 in 2017 to 1,125 in 2018. This has a positive aspect in terms of fulfilling higher standards regarding the number of children per facility (targeted maximum of 14 children). However, in many cases,

new residential facilities have been opened without securing desirable growth of family-based foster care.

An important challenge is that responsibility for developing alternative care lies at district level and significant regional differences are seen.² In six districts, children are not placed in institutional care at all. However, family care and family homes prevail and institutional care is now the exception in only 76 of the 380 districts across the country.³ Many districts have been lagging behind and some have opened new residential facilities without restructuring old-fashioned institutions intended for 30 children or securing new family-based alternative care.

The 2011 Bill on Family Support and Alternative Care is still not fully implemented. For example, children under the age of seven are still placed in institutional care, whilst this was prohibited by the Bill. From January 2000, this age limit is foreseen to increase to 10 years-old. However, reality shows that this standard will not

be met. Furthermore, important amendments, planned for 2018, to the Bill only passed through a first reading in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (Sejm) in December 2018; no further developments have taken place since.

The 2019 Country Report for Poland recognises that "a significant number of children remain in institutionalised foster care... The deinstitutionalisation of foster care has progressed slowly in Poland." However, there is insufficient pressure to speed up the process.

The Polish Foster Care Coalition recommends the following urgent actions for deinstitutionalisation reform: better cooperation and coordination of all actors of the child protection system; establishment of a comprehensive support mechanism for foster parents; and provision of adequate community-based services for children with disabilities to avoid living outside the family.

² Information of the Council of Ministers on the implementation in 2018 of the Act of 9 June 2011 on supporting the family and foster care system (in Polish), 2019.

³ WiseEuropa, Fundacja Przyjaciółka and Polish Foster Care Coalition report: 'Progress of de-institutionalisation of alternative care for children', 2018.

More efforts are also needed in prevention services. Currently, the main reasons for taking children away from their family have been: substance addiction (41.7% of cases); incapability to provide appropriate care (28.1%); and domestic violence (3.8%). Factors such as inadequate housing conditions (0.3%), poverty (0.1%) or unemployment (0.04%), have not constituted major reasons.

Early childhood development

Both the 2019 Country Report and the Country Specific Recommendations for Poland ask for increasing labour market participation, including by improving access to childcare and long-term care, and removing remaining obstacles to more permanent types of employment.

The Country Report brings evidence that formal enrolment in childcare for children under the age of three stood at 7.9% in 2016, compared

to the EU average of 32.9%. Care facilities for children 0-3 are rather scarce and therefore work-life balance for women is not secured. Only thanks to European Structural and Investment Funds, the capacity of childcare infrastructure has raised to accommodate an additional 146,000 children.

The Polish Foster Care Coalition regrets that the Country Report's analysis does not say much about quality of care for young children, taking primarily a labour market perspective. It fails to take into account the needs of children while emphasising the importance of mothers' return to the labour market. Flexible working arrangements should be encouraged more since it could benefit children if families receive adequate support.

In Poland, there has been a broad discussion on development and provision of care for children under three that was initiated by well-known Polish academics in the field of psychology. In 2018, fifty signatories submitted a statement directed to the Polish government,

calling for childcare for children under three years old to be prioritised.⁴

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

All investment priorities featured in Annex D of the Country Report, under 'Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights' are relevant and responsive to the needs of children in Poland. Priorities addressing exclusion and material deprivation by supporting integrated active inclusion measures aimed at increasing an individualised outreach to disadvantaged people are relevant for many children. Even more crucially, the priority calling for enhancing the system of family support and speeding up the process of deinstitutionalisation, in particular for children deprived of parental care, is one of the most important to tackle the high number of children remaining in institutional alternative care.

Polish Foster Care Coalition was engaged in the development of a useful tool to measure the progress of deinstitutionalisation of alternative care for children at district level. However, the Polish Foster Care Coalition regrets that this tool has not been put into practice due to lack of finances, nor has it been made publicly available for wider civil society. The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy cancelled the call for proposals that was supposed to fund this tool. The Polish Foster Care Coalition will increase its efforts in advocacy and calls upon the government and local governments to allocate the funds for its implementation.

The Polish Foster Care Coalition also plans on being engaged in the programming of the 2021-2027 Operational Programmes via the existing channels of cooperation with the authorities.

⁴ List otwarty w sprawie opieki nad dziećmi do lat 3.

Portugal

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective

Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Portugal should take action to develop a comprehensive national strategy to tackle child poverty and promote the social integration of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. It should also take action to reduce inequalities in timely access to high-quality healthcare and to ensure that the right of children to be heard in matters that affect their lives is fully respected.

Respondent organisation:
Sérgio Araujo*, the **Instituto de Apoio à Criança** and the **Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso Foundation**.

* Sérgio Araújo is an Independent Researcher and professor at the School of Education of the Polytechnic of Porto.

The 2019 Country Report¹ for Portugal is keen to highlight existing programmes that are working to improve outcomes around labour market activation for low-skilled members of the workforce. In particular, there is an emphasis on engaging young people who

are 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET) through these programmes and the EU-funded 'Youth Guarantee' scheme.

However, it is important to highlight that despite these positive developments, Portugal has one of



10.28 millions* total
19.2%** under 19 yrs
4.1%** under 5 yrs

Population

21.9%** 

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

¹ European Commission, Country Report for Portugal, 2019.

given more focus in policies and recommendations of the Semester process.

In addition, there is significant regional variation, with the rate of unemployment ranging from 10.6% in Madeira to 7.1% in the Centro region (2017). The risk of poverty follows these trends, with the Autonomous Regions most affected by the risk of poverty (31.5% in Azores and 27.4% in Madeira) and Greater Lisbon having the lowest rate (12.3%).²

Child poverty and social exclusion

The rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion is decreasing, with 21.9% recorded in 2018, down from 24.2% in 2017. This reduction follows Portugal's positive economic growth in recent years. Despite this positive development, Portugal is facing a number of outstanding challenges in 2019 that need to be highlighted.

Portugal remains among the EU countries with the highest levels of social fragility, above-average poverty and inequality rates and high rates of in-work poverty. The 2019 Country Report notes that child poverty, while decreasing nationally, “remains high in households with three or more dependent children and in lone-parent households”. The European Commission and Portuguese government need to deliver more detailed strategies to tackle child poverty. This is especially salient since the government already promised a new national strategy against poverty in 2017.

When it is finally put in place, a national strategy to tackle inequalities needs to take these factors into account and design actions that focus on the specific challenges facing people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Children should be an explicit focus here, and initiatives such as the ‘Child-Friendly Cities and Global Age-Friendly Cities’ offer exemplary practices of how cities can prioritise

children, taking into account specific and local needs.

Child protection reforms

Although deinstitutionalisation is not mentioned directly in the 2019 Country Report, there is clear reference to the need to modernise Portugal's social protection system. In particular, references to supporting people with disabilities, marginalised groups and children at risk of poverty or social exclusion are a good sign.

However, there is still an over-reliance on institutional care for children in alternative care and an under-reliance on family-based care with only 3.3% of children in alternative care arrangements living in family-based care.³ Furthermore, there continues to be a lack of investment in child-protection systems, including family-support systems. In 2018, 819 children were institutionalised after being removed from their families. There is an urgent need for investment

in parenting skills for families in vulnerable situations.

While there is no explicit reference to deinstitutionalisation, Portugal is recommended in its Country Specific Recommendations⁴ to “improve the effectiveness and adequacy of the social safety net”. This recommendation could be reinforced with calls for investment in good quality, accessible, mainstream and community-based support services, which will reduce the threat of institutionalisation of children in Portugal.

A positive development took place in April 2019 when the Portuguese government promulgated a new regime on the rights for foster families that will become effective on 1 January 2020. This should reduce the number of children in institutions and hopefully expand the proportion of children in alternative care living in family-based settings.

² Ibid

³ Instituto da Segurança Social, I.P., ‘CASA 2017 – Relatório de Caracterização Anual da Situação de Acolhimento das Crianças e Jovens’, 2018, p. 31. (In Portuguese)

⁴ European Commission, Country Specific Recommendation for Portugal, 2019

Healthcare

Giving children timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services in both healthcare and education – Including early childhood education and care (ECEC) - are the two main factors to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

In terms of healthcare, the 2019 Country Report usefully highlights that “[t]he health status of Portuguese citizens is good in many areas, but inequalities in access to healthcare remain.” This is a welcome recognition, and it is hoped it will lead to decisive action to address these inequalities. However, there is no specific reference to the current challenges around children’s access to quality healthcare. Meanwhile, disappointingly, the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations only refer to the healthcare system in terms of reducing the arrears in hospitals.

While the National Health System in Portugal has a universal approach that is open to everyone who needs

healthcare, and operates a system of exemptions on user charges for every child (0-18), this unfortunately does not mean equal access for every child. Given that Portugal has one of the highest shares of out-of-pocket payments in healthcare (28%), access can become challenging for families living at risk of poverty or social exclusion.⁵

Ongoing challenges in the organisation of the healthcare system still result in long waiting times (months and even years) for many specialist medical services - such as paediatricians, ophthalmologists, cardiologists and otolaryngologists – which are located only in hospitals. Portugal had previously received a Country Specific Recommendation in 2016 to ensure the long-term sustainability of its health system, but little progress is evident.

Although there is a lack of national statistical data on children’s health - with data only available for oral health – it is clear that backlogs in access to healthcare have knock-on consequences within the education

system, impacting significantly on children. Notably, many children waiting to receive specialist healthcare, such as hearing aids, are unable to access early treatment and become disengaged from learning. This runs counter to policies seeking to improve access to education, highlighting a need for joined-up policymaking to address cross-sectoral needs and a shift to more community-based integrated care in primary care centres.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The contributors to this country profile welcome that there are a number of investment priorities listed under Annex D in the 2019 Country Report that are relevant for using the 2021-2027 EU Funds to alleviate child poverty and social exclusion. These priorities, listed under ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’, give hope for a concerted effort to systematise government and civil

society efforts to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged.

Recommendations to address: youth unemployment; participation in childcare for children, especially those living in poor households; early school leaving; demographic ageing; healthcare inequalities; child poverty; and in-work poverty risks are all welcomed.

In the case of early school leaving and high absenteeism, despite 12 years of compulsory education, these remain very high, notably in Azores and Madeira. NGOs are subsequently taking a leading role in developing responses to these challenges, so calls for investment are welcomed.

In addition, one thing that is not mentioned in the Annex D, but is important to note is the utmost importance to develop better and inclusive child participation in Portugal. There is a brief mention of this within the Country Report expressed as the need to “foster adequate participation and strengthened capacity of social

⁵ Portuguese Observatory of Health Systems, ‘Spring Report 2017 – Living in uncertain times: sustainability and equity in health’, 2017, p. 166.

partners, civil society and other stakeholders in the delivery of policy objectives”, but children are not explicitly mentioned. The contributors of the report look forward to assessing how the Portuguese government incorporates these priorities in the next EU funding period.



Serbia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Serbia should take action to support families, prevent family separation and facilitate family reunification for children already placed in alternative care.

Respondent organisation:
Network of organisations
for Children of Serbia



The Network of organisations for Children of Serbia (MODS) finds the European Commission's 2019 Serbia Report partially adequate. It correctly analyses the situation of children in alternative care: "no progress was made in local-level social care services or in the de-institutionalisation process", as well as expresses its concerns about

child rights violations taking place in state institutions for children. In particular, there are concerns over violations of the rights of children with disabilities, who also face challenges regarding access to inclusive education.



6,963,764* total
19.4%** under 19 yrs
4.6%** under 5 yrs

Population

35.9%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

Child poverty and social exclusion

The 2019 Serbia Report fails to mention children living in poverty and social exclusion, or provide data on them. It rather outlines data for the whole population "the at-risk-of-poverty rate is 25.7%, implying

that some 1.8 million people are in poverty...” To tackle the situation of families at risk, MODS suggests to explicitly propose measures in the Law on Social Welfare to provide support to families and particularly to families in crisis.

Currently, in Serbia there is only the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children that was adopted at the end of 2017. This law does not bring any improvements in the field of coverage and adequacy of financial social benefits. Despite a small increase in the coverage of children’s financial social benefits, the child allowance is still low and a large number of children remain at risk of poverty.

A controversial provision of this law compels parents of children with disabilities under the age of five to choose between the right to absence from work for the special care of the child (and the corresponding salary compensation due to that absence) and the right to financial assistance for support and care of another person. Thus, parents are forced to choose between their right to work and the right of the child to financial

assistance for support and care. Together with other civil society organisations, MODS submitted an initiative to the Constitutional Court for assessing the constitutionality and legality of these provisions. In December 2018, the Constitutional Court issued a Decision to open a procedure of determining the unconstitutionality of the provision of Article 12, paragraph 7 of the law.

Another important social exclusion issue raised by the European Commission’s Serbia 2019 Report is the procedure for registering the birth of children whose parents lack personal documents. The two by-laws that regulate the procedure for birth registration currently prevent registration immediately after the birth of children whose mothers do not possess personal documents. In MODS’ opinion, this violates the right of the child to birth registration as guaranteed by the ratified UN CRC and Serbia’s Constitution - these lengthy procedures can last more than half a year. The EC’s Serbia report notes that although most Roma in Serbia have civil documentation, this issue needs to be monitored, and related secondary legislation needs to be amended.

Child protection reforms

The Economic Reform Programme, in particular chapter 18, provides proposals to establish a national mechanism for the achievement of the Sustainable Development goals, to improve public policy and programmes for children, to introduce systematic policy impact assessment and to improve the process of planning and budgeting funds for children. It also envisages preparation of guidelines for the transformation of residential institutions for children and re-allocation of funds to child and family support services. However, none of the official documents mention the need for an appropriate legislative framework such as a Law on the Rights of the Child and a National Action Plan for Children.

The European Commission’s Serbia 2019 Report flags that violence against children remains a concern. According to the Ministry in charge of family protection, changes on the Family law are underway and they will imply a ban on corporal punishment of children and on the use of physical force as a means of upbringing the child. The draft

strategy (2018-2022) on child protection and preventing violence against children was prepared and needs to be adopted. MODS emphasises that it is also necessary to improve the General Protocol for the Protection of Children from Neglect, Abuse and Violence to respect EU practices and enable monitoring.

To improve the child protection system, MODS calls for preparation of a specific Deinstitutionalisation Strategy, including the development of community services, the transformation of childcare facilities and more effective monitoring of child rights violations in institutions.

Furthermore, to tackle the situation of families at risk, MODS suggests to explicitly propose measures in the Law on Social Welfare to provide support to families, particularly to families in crisis, which are at risk of having a child removed, and to provide support and help with preparations for the return of a child to its primary family. MODS also recommends to establish services of intensive support to families as well as counselling and therapy services

that will receive appropriate funding from the government.

Early childhood development

Based on the 2019 Serbia Report, good progress has been made in the area of education and training. The education strategy and its action plan are being implemented, albeit with delays. However, early childhood education and inclusive education need to be strengthened: “Only half of the children aged 3-5 are attending formal early childcare, while only 9% of the children from Roma settlements aged 3-5 are enrolled in kindergartens, compared to 28% of children from the richest households”.

The government should take action to increase participation in early childhood education and care, in particular of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, MODS insists. Children from socially disadvantaged environments should be provided with a free stay in pre-school institutions. Prevention and eradication of discrimination against

children from vulnerable groups such as Roma children and children with disabilities and segregation in education should be also addressed by the Serbian education system.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The Network of organisations for Children of Serbia has envisaged the following investment priorities supporting children in Serbia to inform the programming of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III). Priority should be given to foster the development of a comprehensive system of support for children and families. A minimum package of services should be established at local level, which should consist of:

- early detection and early intervention to support families at risk; provision of counselling and support to parents and future parents (through pre-natal programmes)
- development of services enabling permanent, timely and adequate support for families with children

with disabilities (counselling, psychological support, information on the rights they can exercise)

- provision of services and programmes for children who are in conflict with the law; and provision of services, including career advice and social housing, for care leavers.

Slovakia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Slovakia should take immediate action to boost the reform process in education, with special focus on inclusion and especially the inclusion of children from marginalised communities.

Respondent organisation:
Coalition for Children
Slovakia

The Semester process has correctly identified the need for improvements in education at all levels, and inclusive education in particular, as among the biggest challenges for Slovakia in 2019. Other important issues are also raised in the Country Report without getting the attention needed in terms of specific recommendations - including

around tackling child poverty and strengthening deinstitutionalisation reform.

More broadly, the national child rights network Coalition for Children Slovakia expresses concern that the space for civil society engagement with the Semester process is shrinking in Slovakia.



5,450,421* total
20.6%** under 19 yrs
5.3%** under 5 yrs

Population

22.5%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018 ***2017

NGOs' representatives can formally participate in various state committees, but they are usually out-represented and outvoted by public/regional body representatives.

Regarding the programming of the 2021-2027 Operational Programmes, NGOs will be involved through the structures proposed by

the Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development in Slovakia. However, until now, the Coalition has not been approached or consulted and the Partnership Agreement has already been prepared. The lack of focus on children and the low presence of child rights on the political agenda could also be the result of the weak performance of the Commissioner for Child Rights whose actions are considered inadequate.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The 2019 Country Report¹ for Slovakia provides considerable analysis of the situation of children and policies aimed at their social inclusion, such as early childhood development and combating poverty. It recognises that a relatively high rate (22.2%) of children aged under 16 are living at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Slovakia.

Furthermore, poverty is considerably higher in a number of districts in southern and eastern Slovakia, most notably those with a large number of people living in marginalised Roma communities, those with a high proportion of small municipalities with a prevalently elderly population, and those with a high proportion of poor youth or with high levels of in-work poverty. Weaknesses in social safety nets and social protection persist. The level of the minimum income benefits is inadequate and below the EU average.

Child protection reforms

Substitute care for children has been progressively reformed in Slovakia, but it still experiences weaknesses and delays. Moreover, deinstitutionalisation of children with disabilities lacks a national strategic approach, resulting in limited guidance at national level. Other challenges include lack of exchange of good practices, low public awareness and insufficient

buy-in by the employees of existing institutions.²

According to the 2019 Country Report: “At the end of 2017, there were around 14,000 children in substitute care, 37% thereof placed in institutional care with an average length of stay in a children’s home slightly above 4 years.” Efficient provision of an individual approach to children and their families has been addressed by the amendment of the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children and Social Curatorship, in force as of April 2018. However, a lack of continuous monitoring and evaluation of the efficiency of the interventions is one of the main weaknesses of the deinstitutionalisation reform in the country.

Early childhood development

The 2019 Country Report notes that enrolment in early childhood education and care remains very

low, with less than 2% of under-3s in formal childcare, compared to the EU average of 33%. In the school year 2017/2018, there was a significant surplus in demand for places in kindergartens, with 7.7 rejected applications per 100 enrolments.

Related to early childhood development, the Country Specific Recommendations³ call for Slovakia to:

- Ensure improvement and inclusiveness of education at all levels
- Enhance access to affordable and quality childcare and long-term care; and
- Promote integration of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma.

Education

Both the Coalition for Children Slovakia as well as the European Commission identify education, and inclusive education in particular,

1 European Commission, Country Report Slovakia 2019.

2 Fundamental Rights Agency (2018) *Country study - The right to independent living of persons with disabilities - Case study report – Slovakia*, cited in European Commission, Country Report Slovakia 2019

3 European Commission, Country Specific Recommendations, Slovakia 2019.

as among the biggest challenges for Slovakia in 2019. The Country Report highlights that “The low quality of educational results, the participation of Roma in inclusive mainstream education as of early childhood and the effective integration of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in education and training (given the increasing early school leaving rate) are pressing challenges.” The Country Specific Recommendations call for “improvement and inclusiveness of education at all levels”, efforts to “foster skills” and to promote “integration of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma.”

There has been some progress in inclusive education with the planned introduction of obligatory school attendance from the age of five, which is expected to come into force on 1 January 2021. This mainly aims to prepare children from marginalised Roma communities to attend the school system. It was initiated by the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities and developed by the Ministry of

Education. However, the law has also triggered a discussion among the organisations and parents protecting the rights of children with disabilities who are not appropriately covered by the law.

The Coalition for Children Slovakia finds the analysis of the education system and its needs provided in the National Reform Programme relevant and responsive. However, despite the appropriate assessment, the government and, in particular the Ministry of Education, have not taken action to move the development forward. In fact, the Ministry of Education has stopped all systemic reform processes and the regulations it has proposed have minor impact on improving the situation.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework for inclusive education has not yet been adopted, despite the efforts of a Ministry working group to draft a ‘National Programme for Development of Upbringing and Education’ in 2018. This draft strategy included concrete measures for inclusive education for

children with disabilities and Roma children.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

The European and Structural Investment Funds (ESIF) have been playing a crucial role in reform processes relevant to children’s rights and well-being in Slovakia, such as tackling child poverty and social exclusion, addressing shortcomings in the systems of education and early childhood development, and transition from institutional to family- and community-based care.

Unfortunately, however, the overall spending of EU funds has been very low. As of 30 June 2019, Slovakia had spent €3.82 billion of all funds for the 2014-2020 programming period, representing less than 25% of its total allocation.⁴ The use of EU funds is considered to be essential for steering an efficient transformation of the existing

institutions, but “it is currently insufficiently coordinated”⁵.

One of the most significant obstacles causing also a low participation of civil society organisations in ESIF spending is the substantial administrative burden. For example, there have been specific calls for proposals addressing the need for inclusive education launched by the Ministry of Education, however only few NGOs received financial support.

The Coalition for Children Slovakia welcomes the identified investment needs under ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’ in the 2019 Country Report under Annex D. The investment needs focusing on promotion of equal access to quality and inclusive education is the most useful for Slovakia today.

⁴ Euractiv, V prvej polovici programového obdobia Slovensko vyčerpalo štvrtinu eurofondov, 2019.

⁵ Cangár, M. and M. Machajdík, 2018

Slovenia

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Slovenia should take action to set children's rights as a priority agenda with a special emphasis on children's right to be heard and the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care of children.

Respondent organisation:
**Slovenian NGO
Network ZIPOM**

According to the Slovenian NGO Network ZIPOM, it is a positive development that Slovenia's 2019 Country Report mentions children in a more specific way than in previous reports. The report acknowledges that Slovenia is performing well on most indicators of the Social Scoreboard supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights.

It also records progress in the provision of childcare and highlights the reduction of the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rates and monetary poverty of children younger than 18, which are well below the EU average. The new Family Code and a Resolution on Family Policy and related regulations



2,080,908* total
19.5%** under 19 yrs
5%** under 5 yrs

Population

13.1%**

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

are welcomed in supporting children's well-being.

Perhaps due to the perceived progress in fields related to children's well-being that the European Commission monitors and evaluates, none of the Country Specific Recommendations for Slovenia focuses on children.

Nevertheless, ZIPOM suggests that there is still room for improvement in priority areas such as ending institutional care for children and reinforcing rights of the child to participate and be heard. The National Reform Programme fails to address these important issues, along with others such as children in the digital environment and child-friendly justice. Significantly, there is still the absence of a new National Programme for Children that should have followed the previous one that expired in 2016.

Child poverty and social exclusion

The Slovenia Country Report 2019 does not mention the number of children who still live in poverty. According to the Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office (SURS) in 2018, this figure was 45,000 children. Data from SURS shows that the poverty rate of children in 2017 was higher than in 2016, though lower again in 2018. Overall improvements of the welfare system

did not have a positive effect on children from single-parent families where the at-risk-of-poverty rate rose to 4.8%.

The National Reform Programme attempts to provide some solutions and outlines the specific policies to tackle early school leaving, pre-school and school education, and to some extent reduction of poverty. ZIPOM appreciates the following proposal that is in line with their advocacy priorities: “in order to establish a balance between the level of the minimum income and the minimum cost of living, we will study the possibility of changing the order of the exercising of rights to public funds such that the child benefit would no longer be considered income”.

Child protection reforms

Institutional care is not in children’s best interests and can seriously harm their mental and emotional development. However, to this day, Slovenia still does not have a strategy for deinstitutionalisation.

Slovenia should adopt legislative changes compliant to the UN General Assembly’s Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children.

According to the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, the number of children in foster care is declining. On the other hand, according to Slovenia’s Ministry of School and Education, the number of children with special educational needs in institutional care has been on the rise for the past five years. In 2017, there were 538 children in residential and counselling centres and 160 children with special educational needs in institutional care. Data from Slovenia’s Ministry of Justice shows that in 2018, there were 38 children in juvenile correctional facilities. There should be more studies on Slovenia’s transition to alternative care.

According to the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia¹, crisis centres for children and youth are reporting a rise in the number of children with emotional and behavioural problems placed in their care. For example, in 2015, 665

children were placed in crisis centres for short-term stay, half of which between 15 and 18 years old. This happens especially in cases when other institutions wish to place their children during the weekends and holidays.

There should also be more services in terms of family assistance, family-like placement, living with peers, attending regular schools, free-time activities and professional help. This view is supported by the results of a study on ‘Grounds for Deinstitutionalisation in Slovenia’² by the Ministry of School and Education.

Early childhood development

The 2019 Slovenia Country Report assesses the state of play of children’s participation in early childhood education and care. The data is summarised as follows: “The rate of over 4-year-olds participating in early childhood education and care is increasing

1 Situacijska analiza položaja otrok v Sloveniji, IRSSV, Smolej Jež idr. 2016

2 ‘Grounds for Deinstitutionalisation in Slovenia’, Ministry of School and Education’s Project, available in Slovenian

slowly but continuously. It stood at 90.9% in 2017, still 4.4% below the EU average...Participation of children younger than three in formal childcare is also above average compared to other Member States and has increased further in the last year.”

Education

With regard to education, the 2019 Country Report Slovenia outlines that: “At 4.3%, the proportion of early school leavers is the second lowest in the EU”. However, another important aspect featured in the report is a finding that young people lack digital skills. “The International Computer and Information Literacy results from 2013 show that only 16% of pupils in primary school acquire the necessary digital skills to use information and communications technology for collecting and processing data and solving problems independently (Ministry of Education, 2018). In addition, only around 5.5% of high school students met all the digital skills targets (National Examination

Centre RIC, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2018).”³

Moreover, the founder of the ZIPOM network, the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth, thinks that there are many challenges in digital education of children. Primarily, there is a lack of information and awareness among children in a child-friendly language about the dangers of the digital environment. No legislation is in place that would protect the most vulnerable. More emphasis should be given to the protection of young children from premature exposure to the digital world.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

According to ZIPOM, only two priority areas of the investment priorities ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe – Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’ are directly linked to children. They aim at modernising the education and training sectors – in terms of

pedagogical staff policies, digital learning, transversal skills and other skills/knowledge for the future - as well as at supporting access to inclusive and quality education, also focusing on enhancing digital skills.

3 See the 2019 Country Report for Slovenia.

Spain

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

Spain should take action to reduce poverty rates, especially child poverty rates. Increasing the amount and coverage of family benefits and social transfers for families at risk of poverty or exclusion should be prioritised. There should also be clear investment to increase the public offer of early childhood education.

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



46.93 millions* total
19.8%** under 19 yrs
4.5%** under 5 yrs

Population

29.5%**

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018

There is a real need to improve the involvement of civil society in the European Semester process. Unfortunately, the 2019 Country Report for Spain¹ only refers to “the involvement of social partners” and makes no specific mention of civil society involvement. Clear guidance

from national or EU policymakers on how civil society should engage with the process would be welcomed. Given the importance of this year's European Semester towards shaping future EU-funding priorities, this engagement is all the more important.

To this end, Plataforma de Infancia attended consultations with the European Commission's Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion in March and October 2019 - along with Eurochild and other civil society organisations - to strengthen the involvement of civil

¹ [European Commission, Country Report Spain 2019](#)

society in the European Semester. Whilst Plataforma de Infancia has welcomed these opportunities, as with last year, Spanish civil society would like to secure stronger involvement and more transparency throughout the Semester process, especially at national level.

Child poverty and social exclusion

Child poverty is on the decrease in Spain, dropping steadily from 35.8% in 2014 to 29.5% in 2018 (it was 31.3% in 2017), and the Spanish government has increasingly recognised and committed to tackling the issues. Nevertheless, the country continues to be highlighted at EU level for Spain's higher than EU average (24.9%) child-poverty rates and continued need for investing in children and families.

Three positive developments have taken place in the past year,

as documented in Spain's 2019 National Reform Plan.² The first was the appointment of a new High Commissioner for the fight against child poverty³, established in 2018 by the then-in-government. The High Commissioner's remit is to establish instruments for measuring, monitoring and evaluating public policies aimed at combating child poverty as well as analysing the status of the Spanish child protection system in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international agreements.

Secondly, Spain's new 2019-2023 National Strategy for the prevention and fight against poverty and social exclusion was approved in March 2019, and provides operational objectives, measures and axes of action for the inclusion of society as a whole in Spain.⁴ The strategy contains a chapter dedicated to child poverty. While this does not equate to a full and accountable National Child Strategy (the most recent of which ended in 2016), it nonetheless

signals Spain's commitment to the issue.

Finally, the launch of a new Universal Social Card system by the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security aims to make the social benefits system more transparent and thus allow for better targeting. Currently, social transfers are not reducing poverty rates for families as effectively as they could, and Spain continues to have one of the lowest family benefits, in terms of quantity and coverage, in the EU.

While these three developments are welcomed and are promising, Plataforma de Infancia notes that they are not accompanied by sufficient or specific measures for implementation nor contain commitments for the future.

The 2019 Country Report for Spain clearly recognises the specific concerns around the higher-than-average rates of child poverty and correctly analyses Spain's main structural and urgent deficiencies.

It outlines the main related challenges as the lack of capacity of social transfers to reduce poverty (especially for children) because of the low levels and poor targeting of social spending for families with children.

In its Country Specific Recommendations⁵, the European Commission called on Spain to "provide effective support and improve support for families". While this recommendation is welcomed, Plataforma de Infancia stresses the need to be clearer about the objective to reduce the high rates of poverty – especially child poverty – and the need to improve the amount and coverage of social transfers for families.

Early childhood development

Plataforma de Infancia welcomed the analysis of the European Commission in this year's Country

² Spain National Reform Plan, 2019

³ Spanish Government, (2018) Royal Decree 419/2018, of June 18, which restructures the Presidency of the Government, see 'Article 10. High commissioner for the fight against child poverty'

⁴ Spanish Government, (2019) Estrategia Nacional de Prevención y Lucha contra la Pobreza y la Exclusión Social 2019 – 2023

⁵ European Commission, (2019) Country Specific Recommendations – Spain

Report, which noted that despite participation in early childhood education and care being generally above the EU average, there are persisting disparities across regions.

Pre-primary education for children aged 3-6 is free of charge and includes a national curriculum taught by graduate teachers. More than 95% of children aged 3-6 are enrolled, 67% of them attending public centres.

The share of children aged 0-3 enrolled in formal childcare was also above the EU average in 2017 (46% vs 34%). Half of them attended public centres. Childcare expenses for under-3s are tax deductible, which benefits mainly households paying taxes.

However, the supply of publicly funded childcare places varies significantly across regions, ranging from less than 30% in the Canary Islands to almost 90% in Extremadura. The enrolment rate also varies strongly across regions, being for instance almost four times higher in the Basque region compared to Ceuta - partly linked to female employment rates.

Calls for investment in early childhood education and care in the Country Report are accompanied by a Country Specific Recommendation to “improve support for families” and are welcomed, alongside the Spanish government’s stated willingness in its National Reform Programme to work towards the universalisation of access to early childhood education and care for children aged 0-3. Although it has not yet been specified exactly how this will be achieved, the national Government will allow municipalities to spend an additional €330 million in 2019 for building and upgrading public early childhood education and care facilities.

Education

Plataforma de Infancia notes that there is a real need for greater attention on the scholarship system in the Spanish education system, especially in primary and secondary education. This system was not reflected in the 2019 Country Report, although the European Commission does recognise that spending on education remains low in Spain, that Spain has a high rate

of early school leaving (17.9% in 2018 vs the EU average of 10.6%) and that large regional disparities persist in educational and training outcomes.

In its Country Specific Recommendation for 2019, Spain is recommended to “reduce early school leaving and improve educational outcomes, taking into account regional disparities.” It is also recommended to place greater emphasis on promoting vocational education and training, to increase access and completion at all levels of education, and to fight discrimination in terms of access.

In its National Reform Programme, the Spanish government also gives an accurate assessment of the education system, but further analysis on the difficulties of families in vulnerable situations and their needs in term of grants and scholarships etc. is recommended.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

All planned actions under ‘Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe: Implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights’ would have a positive effect on investing in children. In Annex D of this year’s Country Report for Spain, measures to address unemployment for disadvantaged groups and early school leaving will indirectly benefit children. Addressing child poverty is directly referenced too, and Spain is recommended by the European Commission to “promote the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including children”.

With the Annex Ds in mind, Plataforma de Infancia calls for the Spanish Government to place a greater focus on specific programmes aimed at reducing the consequences of child poverty, specifically in improving the nutrition of vulnerable children, school reinforcement, school supplies, and support for families at risk of social exclusion and poverty. Likewise, Spain should focus more

on education-support programmes for children aged 0-3 years old. In doing so, the Spanish government can ensure that all children living in Spain can realise their full potential and that their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled, as set out in the European Commission's 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'.



United Kingdom

Country Profile on the 2019 European Semester from a children's rights perspective



Alternative Country Specific Recommendation for 2020

The United Kingdom and its devolved nations should take urgent action to eradicate child poverty, reduce social inequalities, tackle homelessness and improve health and well-being outcomes for all, including by fully accepting and delivering on the Recommendations of the 2019 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.

Respondent organisation:
Children's Rights Alliance
(part of Just for Kids Law)
for England, Children in
Northern Ireland, Children in
Scotland, Children in Wales

The UK - child poverty and social exclusion

In this year's European Semester, there is some welcome analysis of increasing levels of child poverty in the United Kingdom (alongside projections that it is set to increase

further) with a more detailed analysis of child poverty than in last year's Country Report.

Latest Eurostat data shows that children are at a disproportionately higher risk of poverty, with the most recent available data (for 2017) showing that 27.4% of children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion,



66.65 millions* total
23.5%** under 19 yrs
6%** under 5 yrs

Population

27.4%**

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion

Source: Eurostat *2019 **2018 ***2017

as opposed to 22% of the total UK population. This recognition that there is a disproportionate number of children in poverty and that the UK is a net beneficiary of EU funds has been found useful by the contributors to this country profile.

References in the Country Report to analyses from the Institute of Fiscal

Studies (2017)¹ and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018)² are also welcomed. Both of these studies indicate that child poverty will continue to rise to 2022, with the latter predicting that another 1.5 million children will fall into poverty, raising the projected child poverty rate to 41%.

Inclusion of the negative impact of cuts to benefits, the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit and the high levels of children living in poverty in families where at least one parent is working is also to be commended. This undermines the government's narrative to justify changes to welfare provision, that work is the best route out of poverty. Highlighting that the numbers of homeless children has increased significantly over the last ten years is also useful.

However, the overall analysis could not be described as 'thorough'. There is no detailed analysis of the specific changes to the benefits system and its impact on children,

for example the benefit cap and the 'two-child' limit. There is also no mention of the dismantling of the Child Poverty Act and ending of the child poverty targets (that existed prior to the 2010-2015 coalition government) and accompanying child poverty strategy. It is also surprising that there is no reference to food poverty and the proliferation of food banks across the country.

Furthermore, and not for the first time, the analysis carried out by the European Commission does not provide disaggregated statistics for the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Nor does it discuss specific policies that are being delivered to address child poverty at the level of the devolved nations. These factors reduce the usefulness of this analysis for organisations working in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Disappointingly, the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations for the UK primarily focus on the economy,

growth, productivity and 'research & innovation'. There is no reference to the social dimension referenced in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and children are absent from the narrative despite the improved focus in the Country Report. In 2018, UK received a recommendation to improve its childcare sector, yet despite the situation not improving, this recommendation has not been retained.

In 2018, the European Commission also raised concerns around the impact of Welfare Reform, but this also has been omitted in the 2019 Country Specific Recommendations, despite growing independent evidence of the devastating impact this is having on many children and families.³

England

The Children's Rights Alliance for England, part of Just for Kids Law, welcome that this year's Country Report shines light on the number of children in England who are

homeless and evidences the increase of this figure in recent years by drawing on data collected by the charity Shelter.⁴ However, there is little detail on the types of poor and unsuitable accommodation that children in homeless families are forced to live in - for example, temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and hostels.

The report also welcomes the Homelessness Reduction Act as a positive development, but does not refer to the lack of additional funds to implement it, which has been a recent criticism of the Act by local authorities. There is also a lack of analysis on the causes of increased child homelessness, including welfare cuts and the lack of social housing.

The Country Report lacks detailed analysis on child poverty and the impact of child poverty and homelessness on children. In particular, it fails to adequately link different issues together, for example, the detrimental impact

1 'Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2017-18 to 2021-22', Hood and Waters, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2017.

2 'The Cumulative Impact of Tax and Welfare Reforms', Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018.

3 UK Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019.

4 'Homelessness in Great Britain - the numbers behind the story', Shelter, 2018.

poverty and homelessness has on a child's education, development and mental health.

There is some welcome reference to the impacts of huge underinvestment in children's social care and local authority deficits on the lack of affordable childcare. However, it does not make an explicit link to good quality early years childcare (which is a particular problem for the most deprived areas) and how this affects early childhood development.

Concerning primary and secondary education, this year's Country Report highlights that there has been a reduction in education expenditure and school budget deficits, but lacks broader detail on educational reforms and the rise in permanent exclusions which disproportionately affect children with Special Educational Needs, children in care, in poverty and those from particular ethnic groups such as Gypsy/Roma children and Black Caribbean boys.⁵ Instead, it is focused on teacher recruitment and retention.

Surprisingly there is no mention of the mental health needs of school-aged children, focusing instead on the mental health of students in higher education despite official statistics showing school-aged children have growing mental health needs.⁶

Wales

'Children in Wales' reported that where data on child poverty is presented, this was in respect of overall poverty figures for the UK. Recognising that huge disparities exist between Wales and, for example, the South East of England, disaggregated data would have been helpful in presenting a more accurate reflection of the disproportionate numbers of children in poverty in Wales compared to most of the UK.

Disappointingly, there was no specific recognition of the policies in place to reduce child poverty in Wales e.g. the Welsh Government Child Poverty Strategy, or sufficient commentary on poverty reduction

programmes. There is recognition of the increase in child homelessness in the UK, and that Wales has seen bigger proportionate increases than England over the past year. However, there is again an absence of commentary in relation to the Wales-specific legislation, policies and programmes in place designed to help address this.

'Children in Wales' highlights that education and health are also devolved matters to the Welsh Government, yet discussion of these sectors in the reports lacks specific data or information on policies and programmes. Concerning early childhood development in Wales, reference is made to the gradual roll out of the 30hrs-per-week childcare offer for working parents, which is welcome. Yet our concerns that this is only available for working parents (which excludes large numbers of families in poverty) is not reflected. The report concentrates on childcare as opposed to early childhood development, which is much broader and more clearly

focused on the best interests of the child.

In the Welsh Government's section in the UK's National Reform Programme⁷, Children in Wales welcomes references made in respect to intersectionality of addressing issues in housing, employment, skills and climate change to address child poverty. However, there is no reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child nor promising advancements in respect of achieving equal protection in Wales through the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Bill recently introduced.

Furthermore, some sections of the document appear to be repeated from previous years despite concerns being previously raised, for example the section on 'Stakeholder Engagement'. Finally, whilst there is recognition that the UK is a beneficiary of the European Social Fund, Children in Wales regrets that there is no commentary on the fact that Wales financially benefits

⁵ 'Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England 2017 to 2018', Department for Education and National Statistics, 2019

⁶ 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2017', NHS Digital, 2018

⁷ [UK National Reform Programme, 2019](#).

substantially more than any other nation or region of the UK. Unless replacement funds are found when the United Kingdom leaves the EU, Wales will lose out substantially.

Scotland

Children in Scotland welcomes the important focus on child poverty, and is deeply concerned that numbers of children living in poverty throughout the UK are increasing. However, without an analysis of the Scottish situation and access to disaggregated data, the analysis of this year's Country Report is not particularly relevant for a Scottish context.

The most recent Scottish figures indicate numbers of children living in poverty is increasing and will continue to rise. Inclusion of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 within the report, which brought in targets around reducing numbers of children living in poverty, would therefore have been welcomed.

Education is a devolved matter that is not reflected in the Country Report's analysis. This is unfortunate, as the government in Scotland has progressively linked child poverty with educational attainment through the key policy priority to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

Concerning early childhood development, the European Commission's analysis helpfully explains different levels of early childhood education and care in Scotland, and the 2020 target for expanding free early learning and childcare provision to 1,140 hours per year. However, Children in Scotland has a number of concerns about how this expansion will work in practice, e.g. for children with additional support needs, ensuring geographical accessibility, workforce capacity and quality of provision.

There are three other gaps in the report related to child rights that are currently very much on the political agenda in Scotland. Firstly, the Scottish government plans to incorporate the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law, which will put children's rights squarely at the heart of all future legislation and policymaking in Scotland. Secondly, a new Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill proposes to bring to an end the physical punishment of children by adults caring for them.⁸ Thirdly, the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act, which received Royal Assent in June 2019, raises the age of criminal responsibility in Scotland from 8 to 12 years old.⁹

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has been without a government at Stormont since January 2017, following the Renewable Heating Initiative scandal. After a general election, power sharing could not be restored between the two leading parties (the Democratic Unionist Party and the republican party Sinn Féin). In the meantime, the devolved nation has been governed day-to-day by civil servants.

The Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions Bill (2018) was passed through Westminster late last year allowing decisions that are minor and/or non-controversial, as well as those broadly in line with the previous government in Stormont, to be made. However, the lack of political leadership is having a huge impact on people (including children) in Northern Ireland. For example, mental health issues are on the rise, yet there continues to be no national suicide prevention strategy.

In education, schools are facing real financial constraints with some schools asking parents to buy basic supplies to make ends meet. In October 2018, the head teacher of a primary school in County Antrim appeared before a committee of Members of Parliament to plead for more resources stating that: "I've actually found myself in the humiliating position of begging my parents to support the well-being of their children by providing Pritt Stick, reading books, tissues and soap. I actually have parents – and this isn't

⁸ The Scottish Parliament Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill, 2019.

⁹ Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019.

a joke – who are donating toilet roll to my school. It feels Victorian – it's a disgrace.”¹⁰

Concerning childcare, Northern Ireland still has yet to introduce a childcare strategy to replace the last one in 1999. A number of laws that have been introduced in the rest of the UK - for example on coercive control - cannot be applied to Northern Ireland due to the stalemate at Stormont. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Executive's agreed welfare reform mitigation package – which ensures that families do not face the harshest effects of UK welfare reform - comes to an end in March 2020; it will be a cliff edge for a lot of families if the mitigations finish.

The situation for children in Northern Ireland is, as elsewhere in the UK, continuing to worsen, exacerbated by the fact that Northern Ireland continues to 'float adrift' without any decision-making capacity at its helm.

Investment guidance on EU funding 2021-2027

An important addition to this year's European Semester was the inclusion of investment priorities identified ahead of the new EU funding period of 2021-2027. These priorities are intended to identify how EU funds can be allocated towards specific areas, including measures to reduce child poverty and promote social integration. The investment priorities are listed in the Country Reports for each country, under the section Annex D. Due to the expected departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2019, an Annex D was not prepared for the UK in its 2019 Country Report.

¹⁰ [BBC, Maghaberry primary school principal says parents donating toilet roll, 31 October 2018.](#)

Statistics explained

All data on population and child poverty provided in this publication was retrieved from Eurostat. The most recent data available was used.

In the case of population for countries, this was taken from data made available as of January 1 2019.

The percentage of the population aged 0-18 and 0-4, was taken from 2018 data.

Finally, in the case of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), this data was taken from 2018 data when available, and where not (as is the case with Ireland, Slovakia and the United Kingdom) it was taken from 2017 data. The European Commission defines the AROPE indicator as the share of the population in at least one of the following three conditions:

- at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold
- in a situation of severe material deprivation
- living in a household with a very low work intensity.

In 2018, an estimated 24% of children (0-17) in the EU 28 were AROPE compared with 27.9% of youth (16-24), 22.1% of adults (18-64) and 18.3% of the elderly (65 or over).

Other recent Eurochild publications

[A call for action to European Union Member States for an Investing in Children Council Recommendation, 2019](#)

[European Semester 2019 – more social and more investment, Eurochild brief, 2019](#)

[Child Guarantee: An EU that helps fight child poverty, Eurochild brief, 2019](#)

[Making social rights work for children: 2018 Eurochild report on the European Semester, 2018](#)

[Eurochild's Strategic Plan 2019-2021, 2018](#)

[Investing in children through the post-2020 European Multiannual Financial Framework, 2018](#)

[Opening Doors for Europe's Children campaign - Maintain, strengthen and expand EU's pivotal role towards children's deinstitutionalisation, 2018](#)

[Childonomics - Measuring the long-term social and economic value of investing in children: Summary of Findings, 2018](#)

[Eurochild's Policy Position on the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2017](#)



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