



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Is Europe doing enough to invest in children?

2016 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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Eurochild AISBL Hallepoortlaan 27, 1060 Brussels, Belgium.
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83





















info@eurochild.org - www.eurochild.org

For more information, contact:

Réka Tunyogi
Head of Advocacy, Eurochild
reka.tunyogi@eurochild.org

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Purpose of the report

This report aims to:

- 1** Build knowledge on the extent to which the European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (2013) has been implemented across the EU and whether the European Semester process is helping or hindering the achievement of positive outcomes for children.
- 2** Develop the capacity of and inspire Eurochild members and networks to harness the opportunities provided by the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Semester at national and EU level, to address child poverty and promote child well-being.
- 3** Provide a Eurochild perspective on the broader EU context and how EU political and economic power can be better channelled to improve the life chances of all children.

The 2016 Eurochild Report on the European Semester builds on its 2015 report and contributes to the network's efforts to put children at the heart of policy making. It is based on the assessment of 28 contributors from 20 Member States documented in the 20 country profiles included in this report.

A group of children and an adult are gathered around a chalkboard. The chalkboard is covered in colorful drawings, including a sun, a flower, and various abstract shapes. The children are looking at the drawings and some are pointing at them. The adult is also looking at the drawings. The scene is brightly lit and the children appear to be engaged in a creative activity.

“ Child-centred policy makes sense both for social inclusion and long-term sustainable economic growth. By giving visibility to children, the European Semester can help build more resilient communities, societies and economies. **”**

Acknowledgements

This report is based on assessments provided by **28 Eurochild members in 20 countries**. These are: FICE Austria (Austria), National Network for Children (Bulgaria), Coordination of Associations for Children* (Croatia), Joint Council for Child Issues (Denmark), Estonian Union for Child Welfare (Estonia), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), National federation of associations for child protection (CNAPE)* and Solidarité Laïque (France), National Coalition Germany* the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ) (Germany), Ombudsman for Children's Office (Greece), Family Child Youth Association (Hungary), Children's Rights Alliance (Ireland), Fondazione L'Albero della Vita Onlus and Salesiani per il Sociale (Italy), Latvian Child Welfare Network (Latvia), Defence for Children International (Netherlands), Coalition for Children* (Slovakia), Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (Slovenia), Sérgio Araújo (Portugal), Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations for the Child (FONPC) and Hope and Homes for Children Romania (HHC) (Romania), FICE Spain and Don Bosco International (Spain), from the United Kingdom: Children in England (England), Children in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland), Children in Scotland (Scotland), Children in Wales (Wales).

Thank you to Ed Thorpe of Thorpe European Services (external consultant) for editing services, to Emma Grindulis (Advocacy and Parliamentary Officer) for overall coordination and supervision, to Dhanishtha Kuruvilla (Policy and Advocacy Intern) for her work on the questionnaire, to Flavia Colonnese (Policy and Advocacy Intern) for her authoring contributions and to all Eurochild members who took part in the 2016 questionnaire.

* Eurochild members who undertook wider consultations within their countries.

1 Key findings and recommendations

Eurochild welcomed commitments in the European Commission's **2015 Annual Growth Survey** to promote social investment. However, children remain largely invisible in the Semester process (see p.15) and are referred to only in relation to employment, for example by linking provision of early childhood education and care to female labour market participation.

The key message of the 2015 Eurochild Report on the European Semester remains valid: **there is no attempt to take a child-centred perspective**. This is a missed opportunity because child-centred policy makes sense both for social inclusion and long-term sustainable economic growth. By giving visibility to children's rights and investment in children, the European Semester can help to build more resilient communities, societies and economies.

With regards to the Semester process, the **2016 Country Reports** at least acknowledge the situation of children and to a greater or lesser degree address the challenge of increasing levels

of child poverty. However, even where statistics on child poverty are provided, an analysis of the impact of poverty on children does not follow.

While most of the **2016 National Reform Programmes** (NRPs) make some reference to children, this is predominantly through the lens of parents' access to the labour market. Only 4 out of 20 NRPs reviewed by Eurochild members reflect on the principles of the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Child participation and deinstitutionalisation reforms are absent from the majority of the NRPs.

According to Eurochild members, the **2016 Country Specific Recommendations** (CSRs) show no improvement on the 2015 CSRs in relation to addressing the needs of children. Eurochild had expected to see more CSRs on the use of European Strategic and Investment Funds (ESIF) for social inclusion, however children were mainly mentioned in relation to employment. As in 2015, Ireland was the only Member State to receive a CSR addressing child poverty. Members

of Eurochild believe the issues of migrant and refugee children, deinstitutionalisation and child participation deserve attention.

Eurochild members indicate that, apart from a few positive examples, the **Recommendation on Investing in Children** has had relatively little influence on the political agenda. Despite pockets of progress in some Member States, it appears that the Europe 2020 targets – and in particular the poverty reduction target – have insufficient political buy-in.

Nonetheless, Eurochild remains hopeful that the forthcoming European Pillar of Social Rights provides an important opportunity to strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester and reinforce a social investment approach (as articulated in the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children). Eurochild also strongly supports EU efforts to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the EU Agenda 2030.

Eurochild has the following five recommendations for EU-level policy and decision makers.



Strengthen the social dimension of macro-economic governance, ensuring it supports investment in children

The forthcoming European Pillar of Social Rights initiative is an opportunity to strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester. Specifically, Member States would be incentivised to prioritise investment in children if there are indicators on child poverty in the employment and social scoreboard, and if the social scoreboard is given the same importance as the macro-economic imbalances procedure.



Ensure robust EU social policy coordination

The Recommendation on Investing in Children should be followed up by an implementation roadmap including monitoring and evaluation of progress at national level. This would be helped if the European Commission completed and used the proposed portfolio of indicators included in the Recommendation. These indicators should then be more widely known and applied at national level.



Make better use of EU funding to stimulate investment in children

There are significant funds available at EU level that, if effectively deployed, can stimulate investment in children. To make them work better, more effort needs to be invested in simplifying procedures, removing barriers to NGO access to funds, and ensuring ex-ante conditionalities – such as the requirement to have an anti-poverty strategy – are respected. Planning of the EU budget beyond 2020 needs to be informed by the Sustainable Development Goals and the Recommendation on Investing in Children.



Facilitate child participation in policy making

Positive examples of how children can engage meaningfully in policy making processes should be widely promoted. The European Parliament and its Intergroup on Children's Rights should encourage child participation in its activities and become an example for other EU institutions to follow.



Engage in meaningful and ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations

Member States should stimulate meaningful and ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations during each step of the European Semester process. The European Commission can support this effort by better tracking and disseminating national processes and exchanging good practice.



2 EU challenges and opportunities

Whilst this report focuses on how the European Semester process can help address child poverty and promote the protection of children's rights, it is also important to reflect on the broader EU context in terms of challenges and opportunities.



.....

In the first half of 2016, almost half a million people arrived in Europe by sea fleeing war, conflict or persecution, of whom 32% were children

The upcoming negotiations between the EU and the UK Government following a referendum vote for '**Brexit**' in June 2016 creates enormous uncertainty for children.¹ There is a popular perception of the EU 'elite' being disconnected with ordinary people, and an overall lack of confidence in political leaders both at EU and national level.²

The (mis-)handling of the **refugee crisis** in Europe reflects the absence of compassionate forward-looking political leadership in the EU today. In the first half of 2016, almost half a million people arrived in Europe by sea fleeing war, conflict or persecution, of whom 32% were children.³

The number of **unaccompanied children** applying for asylum in the EU doubled in 2014 and quadrupled

in 2015 to reach an estimated 88,300 children.⁴

At least 10,000 refugee children were **unaccounted** for after arriving in Europe in 2015 (and national reports suggest that this number could be much higher) with many feared to be exploited and abused for sexual or labour purposes.⁵

Refugee children are often placed in detention centres, in camps or overcrowded shelters which focus on the needs of adults and are not child-friendly. Obligations enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international legal instruments are largely being ignored, such as the right to grow up in a family environment, the right to health care, or the right to quality education.⁶

Eurochild firmly believes that alternative political choices are available. Existing child protection systems should be strengthened to provide individualised support for all children and families.

Appropriate investments in education, health and social infrastructure and professional training and support will enable migrant and refugee children to access their rights. Such an approach is not only a moral duty, it also makes sense for Europe's future political and economic stability.

Bold political leadership is also required to address **climate change** and respect for children's rights needs to be at the heart of efforts to find solutions. This is not only a question of leaving a healthy planet for future generations, but also how children and young people can be protagonists in raising awareness and changing behaviours to reduce our negative environmental impact.

As Eurochild, we believe the complexity of the challenges faced by Europe today require new ways of thinking and new styles of political leadership. We need participatory models that empower people to come up with their own solutions, guided by a vision and values that are strengths-based and inclusive.

Education has a critical role to play, but it will also depend more broadly on how children are viewed and treated in society. When children are recognised as individual rights holders, they grow up as confident, autonomous adults better able to make a positive contribution to their communities, society and the economy.

Eurochild has identified four key EU policy agendas that, if harnessed effectively, could provide a more favourable environment for Member States to prioritise investment in children and to promote children's rights:

1. The EU commitment to end child poverty;
2. The Sustainable Development Goals;
3. The European Pillar of Social Rights;
4. The EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child.

1 For an analysis of the impact of Brexit on children's rights see [Eurochild members Together](#) (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights) and [European Children's Rights Unit](#)

2 Common statement by 177 European and national Civil Society Organisations and Trade Unions (2016). [A new Europe for people, planet, and prosperity for all](#)

3 European Commission (2016). [Compilation Of Data, Situation and Media Reports On Children In Migration](#)

4 [Eurostat data 2016](#)

5 Missing Children Europe (2016). [Figures and Trends 2015](#)

6 Eurochild (2016). [Turning the Tide for Children on the Move](#)

Eurochild has identified four key EU policy agendas that, if developed and harnessed effectively, could provide a more favourable environment for Member States to prioritise investment in children and to promote children’s rights.

2.1 Sustain EU political commitment to end child poverty

Since adoption of the Recommendation on Investing in Children in 2013 there have been several high-level political commitments on child poverty at EU level, for example:

- A European Parliament **Written Declaration on Investing in Children** was signed by 414 MEPs in 2015. It called for, among other things, the introduction of specific indicators on children at risk of poverty and the use of EU funding to implement the Recommendation.
- The EP adopted a Resolution on “Reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty” which also repeated the call for a roadmap to support implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

- Led by the Dutch EU Presidency, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on “Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion: An integrated approach” accompanied by an addendum, offering best practices across Member States on integrated approaches to combating poverty and social exclusion.⁷

These political commitments need to be translated into action. At EU level this means putting investment in children at the heart of the European Pillar of Social Rights (see p.12) and promoting the rights and well-being of children in the macro-economic governance cycle (European Semester). There also needs to be clear follow-up of the Recommendation on Investing in Children, including completion and use of the proposed portfolio of child well-being indicators.

7 Joint statement from Alliance for Investing in Children, 2016

2.2 Agree a transformative EU Agenda 2030 based on the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals

The 'Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development' adopted by all EU Member States at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 is an opportunity to set a coherent and ambitious agenda for the EU, which would include boosting efforts to tackle child poverty. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a clear accountability framework for improving children's lives and addressing poverty, nutrition, health and education. To align the work of the EU with this universal agenda,⁸ there needs to be better EU-wide measurement of the monetary and multi-dimensional aspects of child poverty.⁹



⁸ Goal 1 (Target 2) requires Member States to "by 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions".

⁹ EU Alliance for Investing in Children (2016). Joint Statement: [The Alliance for Investing in Children welcomes Council Conclusions acknowledging the need to address child poverty](#).

2.3 Ensure the European Pillar of Social Rights makes a positive difference for children

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) attempts to respond to Juncker's ambition for the European Union to achieve an EU "social triple-A rating". It aims to put social concerns on an equal footing with financial and economic priorities.¹⁰ Eurochild welcomes the initiative in as much as it encourages upwards social convergence and could help to advance children's rights and build more resilient communities and societies.¹¹

However, as it stands, the EPSR proposal does not challenge the existing macro-economic paradigm which arguably has led to growing inequalities and poverty across Europe. The 20 policy domains as proposed do not take a holistic, child-centred approach. Even the proposals for increasing childcare provision are primarily aimed at increasing female labour market participation. It is not clear how the EPSR will reinforce the realisation of existing Member States' social and economic rights obligations.¹² Eurochild members¹³ are concerned that the EPSR will fail to support the rights of children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children in alternative care and refugee and migrant children.

In order to ensure that the EPSR makes a positive difference for children, Eurochild makes the following recommendations to the European Commission:

- Ensure the EU's macro-economic governance incentivises Member States to adopt policies that improve outcomes for children. This can be achieved for example by including child poverty indicators in the employment and social scoreboard, giving the social scoreboard the same importance as the macro-economic imbalances procedure and producing child-centred Country Specific Recommendations to Member States.

- Develop minimum standard social benchmarks on early childhood education and care, building on the existing Barcelona Targets and the quality framework developed by DG Education and Culture,¹⁴ and seek to implement the 2016 recommendations from the European Parliament in relation to creating labour market conditions favourable for work-life balance.

10 European Parliament (2016). [At a Glance: What is Social Triple A?](#) Eurochild (2016). [Briefing Paper: A European Pillar of Social Rights & Recommendations for Progressing Children's Rights](#)

11 The International Labour Organization has highlighted that the EPSR could encourage stronger types of cooperation in European socio-economic governance processes, see [Building a Social Pillar for European Convergence](#) (2016).

12 Such as the [Council of Europe European Social Charter](#) and [European Convention on Human Rights](#), [UN human rights treaty bodies](#) and the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#)

13 Member webinars took place on Thursday 15th September 2016 to gather views and perspectives from Eurochild members across Europe regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights proposals.

14 [Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014](#)

2.4 Revive an ambitious and comprehensive children's rights agenda for the EU

The 2011 EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child aimed at reinforcing the EU's commitment to promote, protect and fulfil children's rights in all relevant EU policies and strategies. The Agenda has positively influenced the work of the European Commission on children's rights, particularly on promoting child-friendly justice, addressing violence against children and combating discrimination and social exclusion.

However, this important instrument in the promotion of children's rights expired in 2014 and whilst efforts to coordinate European Commission action on children's rights are ongoing, they are not framed in an ambitious and comprehensive framework. This makes it more difficult to monitor progress and to make choices on priorities.

Eurochild calls for a new and comprehensive EU strategy on the rights of the child.

Such a Framework would include specific time-bound and well-resourced actions to achieve measurable objectives where the EU can have the greatest added-value. It should also support the effective mainstreaming of children's rights in all internal and external EU processes, and seek to promote the implementation of General Comment 19 to the UNCRC on public spending.

A new EU child rights strategy should pay special attention to children in vulnerable situations, building on the 2015 reflection paper on integrated child protection systems, and linking to ongoing discussions regarding the development of a 'Child Guarantee.'

The strategy should also ensure the rights of refugee and migrant children are prioritised in the EU's migration and asylum legislation, policies and programmes. To be consistent with the UNCRC, the EU must insist that any child arriving in Europe is guaranteed the same rights as any other child. The EU can provide important guidance on strengthening existing child protection systems and mainstream services to support the long-term inclusion and integration of migrant and refugee children, based on best practices across EU Member States.

3 The European Semester process for children's rights

 106m

In 2015 over 106 million children (to 19 years) lived in the EU28.

 26.1m

In 2014, Eurostat figures estimate that 26.1 million children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU.

 80.4%

In 2012, Eurostat figures estimate that 80.4% of 18 year olds were in education.

3.1 What is the European Semester process?

The 'European Semester' was put in place in 2010 as the coordination mechanism of the **Europe 2020 Strategy** alongside budgetary surveillance (the Stability and Growth Pact). The Semester process was intended to address European – but particularly national – challenges to achieving the Europe 2020 targets in a coordinated way.

The **Europe 2020 targets** are defined by the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and were launched in 2010 as a successor to the previous ten-year Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs:

1. **Employment:** raise the employment rate to 75% for the population aged 20-64.
2. **Innovation:** raise investment levels in the R&D sector to 3% of GDP.

3. **Environment:** reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% compared to 1990 levels; increase the share of renewables in final energy consumption to 20%; and move towards a 20% increase in energy efficiency.

4. **Education:** reduce school drop-out rates to less than 10% and increase the share of 30-34 years old having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40%.

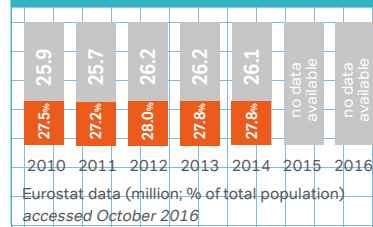
5. **Social inclusion:** in particular through the reduction of poverty, by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion.¹⁵

2016 update on target 5 to reduce poverty and social exclusion

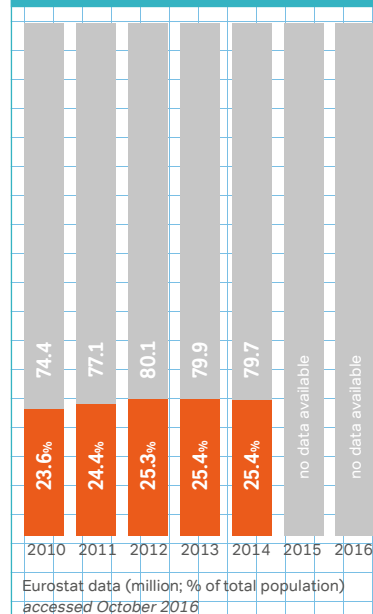
The conclusions drawn from the European Commission 2014 consultation on a mid-term review of the Europe 2020 Strategy state that the EU is **“far from reaching the targets on [...] poverty reduction.”** A mid-term review report from the Commission was scheduled for the first half of 2015, delayed until spring 2016 and has not been published.

In 2014, Eurostat figures estimated that **122.3** million people – and **more than one in every four children** – were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU. This is far behind the target of **96.6** million people by 2020.

Number of children (under 18) in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Number of adults (18-64) in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion



¹⁵ EU Alliance for Investing in Children (2015). Advocacy Toolkit for implementing the EC Recommendation Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage http://www.alliance4investinginchildren.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/TOOLKIT_br.pdf

3.2 Calendar of the European Semester

November: Annual Growth Survey (AGS): The cycle starts with EU-level policy guidance by the European Commission and the European Council in the AGS. This is accompanied by the Alert Mechanism Report, which – based on a scoreboard of indicators – identifies the Member States that require further analysis on potential macro-economic imbalances.

February: Country Reports (CRs): A CR is provided to each Member State by the European Commission, providing an annual economic and social situation analysis. They are intended “to monitor policy reforms and to point early on to challenges that Member States should address.”

July to November: National Semester: Member States are expected to integrate these CSRs into national policies and budgets for the following year, during the so-called ‘national semester’ with the possibility of sanctions for non-implementation of deficit rules and macro-economic priorities.

April: National Reform Programmes (NRPs): The implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy at national level is monitored through the NRPs, which Member States submit each year. The NRPs should be based on the Integrated Guidelines which comprise six economic guidelines and four employment guidelines which include improving the quality of jobs, education systems, and promoting social inclusion and combatting poverty. The NRPs are submitted to the Commission at the same time as the National Stability and Convergence Programmes setting out national commitments on budgetary policy.

May: Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs): The Commission reviews the NRPs and proposes CSRs for each Member State (and the euro area as a whole) which are adopted by the European Council in July.

The Social Ministries, through the Social Protection Committee, have also agreed to develop separate National Social Reports (NSRs) which will be used to feed into the NRP every two years, drawing on broader social objectives.

3.3 The European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013

Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

The Investing in Children 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.*”

The Recommendation offers a common European framework with a direct link between tackling child poverty and the European Semester, and offers guidance to Member States on how to achieve the Europe 2020 targets. It includes a call for Member States to: “*firmly place child poverty and social exclusion as key issues in the Europe 2020 Strategy and National Reform Programmes, as part of the overall effort to reduce poverty and social exclusion, taking into account relevant Country Specific Recommendations adopted by the European Council.*”

The Recommendation on Investing in Children is based on the recognition of children as rights-holders, the best interests of the child, equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged whilst ensuring quality universal provisions for all.

The Recommendation *recommends that member states:*

“Organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children’s well-being, through multi-dimensional strategies... guided by... horizontal principles.”

It calls on Member States to develop **integrated strategies** based on three key pillars:

1 Investing in “Access to adequate resources”

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

2 Investing in “Access to affordable 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 a safe, adequate housing and living environment
- Enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings

3 Investing in “Children’s right to participate”

- 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

Horizontally, it further calls on Member States to:

A) Further develop necessary governance, implementation and monitoring arrangements

- Strengthen synergies across sectors and improve governance arrangements
- Strengthen the use of evidence-based approaches

B) Make full use of relevant EU instruments

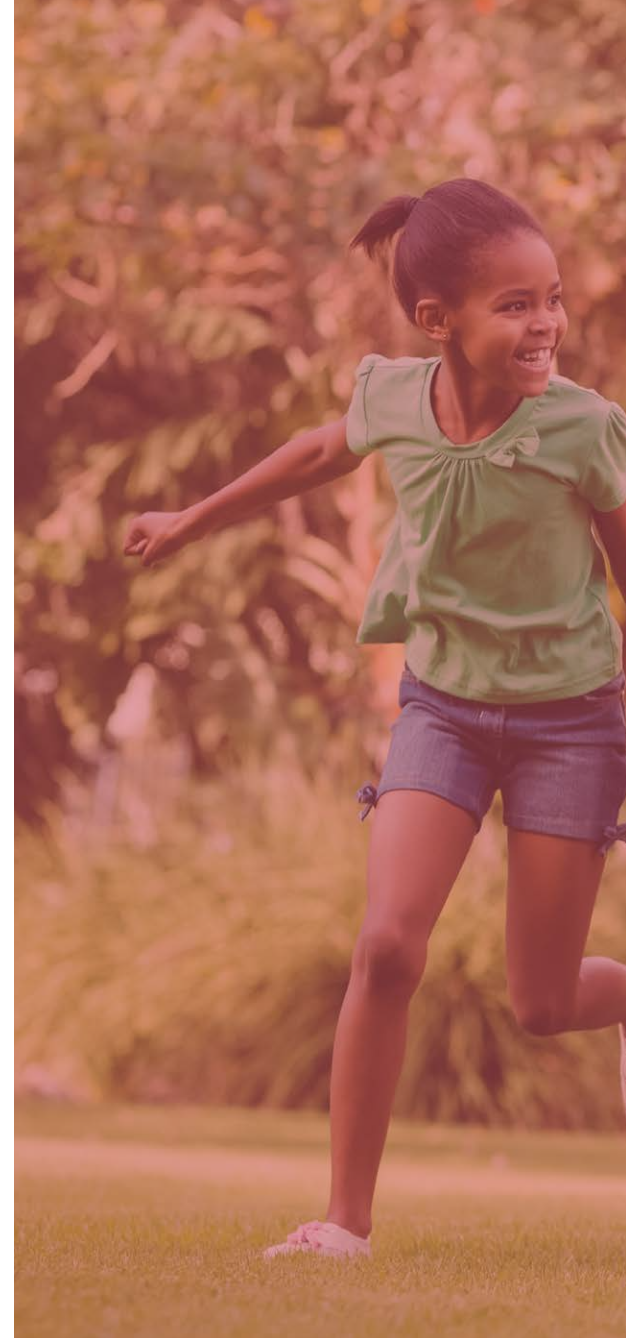
- Address child poverty and social exclusion as a key issue within the Europe 2020 strategy
- Mobilise relevant EU financial instruments

3.4 Why is the European Semester relevant for children?

The assertion that the European Semester process can help push forward a children's rights agenda is often met with considerable scepticism. Firstly, financial and budgetary targets are clearly prioritised over social and education targets; secondly, there is limited political buy-in to the Europe 2020 strategy; and, finally, there are multiple barriers for NGOs – in particular those working on children's rights – to engage in the process (as highlighted in Chapter 5.2).

Despite these shortcomings, Eurochild believes engaging with the Semester process is important and can potentially support children's rights advocacy efforts for the following reasons:

- It monitors the Europe 2020 targets annually and can help to compare and contrast the situation for children across Member States, specifically regarding the Europe 2020 target to reduce poverty and social exclusion;
- It provides a means through which the children's sector can reach out to EU and national decision-makers, such as European Commission Semester Officers in each country and government social ministries and departments;
- It enables us to discuss and promote how investing in children and promoting children's rights fits within the broader macro-economic agenda, thereby providing a high-level platform for our arguments;
- The annual cycle provides several entry points through which to engage with the process, as well as the possibility to build capacity year-on-year and improve the effectiveness and, hopefully, outcomes of our engagement.





4 Country Profiles

The following 20 country profiles provide a country-by-country insight into the extent to which the European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (2013) is being implemented across EU Member States, and whether the European Semester process is placing children on the agenda and helping to protect and promote children's rights.

The profiles contain information on engagement with the Semester process, access to EU funds and, importantly, alternative Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). It is intended that Eurochild members and other NGO actors can use this report as a tool to advocate for these alternative CSRs, helping to support coherent and consistent calls to prioritise the rights of children.

The country profiles have been produced on the basis of 28 questionnaire responses received by members of Eurochild. They include information provided by questionnaire respondents only, and do not represent the views and experiences of each country as a whole. The length of the profiles are subject to the amount and detail of information received.

Acronyms

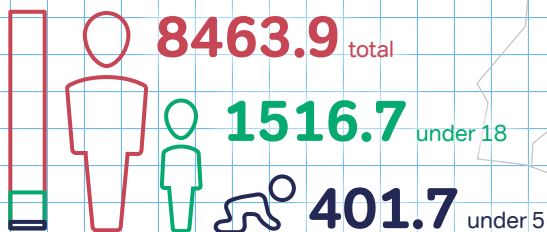
CR – Country Report

CSR – Country Specific Recommendation

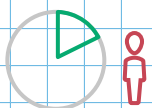
NRP – National Reform Programme

Austria

Country Profile for Semester Report

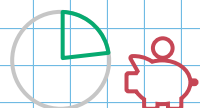


Population (thousands, 2012)



17.9 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



23.3 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



73.5 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ The biggest barrier to participation in the Semester process is the fact that children are not considered a thematic issue.

Respondent:

Organisation: FICE Austria

Engagement with the Semester process: FICE Austria did not engage with the Semester process, as children were not a topic of discussion. FICE Austria finds that the biggest barrier to their participation in the Semester process is the fact that children are not considered a thematic issue.

Access to EU funds: FICE Austria has not accessed any EU funds.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

FICE Austria provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Children's rights

The only tangible change in terms of policies and new laws implementing children's rights is represented by Austria's new regulation on the age of compulsory school attendance, which has been raised from 15 to 18 years of age.

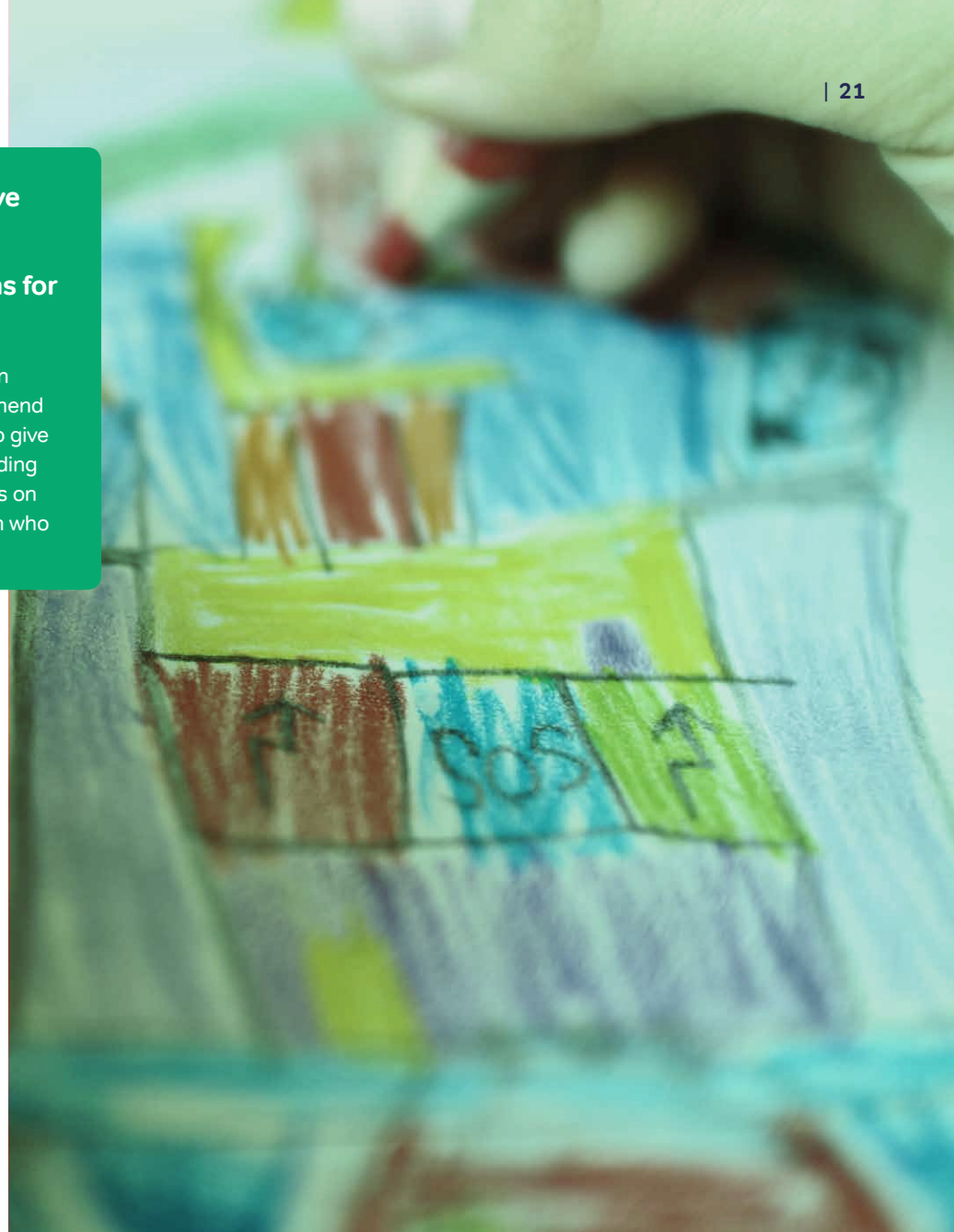
Austria's [2016 Country Report](#) did not provide a complete account of the situation of children. Moreover, whilst the [2016 National Reform Programme](#) references children with regards to employment and poverty, it does not include any meaningful reference to children's rights.

In both the [2015](#) and [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations, children were not directly mentioned.



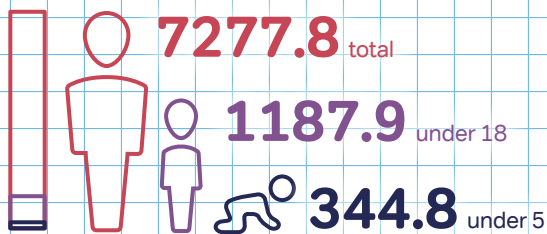
Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Austria to take action to give more attention to providing guidelines to authorities on how to support children who leave care.

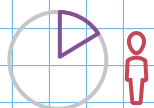


Bulgaria

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



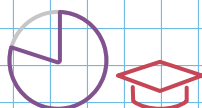
16.3 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



45.2 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



80.6 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *The National Reform Programme presents provisions aiming at improving access to quality inclusive education, now regarded as a fundamental component of the right to education. Implementation of all the planned instruments remains the key challenge.*

Respondent

Organisation: National Network for Children

Engagement with the Semester process: The National Network for Children provided its recommendations independently and as part of consultations organised by the National Alliance for Social Responsibility. Representatives of the organisation were invited to participate in meetings with EU officials.

Access to EU funds: NGOs and civil society organisations are generally excluded as potential beneficiaries. Furthermore, most projects specifically target state institutions and/or local authorities,

which can create conflicts of interest in the design, implementation and evaluation of projects. Nevertheless, the Network does sit on the Monitoring Committees for the Operational Programme on 'Science and Education for Smart Growth',¹ and on 'Good Governance'² as well as in the thematic working groups and relevant sub-committees of the Programmes.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The National Network for Children provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

There have been some positive developments in laws and policies on children's rights in Bulgaria. These include a new Pre-school and School Act, a National Health Strategy and associated Action Plan, and an

1 European Commission, [Operational Programme Science and Education for Smart Growth ... Bulgaria](#).

2 European Commission, [Operational Programme "Good Governance" 2014 - 2020](#).

updated Implementation Plan for the National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy.

In terms of the Semester process, the reforms included in the [2016 National Reform Programme \(NRP\)](#) for Bulgaria correspond to some of the principles included in the second pillar of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and the [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) provides an accurate picture of the situation of some of the most vulnerable children in the country.

Education

The **2016 Law on Pre-school and School Education** constitutes one of the main new developments in relation to children's rights and can be directly linked to the [2015 Country Specific Recommendations \(CSR\)](#) on the need to integrate children belonging to marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as Roma children and children with special needs, into the school system. Inclusive education is now regarded as a fundamental component of the right to education, as is parents' active participation.

Bulgaria's 2016 NRP presents provisions aimed at improving access to quality inclusive education. Plans include the adoption of a mechanism to monitor the educational integration of children and students from ethnic minorities and an online platform to share good practices. The NRP further plans training of specialists and teachers "to develop the institutional capacity to provide inclusive education", aiming to benefit the country's most vulnerable children, including Roma children.

The NRP, moreover, mentions the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020)³ stating the target of reducing the rate to 11% by 2020. The Strategy provides an action plan which includes the establishment of an early warning system, policies on prevention and intervention, and activities to facilitate the transition from pre-school to school education. It is based on an integrated approach involving all members of the school community. The Strategy and the action plan for its implementation lack an

3 [Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers \(2013 - 2020\)](#).



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Bulgaria to take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by adopting a holistic approach, including in relation to prevention and early intervention, to improve social transfers through linking social benefits with social work and investing in early childhood development and family support policy and measures.

impact assessment mechanism to monitor its effectiveness, and better coordination between all key stakeholders is needed.

In terms of vocational education and NEET, the Operational Programme on Science and Education for Smart Growth states that over € 673 million (€ 596 million of which will be provided by the EU budget) will be invested to strengthen research and innovation, general and higher education, and vocational training. The main beneficiaries of this substantial investment will be children and young people.

The [2016 Country Specific Recommendations \(CSRs\)](#) recommend that Bulgaria continues to do more on these themes, specifically that, while better labour market policies are needed to address the issue of young people not in employment, education or training, Bulgaria should increase the provision of quality education for disadvantaged groups, including Roma.

Implementation of all the planned instruments remains the key challenge. Furthermore, additional

child-specific targets could usefully have been defined beyond reducing the rate of early school leaving.

Child poverty

The National Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Promote Social Inclusion 2020 will be implemented by the development of the next Action Plan for the period 2017–2018. Support for families with children is a key priority in 2016, which should trigger the improvement of efficiency and targeting of family benefits.

Healthcare

The new National Health Strategy provides several positive developments for children, including the provision of additional medical examinations for pregnant women, newborns, pre-school and school children, and the establishment, within regional hospitals, of Health and Counselling Centres for Maternal and Child Health.

The NRP mentions the Health Strategy, highlighting that it aims to create new medical centres providing comprehensive services to children with disabilities and chronic

conditions. Lastly, the NRP mentions the creation of a working group to draft an ordinance regulating integrated services (healthcare and social) related to long-term care for children (and elderly people).

Alternative care

In line with the 2015 CSRs, Bulgaria's 2016 NRP presents policy measures to continue the process of deinstitutionalisation. The Action Plan to the National Strategy "Vision for deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria" is being updated: building a network of affordable and quality social and health services available in the community and at home and establishing cross-sectorial services to support families and parents with small children continues to be a priority in the deinstitutionalisation process. At the beginning of 2016, the implementation of operation "Services for Early Childhood Development" has started.

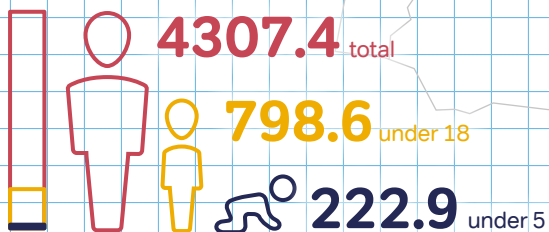
The Operational Programme on Science and Education funds are used to support efforts to improve access to quality and affordable services.

Child rights

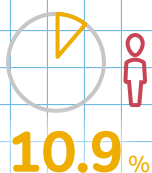
The NRP fails to address reform of the juvenile justice system, which is still based on archaic legislation dating back to 1958. The Bulgarian government should better target parents and the needs of children in its national strategies. Dialogue on a new Children and Families Act should also be resumed.

Croatia

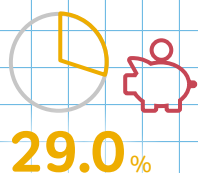
Country Profile for Semester Report



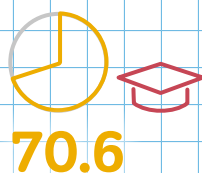
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ Since 2015, Croatia has not seen any positive development in the field of child rights. On the contrary, some of the policies and strategies implemented seem to have had a negative impact on children.

Respondent

Organisation: Coordination of Associations for Children (in consultation with their members).

Engagement with the Semester process: The Coordination of Associations for Children was not involved in the Semester process either at the sub-national or national level, with the major obstacle being the lack of capacity to fully participate. Some of their members, however, engaged with the European Commission by providing input for the drafting of the CSRs.

Access to EU funds: The Coordination of Associations for Children has not accessed any EU funds. The main barriers are lack of



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Croatia to take action to start reducing fragmentation and improve allocation of key functional competencies within the Public Administration (PA), in order to address territorial disparities in the provision of public services, and improve efficiency in their delivery.

administrative capacity and the high level of complexity of the application and reporting procedures. In 2016, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, the only public institution providing institutional support to civil society organisations and platforms, faced a 70% cut in its funding.

Investing in Children and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Coordination of Associations for Children provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Since Eurochild's last consultation in 2015, Croatia has not seen any positive development in the field of child rights. On the contrary, some of the policies and strategies implemented over the past year seem to have had a negative impact on the situation of children in Croatia.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children has not played any role

since 2015. As for the Semester process, issues concerning children were not directly mentioned in the [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) for Croatia, which does not reflect the real situation of children on the ground. Children were not visible in the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) in either [2015](#) or [2016](#).

Despite this, the [2016 National Reform Programme \(NRP\)](#), while not including any child-specific targets, presents some measures and reforms that support the rights of the children and can be linked to the Recommendation on Investing in Children, particularly in the following areas: healthcare, education and social welfare.

Child rights

The Ministry of Social Policy and Youth has presented a new Action Plan to implement the 2014-2020 Strategy for the Rights of Children. However, the document only consists of a collection of programmes carried out by civil society organisations and national institutions working on education, social protection and health for

children. The Action Plan does not include any provision on developing new services for children, although such measures are mentioned in the 2014-2020 Strategy.

Furthermore, the situation of children in Croatia has been worsened by the withdrawal of, for example, financial support to children with Down syndrome and scholarships for disadvantaged students.

Education

The 2016 CR states that Croatia's rate of early school leavers is 2.7%, although the method used to calculate this value in highly questionable. It also raises some of the challenge around the lack of coordination between the school system and the needs of the labour market, with a negative impact on the youth unemployment rate, which remains one of the highest in the EU.

The 2016 NRP includes plans for comprehensive school curriculum reform to provide a more efficient system at early, preschool, primary and secondary education levels. The reforms target improved student literacy, clearly defined educational

outcomes and radical changes in assessment and evaluation methods, and the adoption of teaching and learning methods giving students a more active role in their own development. The aim is to ensure that school curricula match the interests of the students, as well as the needs of the economy and the labour market. This was already included in the 2015 NRP and should be implemented over 2016, 2017 and 2018.

The NRP, moreover, includes improving the social dimension of education among its priorities. To support this aim, the Operational Programme (OP) of the European Social Fund states that special attention will be placed on ensuring targeted support to disadvantaged students and on increasing the number of children attending preschool, with a particular focus on the Roma minority and persons with disabilities.

Scholarship programmes will also be provided for students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics, which will be linked to a new national Action Plan for Improving the Social Dimension

of Higher Education. The OP also addresses actions contributing to civil society's effective involvement in implementing civic education programmes.

Healthcare

The 2016 NRP states that the government plans to implement six reforms in 2016, two of which will indirectly affect children. On the one hand, there are plans to improve access to primary healthcare by limiting the number of patients per physician and strengthening community healthcare services. The adoption of a new primary healthcare network will aim to provide primary healthcare facilities with diagnostic and therapeutic equipment, mainly in deprived areas, as well as small-scale infrastructural interventions in primary healthcare facilities and healthcare centres.

However, on the other hand, the plan to increase the monthly cost for supplementary health insurance by 22% is likely to have a negative impact on access to healthcare for families at risk of poverty.

Child poverty

The NRP states that the government adopted the National Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2014-2020 based on securing conditions for the achievement of three main objectives: fight against poverty and social exclusion; prevention of the emergence of new categories of poor and socially excluded people; and establishment of a coordinated support system for groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This can benefit children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Alternative care

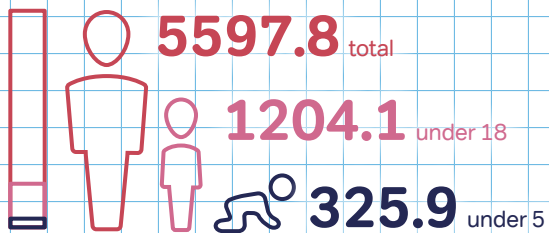
More attention should be given to deinstitutionalisation, which is not mentioned in the 2016 CR, nor in the other key documents published within the Semester process.

The OP, however, does state that it will support efforts in this field. This includes: enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality social services for vulnerable groups; supporting infrastructure investments, including in day centres and housing; supporting

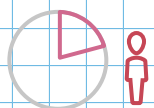
programmes specifically targeting children and youth without parental care or with behavioural disorders or disabilities; supporting community-based non-institutional forms of care to prevent institutionalisation and support the transition from institutional care to community-based care services; and counselling services and support to families.

Denmark

Country Profile for Semester Report

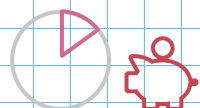


Population (thousands, 2012)



21.5 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



14.5 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



86.4 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“
The Semester Process did not include a focus on children's rights.”

Respondent

Organisation: Joint Council for Child Issues in Denmark

Engagement with the Semester process: The Joint Council for Child Issues did not engage with the Semester process, as the Ministry did not organise its annual meeting with NGOs in 2016.

Access to EU funds: The Joint Council for Child Issues has not sought access to EU funds.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Joint Council for Child Issues provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

A 'Social Report'¹ was published by the Danish Government for the first time in 2016, and will continue to be published every year. The report notably reflects on special measures directed at vulnerable children and young people from 1 to 17 years of age.

These special measures are particularly in relation to: school performance; their wellbeing during childhood; their performance during upper secondary school; and rates of crimes committed. These measures are in turn reflected in the new "10 New Goals for Social Mobility"² published by the Ministry.

However, there is no evidence that the Recommendation on Investing

in Children played a role in triggering these developments.

Regarding the Semester Process, the 2016 National Reform Programme (NRP) did not include a focus on children's rights. Nor were there any Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Denmark directly related to children or to the Recommendation on Investing in Children in either 2015 or 2016.

Education

The 2016 Country Report (CR) states that early childhood education and care, as well as primary and upper secondary education, remain a challenge in relation to migrant children. Moreover, it reports that dropout rates for children in upper secondary education is still high. However, the rate of tertiary attainment is higher (41%) than the EU average (37.9%).

Preventative approaches

The NRP notes an agreement to set aside DKK 96 million (nearly € 13 million at current exchange rates) for a 'social reserve' for the next

four years. This would be targeted at supporting municipalities in reorganising their policy responses to children towards actions that are "earlier, preventing and more effective... so that action is taken before problems of the child and the family increase".

Employment

Denmark's 2016 Country Report (CR) makes reference to children in relation to female participation in the labour market. Notably, it includes statistics on parents with young children and highlights that the rate of part-time work is significantly higher for women than for men.

On youth employment, the CR states that the measures targeted at young unemployed people are included in the reforms on providing social assistance and fostering an active labour market. Despite this, young people with low educational attainment and very limited work experience are still falling through the system: nearly 40% of social assistance recipients are aged 16-29 years.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Denmark to take action to report on and allocate funds to combat child poverty.

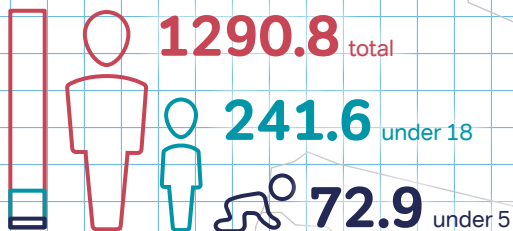
We call on the European Commission to recommend Denmark to take action to renew cooperation with civil society, including through a European semester which includes civil society thoroughly and creates a coherent and transparent process.

1 Social-og Indenrigsministeriet, Socialpolitisk Redegørelse, 2016.

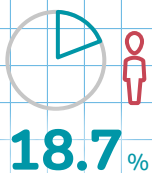
2 Fordi Alle Kan, 10 Mal for Social Mobilitet, 2016

Estonia

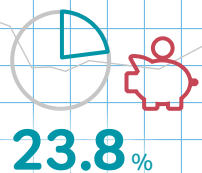
Country Profile for Semester Report



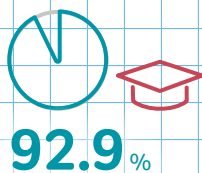
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ There have been some positive developments regarding the welfare and rights of children. However, it is unclear whether such changes were supported in a significant way by the Semester process.”

Respondent

Organisation: Estonian Union for Child Welfare

Engagement with the Semester process: Despite being involved in several domestic processes (e.g. providing opinions and statements on new laws, regulations and plans), the Estonian Union for Child Welfare is rarely invited to engage with the Semester process, which mainly engages State authorities only.

Access to EU funds: The Estonian Union for Child Welfare has not accessed any EU fund. It finds these funds to be difficult to access.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Overall, there have been several positive developments in Estonia regarding the welfare and rights of children. However, it is unclear whether such changes were triggered by the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children or supported in a significant way by the Semester process.

Child poverty

The [2016 Country Report](#) (CR) sets out that Estonia has invested more in social benefits and free social services, as means to address poverty and the [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) gives special attention to child poverty among other at-risk groups. The NRP provides measures aiming at increasing social benefits. Such measures include increasing family allowances, establishing a

maintenance allowance scheme and additional tax refunds for low-income employees.

The Ministry of Social Affairs drafted the 'Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023',¹ which aims at reducing poverty and social exclusion. Unfortunately, the final draft does not give specific consideration to the situation of children and youth or poverty - the main focus is on people with disabilities and the elderly. Civil society organisations provided recommendations, but these were not followed fully.

Social and childcare services

Estonia has taken some steps to address the [2015 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) on ensuring high-quality social and childcare services at a local level. Local municipalities are giving financial support to families who could not get a place in kindergarten and more childcare facilities have been built. As of January 2016, the New Child Protection Act² came into force: new social services and child

protection systems are now in place, providing more support to local municipalities. Nevertheless, much more is needed to improve childcare services.

The 2016 NRP does refer to the need to improve access to social services including childcare. Attention has been paid to the situation of parents of children with disabilities (e.g. childcare and transport services). The need to increase social services that indirectly benefit children, such as more accessible women's shelters is also referenced.

The [2016 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) contained a recommendation on ensuring the provision and accessibility of high quality public services, especially social services, at a local level.

The 2016 Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy funding in Estonia states that "Childcare options will be improved in the urban areas of Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu." Funding will also be targeted at improving childcare services and developing

new childcare services for families with children with disabilities.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Estonia to take action to reduce child poverty, e.g. improve food-aid services; improve childcare services and access to social services and benefits in rural areas (e.g. increase number of child-protection workers and social workers).

We call on the European Commission to recommend Estonia to take action to establish a household supporting system for families with children.

1 Sotsiaalministeerium, [Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023](#).

2 [Child Protection Act](#), 2014.

Education

The 2016 CR states that Estonia has a high rate of tertiary education attainment and performs well in international skills surveys (e.g. PISA). However, inclusive education remains an issue, particularly for children with special needs. The drop-out rate in general education schools declined in 2011-2014 and it is now stable at 0.5-0.6% for grades 7-9.

The NRP focuses on providing supportive services for young people to help direct youth choices, implementing support systems such as information and career counselling. This aims to address issues around vocational education and NEET children early. Pre-school education and making schools more child-friendly is also considered important. Children also indirectly benefit from measures such as better training for teachers and a raise in their salary.

The 2016 Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy funding in Estonia states that “11.7% will be invested in reforming the general education network and improving

access to high-quality education. An important aim is to reduce early school leaving rates by improving career guidance and by producing innovative study materials.”

Young People ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training’ (NEET)

Vocational education has been improved following the 2015 CSR on this topic. The new Education Regulation supports dual learning, and is based on the principle that education should be better connected with the needs of the labour market. Additional interactive services for students have been provided (e.g. online career counselling), while other measures have been implemented as part of the Youth Guarantee scheme.

Nevertheless, vocational education dropout rates are still high and supporting programmes for NEET youth remains a key issue in both the 2016 NRP and use of EU Structural and Investment Funds in Estonia. The Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy expresses the target of a “75% rate of successfully

completing apprenticeships” by 2023– compared to 50% in 2013.

A related initiative, adopted by the Ministry of Social Affairs, is the reform of the Employment Act,³ aiming to address the high rates of unemployment among 15-24-year-olds. However, the plan does not stress how children should firstly focus on their education nor does it include any basic protection measures (e.g. additional control by child-protection officers, benefits etc.).

Parents’ participation in the labour market

Estonia’s Ministry of Social Affairs is currently working on a reform of the Parental Leave system, to render it more flexible. This is set out in the 2016 CR, but the debate around the reform is still in its early stages; roundtables, public discussions and legal analyses are still taking place.

The Estonian Government is also in the process of drafting the Work Ability Reform,⁴ which addresses

social exclusion in the labour market. By focusing on people with disabilities, it will provide a way for disadvantaged parents to work.

Alternative care

Deinstitutionalisation is not progressing as planned due to the lack of qualified foster families. Estonia is investing in improving the knowledge of professionals working in the foster care system, and in 2014 a Green Paper on Alternative Care was developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. EU Structural and Investment Funds for the period 2014–2020 will be used to support improvements in the quality of foster homes – including through the training of specialists who work in the system.

However, the 2016 CR does not reflect such developments.

Healthcare

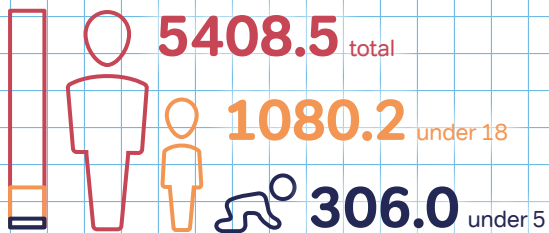
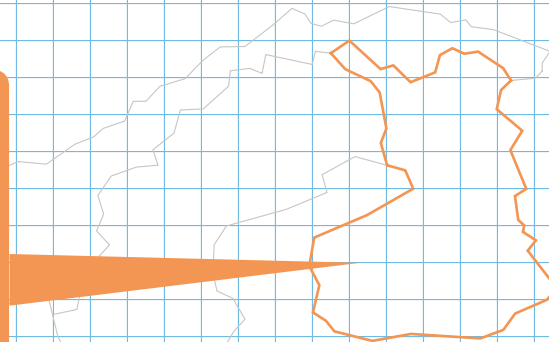
Queues for specialised doctors are too long; there are not enough paediatricians or psychologists. Better access to health services needs to be guaranteed, especially in rural areas.

³ Employment Contracts Act, 2008.

⁴ Ministry of Social Affairs, Work Ability Reform, 2016.

Finland

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



19.9 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



15.6 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



93.7 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ The Country Report fails to focus on the negative impact of the financial crisis on families with children: while the economic situation in the country is slowly improving, several social indicators show that the crisis is negatively affecting families.

Respondent

Organisation: Central Union for Child Welfare

Engagement with the Semester process: The Central Union for Child Welfare was not involved in the Semester process.

Access to EU funds: The Central Union for Child Welfare has not accessed EU funds, as the organisation does not rely on external funding.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Finland to take action to implement a mechanism to assess and evaluate how new administrative and legislative measures, adopted at all levels of the Finnish government and municipal administration, impact on children's wellbeing.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Central Union for Child Welfare provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents in Finland:

There have been some developments in relation to the implementation of children's rights in Finland. However, neither the Investing in Children Recommendation nor the Semester Process are considered to have had an explicit role in such developments.

Finland's [2016 Country Report](#) (CR) includes only a few references to the situation of children in the country. The report notably fails to focus on the negative impact of the financial crisis in Finland on the situation of families with children: while the economic situation in the country is slowly improving, several social indicators show that the crisis is negatively affecting families.

Children and young people were not visible in the [2015](#) or [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

Child and family support services

The Finnish government put in place a programme to improve and reform child and family services,¹ to be implemented as part of twenty-six key projects. The aim of the programme is to pool all services directed at children, adolescents and families into a set of child and family-oriented services. In particular, the programme focuses both on access to services, as well as on preventive services and early support and care. The programme, however, is still in its early stages, therefore the implementation phase is yet to commence.

Child poverty

Although still lower than in other Member States, the rate of people at risk of poverty as well as the number of jobless households have increased in Finland. Cuts in social benefits and day care have been applied as means

to address the economic crisis, but they have had a negative impact on child poverty and female participation in the labour market.

The 2016 CR includes a thorough analysis of Finnish households' indebtedness, which also poses a risk to children. However, the report does not include any assessment or evaluation of how measures to be implemented by the government to cut family and child services will affect children's wellbeing. The National Reform Programmes mentions children in relation to access to adequate resources, but their needs are not explicitly analysed.

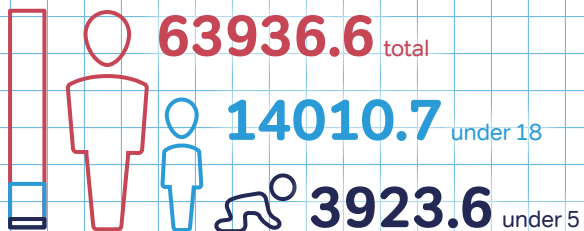
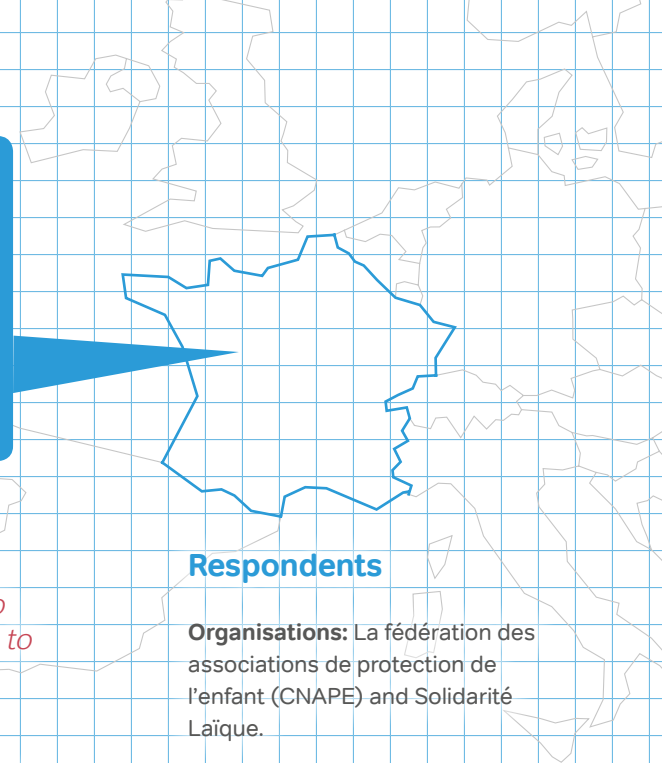
Social and healthcare services

The [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) mentions reform of the social and healthcare system, which should improve access to these services by addressing inequalities. However, the NRP does not include any child specific target or specifically assess the needs of children.

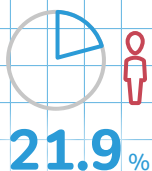
1 Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, [Towards child and family-oriented services](#).

France

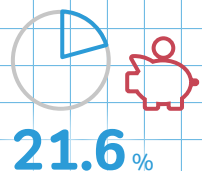
Country Profile for Semester Report



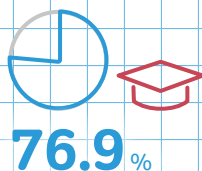
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ More needs to be done to guarantee the expression and participation of children and young people, offering adequate spaces for children on consultative bodies and in policy-making processes.”

Respondents

Organisations: La fédération des associations de protection de l'enfant (CNAPE) and Solidarité Laïque.

Engagement with the Semester process: The respondents have not been involved in the Semester Process. The biggest barriers to involvement are a lack of government consultation and insufficient time to be proactive in engaging with government on this subject.

Access to EU funds: Neither respondent has accessed EU funds. The main barriers to accessing such funds are a lack of human resources in both the time and specific



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend France to take action to guarantee access to adequate resources for young people. In particular, France should reinforce support for young people leaving care to ensure access to an independent life with adequate resources.

We call on the European Commission to recommend France to take action to strengthen prevention policy which is increasingly necessary in times of crisis and austerity. For instance, investing in social work services could help to prevent high-risk behaviour, child abuse, dropping out of school and juvenile delinquency.

knowledge to monitor and respond to calls and the lack of availability of funding for small projects.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The respondents provide the following overall assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

There have been some new policy developments in relation to the implementation of children's rights in France, particularly in relation to child protection and participation of children and young people.

Under the European Semester process, the French [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) does not include a specific section on childhood and youth nor reference to the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Nevertheless, certain corresponding objectives can be found.

One of the [2015 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) included a reference to young people, as it underlined the need to reform the labour law to address also youth unemployment. However, the [2016 CSRs](#) are economic and do not seem to take into consideration the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

Child protection

One of the most recent developments relates to the Action Plan on Child Protection 2015-2017¹ and the adoption of the 2016 child protection law,² which strengthens prevention policy and reinforces support for young people leaving care. The new law promotes more strenuously respect for children's rights and the principle of the best interests of the child. Civil society, young people in alternative care and their parents were consulted in its development.

The law has created a national council of child protection to allow

a national governance of child protection system and a better cooperation of all the stakeholders. However, it is regrettable that – despite the publication of annual data by the national observatory of child protection (ONPE)³ – there is no mention in the [Country Report](#) (CR) of child protection in the sections on family and childhood assistance and local spending. The net functioning spending of the departmental councils concerning social assistance was € 36.1 billion, and spending on child protection (social assistance to childhood) represented 26% of this sum.⁴

Child poverty

The latest evaluation⁵ of the governmental action plan for fighting against poverty includes specific goals concerning children, young people and families (including children in institutional care and young people leaving

1 [Ministère des Affaires Sociales, de la Santé, et des Droits des Femmes, Feuille de Route pour la Protection de l'Enfance 2015-2017.](#)

2 [Law no. 2016-297, 2016.](#)

3 [Observatoire National de la Protection de l'Enfance, Dixième rapport au Gouvernement et au Parlement.](#)

4 [Observatoire National de l'Action Sociale, Dépenses Départementales d'Action Sociale: l'Inquiétude Persiste.](#)

5 [Dossier de Presse, Bilan 2013-2015 & Perspectives 2016-2017.](#)

care). However, the France 2016 CR does not refer to these goals.

The CR states that the child poverty rate was at 17.6% in 2014. Yet, the situation appears to be more worrying given that the UNICEF 2015 alternative report to the Committee on the rights of the child⁶ states that 1 in 5 children lives below the poverty line. The 2016 NRP addresses social exclusion, poverty, access to housing and gender equality and the Europe 2020 targets on reducing the poverty rate.

A recent law⁷ is aimed at fighting discrimination due to social precariousness by recognising poverty as a specific discrimination.

Children's rights and participation

The 2015 law on the adaptation of society to ageing⁸ provides for the creation of a High Council of Family, Childhood and Age, which will include a specific college for

children and young people to promote their participation.

Moreover, the Draft Equality and Citizenship Bill⁹ promotes the development of bodies dedicated to youth participation and facilitates the growth of civic service and volunteering for young people. The development of civic service for young people to support their participation in civil society is referenced in the 2016 NRP.

Nevertheless, more needs to be done to guarantee the expression and participation of children and young people and particularly those leaving care, offering adequate spaces for children on consultative bodies and in policy-making processes. "Family group conferences" should be developed to promote the participation of children in care and their families.

A child rights impact-assessment procedure should be implemented at all stages of legislative, policy and project development.

Education

The 2016 NRP includes specific targets to promote quality education and states that the 'Youth Guarantee' will be extended throughout France in 2017. This is progress; however, the initiative does not yet seem to reach the most vulnerable children who face the biggest barriers to training and employment, nor all the care leavers or young people exiting the juvenile justice system.

The 2016 CR refers to investment in education, however it fails to address the need for investment in a holistic approach to inclusive education¹⁰ for at-risk children including children with disabilities, Roma children and the many refugee and migrant children in France.

The Operational Programme for mainland France refers to children in relation to investment in preventive measures addressing dropout rates and promotion of equal access to quality early childhood, primary and secondary

education. Other references are made to young adults, particularly in relation to employment and the need to promote their access to the labour market.



6 UNICEF France, [Chaque Enfant Compte. Partout, Tout Le Temps.](#)

7 [Law no. 2016-832, 2016.](#)

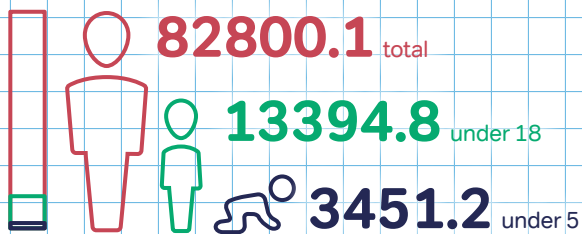
8 [Law no. 2016-832, 2016.](#)

9 [Sénat, Projet de loi relatif à l'égalité et à la citoyenneté, 2016.](#)

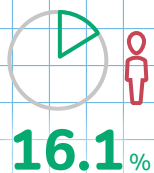
10 As called for by Art.29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Germany

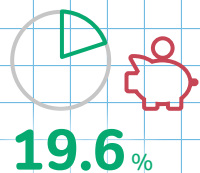
Country Profile for Semester Report



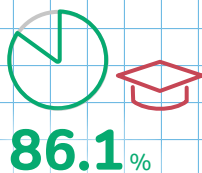
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *The integration of young refugees is an important policy development. Various initiatives have been launched in order to foster refugee's integration into society and the labour market. Yet financing with regard to unaccompanied minors continues to be controversial.*

Respondent

Organisations: National Coalition Germany – Network for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (and its members) and the Child and Youth Welfare Association (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – AGJ).

Engagement with the Semester process: The National Coalition Germany was not involved in the European Semester process either at local or national level.

The AGJ participated in the consultation¹ on the National

¹ The consultation process was organised by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and involved a range of social partners and welfare associations, the Länder and municipalities.

Social Reporting/Strategic Social Reporting (NSR) which is conceived to complement the National Reform Programme (NRP) and its economic focus. However, calls² to consider young people as a target group and to include the forthcoming independent youth policy in the list of relevant reforms and measures were not reflected in the final version of the NSR.

Access to EU funds: Neither respondent organisation has accessed any EU funds. However, some of the member organisations of the National Coalition Germany and the AGJ have.

‘Investing in Children’ and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The respondent organisations provide the following combined assessment of the place of children

in recent policy documents in Germany.

The overall situation of children in Germany has seen some developments in line with the principles enshrined in the Recommendation on Investing in Children particularly in relation to migrant children. But more efforts are needed to invest in children and tackle child poverty.

Germany’s 2016 National Social Report (NSR) has a specific additional chapter on “Investments in children”.³ However, this fails to adequately take into account the specific needs of children and young people and reflects a lack of awareness of children’s rights in Germany according to the National Coalition Germany. As criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Germany has not yet mentioned children in its Constitution and has very weak data on the realisation of children’s rights.

Regarding the Semester Process, whilst the 2016 National Reform

Programme (NRP) mentions some child-specific targets – relating to access to health, tax breaks and benefits for children, childcare and extended parental allowance – the analysis of the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Germany indicates a continued emphasis on economic aspects as criticised in Eurochild’s 2015 European Semester Report.

Refugee and migrant children

Following the relatively high number of refugees arriving into Germany in 2015, the Ministry of Family Affairs established a programme to support cities and municipalities to improve the protection of women and children in refugee reception centres. This includes a cooperation with UNICEF of up to € 200 million to support counselling in reception centres and strengthening counselling services for victims of torture (focusing on women).⁴

The integration of young refugees is an important policy development which has gained impetus since



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Germany to take action in 2016 and 2017 to considerably reduce child poverty by increasing investment in early childhood care and ensuring access to quality education, as well as addressing precarious working conditions, which disproportionately affect young people.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Germany to take action in 2016 and 2017 to implement the rights of all children and young people – irrespective of their origin and residency permit status – which they are entitled to according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the German social legislation (SGB VIII). This must include access to health and education and be led by the best interests of the child.

² Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – AGJ (2015). Die Strategie Europa 2020 - Die Rechte und das Wohlergehen von Kindern und Jugendlichen stärker berücksichtigen!

³ Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2016). 2016 Strategic Social Reporting: Germany

⁴ Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2015). Improve protection of women and children in refugee camps

Eurochild's 2015 Semester Report. Various initiatives have been launched in order to foster refugees' integration into society and the labour market.⁵ Yet financing with regard to unaccompanied minors continues to be a controversial issue between the federal government, the Länder and the municipalities.⁶

The very rare mentions of the rights of refugee children in the 2016 NRP is of great concern. A report by the Association for Unaccompanied Minors and UNICEF stresses the importance of investing in infrastructure to ensure that refugee children experience a healthy upbringing in Germany and that their best interests are routinely taken into account.⁷

Whilst there is a reference in the introductory remarks of the [2016 Country Specific Recommendations \(CSRs\)](#) regarding the “successful

labour market and social integration, including via educational support” of migrants, this does not translate into a specific CSR and the rights of refugee children are not explicitly mentioned.

Child poverty

It is striking that child poverty is only addressed in the annex to the [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) as an indicator for social inclusion. Even with Germany's strong economy, one in six children under 3 years is living in poverty. Despite reports from welfare organisations on child poverty⁸ and a call from AGJ for a holistic, integrated and effective strategy to counter child poverty in Germany,⁹ this is not reflected in the Country Report.

The German NSR includes measures taken by the Länder to support social inclusion and to fight child poverty and discrimination.¹⁰ However, the overly narrow focus on

the long-term unemployed fails to adequately capture the complex root causes of child and youth poverty in Germany. There needs to be an integrated strategy.¹¹

Education

Education was mentioned by the [2015 CSRs](#) as one many fields for greater public spending. This has been implemented through a € 550 million increase of the 2016-2018 federal budget for early education and childcare and an increase in the education budget on the Länder level.

The 2016 CR recognises the need to further invest in education and especially in early childhood education and care.

Germany's 2016 CSRs continue to mention education as one of the areas of focus for “a sustained upward trend in public investment”.

Employment

The 2016 CR takes into account employment issues relevant to children, including low rates of women in the labour market and persisting youth unemployment (with a focus on migrants). In addition, Germany's 2016 CSRs call on it to “reduce disincentives to work for second earners”. However, children or children's rights are not directly referred to in these references.

Children's right to participate

Children's right to participate is hardly taken into consideration in the Semester documents. When implementing the Europe 2020 strategy as an investment strategy, children and young people should be taken into greater consideration in terms of listening to their views and promoting their potential.¹²

5 Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2016). [2016 Strategic Social Reporting: Germany](#)

6 For further information, the AGJ 2016 position paper “[Creating conditions for a successful integration of unaccompanied minor refugees](#)” sketches the conditions for the integration of refugee children and young people in Germany

7 UNICEF (2016). [Zur Situation der Flüchtlingskinder in Deutschland](#)

8 [Der Paritätische Gesamtverband, Zeit zu handeln. Bericht zur Armutsentwicklung in Deutschland 2016](#)

9 AGJ (2015). Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe [Discussion Paper on Child poverty and family policy in Germany](#)

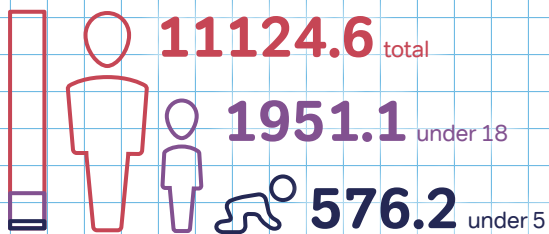
10 Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2016). [Strategic Social Reporting: Germany](#)

11 AGJ (2015). Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe. [Discussion Paper on Child poverty and family policy in Germany](#)

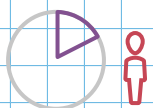
12 Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – AGJ (2015). [Die Strategie Europa 2020 - Die Rechte und das Wohlergehen von Kindern und Jugendlichen stärker berücksichtigen!](#)

Greece

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



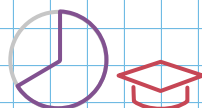
17.5 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



36.7 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



67.6 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *The National Reform Programme mentions that reforms of the educational system are currently being implemented. However, lack of educational staff is still an issue.*

Respondent

Organisation: The Greek Ombudsman

Engagement with the Semester process: The Greek Ombudsman has no involvement in the European Semester process due to its particular mission.

Access to EU funds: The Greek Ombudsman is not involved in the use of EU funds.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Greek Ombudsman provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Overall, there have been some positive developments in relation to children's rights.

Greece's 2016 National Reform Programme (NRP) presents some child-specific targets, but only related to education. Since Greece is currently implementing its macro-economic adjustment programme, it does not receive Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) under the European Semester process.

Education

The Ministry of Education introduced a multidisciplinary Committee for a national dialogue on education, which delivered a strategy and proposals. This triggered some structural changes in the education system, including the creation of pupils' communities.

The 2016 NRP mentions that reforms of the educational system are currently being implemented and presents specific targets related to access to schools and drop-out rates. The NRP includes measures to ensure access to schools for refugee children, starting from 2016.

However, lack of educational staff is still an issue. Furthermore, implementation of the European funded programme "Harmonisation of Family and Professional Life" promoting preschool care suffers from functional problems in relation to access to kindergartens.

The Operational Programme target most related to children is education, but it mainly refers to training skills for persons over 18 years of age.

Participation

The government has shown interest in the recommendation of the multidisciplinary Committee on education for pupils' involvement in the drafting of school regulations. The Ombudsman has also been involved in preparations of the 2016 Youth Parliament session, which

has been modified according to the Ombudsman's proposals.

Child Poverty

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) programme has been implemented in Greece with benefits for many children in situations of poverty.

Child rights

The Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the Greek Children's Ombudsman, is currently drafting a new National Action Plan on Children's Rights, which will include concrete targets and priorities.



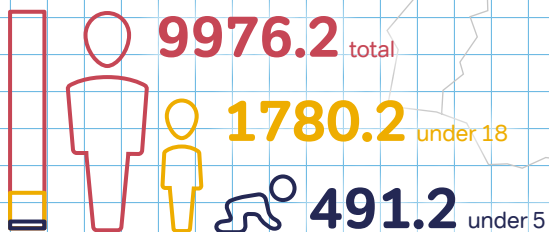
Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Greece to take action to give more attention to addressing preschool education, social care and alternative care (deinstitutionalisation, foster care, etc).

We call on the European Commission to recommend Greece to take action to promote children's access to adequate resources as well as children's right to participation, which remains limited, despite some developments in the educational area.

Hungary

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



17.8 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



41.8 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



86.0 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ The National Reform Programme lists some child-specific targets, such as tackling child poverty. However, it does not give consideration to some of the key issues in relation to the implementation of children’s rights.

Respondent:

Organisation: Family, Child, Youth Association

Engagement with the Semester process: The Family, Child, Youth Association did not take part in the Semester process. According to the Association, barriers to NGOs’ participation are mainly linked to the government’s unwillingness to consult and engage with organisations that are not in line with the political agenda.

Access to EU funds: The respondent has not accessed any EU funds and noted that the main barrier to access is a lack of support from the government to do so.



Alternative Country Specific

Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Hungary to take action to provide complex, high quality services for families and children in need (health, education, social), including vocational training and better resources for professionals working with them, making them accountable for their actions.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Hungary to take action to conduct reliable research and data gathering on the current situation of children, facilitate a transparent and public debate on the outcomes, addressing barriers and discussing possible solutions.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Family, Child, Youth Association provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Since 2015, there has not been any positive change in the implementation of children's rights in Hungary. Policies are not strategic, coordinated, monitored or evaluated. The Recommendation on Investing in Children has not played any role as there are decreasing resources for those in vulnerable situations. The very few child rights policies are implemented for political reasons.

No steps have been taken to implement the Recommendation on Investing in Children following the [2015 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs). Rather, the support for children in need has been further decreasing. Children are not visible in the [2016 CSRs](#).

The Operational Programme does include some references to children, but these are not visible enough.

Child poverty

Poverty, including child poverty, is a growing issue in Hungary, which, paired with a lack of support services, is affecting social development in the country.

The [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) lists some child-specific targets, such as tackling child poverty, social inclusion of Roma children and their families, and decreasing taxes on the basis of the number of children. However, it does not give consideration to some of the key issues in relation to the implementation of children's rights.

Child participation is not included, and access to adequate resources as well as access to services are not given enough space. Although in 2009 the Parliament endorsed a 25-year strategy to "give children a chance" and tackle poverty, in practice, state authorities are yet to act on their promises.

Education

The quality of education has been steadily decreasing, mainly due to the lack of independence of the

teaching staff and segregated schools and classes. What's more, there are a lack of programmes for vulnerable children (living in poverty, disabled, belonging to ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees). Secondary education is not inclusive towards children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The [2016 Country Report](#) (CR) recognises that early school leaving continues to be an issue. The age of compulsory education has been lowered from 18 to 16.

Alternative care

While deinstitutionalisation is a priority for the government, authorities have not taken measures to address the issues in practice. The number of referrals has been rising over the past three years. Hungary lacks alternative care facilities, and despite the prohibition of institutionalising children under the age of 12, there are many children still in institutional care. Despite closing several institutions over 2016, the government is yet to implement a coherent and effective strategy.

Parents' participation in the labour market

The 2016 CR recognises that female participation in the labour market remains an issue in the country, as the rate of female participation is one of the lowest in Europe. As highlighted in the CR, this is partly due to the lack of adequate care services for children under 3, kindergartens' very rigid opening hours and lack of access in the more remote areas of the country.

Moreover, lack of after-school and holiday-care services, and the high price of transportation, paired with lack of employment opportunities for women, contribute to the low rates of female employment in Hungary.

Employment

The youth unemployment rate is extremely high in Hungary. This is linked to a number of factors: low quality education, lack of preventive measures to tackle early school leaving and a lack of highly skilled workers.

Most of the underqualified young people take part in so-called 'public or community work': badly paid, low skilled activities, which do not help young workers to develop knowledge or competence.

Integrated strategies

Comprehensive, complex, holistic strategies, as well as detailed implementation plans, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and cooperation with civil society and independent experts are needed. In particular, there is a need to focus on the implementation phase, taking into consideration the recommendations made by the EU, UN Treaty Bodies and other experts.

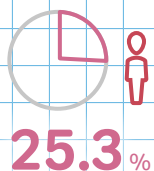


Ireland

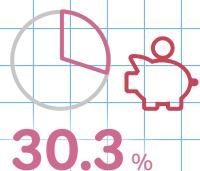
Country Profile for Semester Report



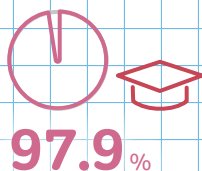
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ The National Reform Programme points out that social transfers have worked well, but that there is only so far they can go to target child poverty. A significant issue remains a lack of investment in quality and affordable services.

Respondent:

Organisation: Children's Rights Alliance

Engagement with the Semester process: The Children's Rights Alliance provided a submission to the 2016 Country Report (CR) through Social Partnership structures – although there was little time for and impact from this work - and advocates for children's rights-focused Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) in its annual Report Card, budget work and advocacy meetings.

Access to EU funds: The Children's Rights Alliance receives funds as a partner in a project under the European Commission's

Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme.¹

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Children's Rights Alliance provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Ireland enjoys a National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 called "Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures".² As part of the 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Advisory Council', the respondent co-convenes a sub-group on child poverty with the Department of Social Protection. Under its updated target, the Government now commits to lifting 97,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020.

However, this positive work is not fully reflected in the Semester Process. Neither the child poverty reduction target nor the Framework is referenced in the 2016 National Reform Programme (NRP). Indeed, Ireland's 2016 NRP includes only one child-specific target, on early school leaving, and some indirect references to children.

Child poverty

The Budget 2016³ increased child benefit payments and included measures to support lone parents and low-income families: € 18 million to be invested in the Family Income Supplement (FIS), an increase of € 5 to the weekly income thresholds for families with one child and of € 10 for families with two or more children. In Budget 2017, an increase of € 5 was made to all maximum weekly payments with proportionate increases for those on reduced rates of payments.

However, there are still concerns that some families may not be able to access crucial financial support – such as migrant parents – due



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Ireland to further develop and adequately resource the childcare funding model proposed in Budget 2017. The receipt of public funding should be linked to a requirement to meet appropriate quality and educational standards and also statutory regulatory requirements.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Ireland to ensure that the commitments for children *Rebuilding Ireland – Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* become a reality and are implemented as a matter of urgency.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Ireland to address food poverty outside of formal education such as in youth services, early years settings and afterschool programmes.

1 European Commission, Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme.

2 Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People, 2014 – 2020.

3 Department of Social Protection, Budget Factsheet, 2016.

to their status. The payment to children in families seeking asylum and living in the Direct Provision system was excluded from the 2017 increase. The level of income from work that lone parents can earn whilst continuing to receive full state benefits should increase. The rates of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance should also be restored.

While additional funding was made available to the Schools Meals Scheme in Budget 2017,⁴ more could be done to address the issue of food poverty, including expansion of the School Meals Scheme to include provision in youth services, early years' settings and afterschool programmes.

Ireland's 2016 CR includes statistics on child poverty but fails to analyse which children and families are living in poverty nor does it go into detail on those excluded from EU-SILC surveys.⁵ These groups are often the most vulnerable to child poverty, such as homeless families, asylum seeking families in the direct

provision system, Traveller and Roma children.

The NRP rightly points out that social transfers have worked well in Ireland, but that there is only so far they can go to target child poverty. A significant issue remains a **lack of investment in quality and affordable services.**⁶

The 2016 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Ireland include: *“Expand and accelerate the implementation of activation policies to increase the work intensity of households and address the poverty risk of children. Pursue measures to incentivise employment by tapering the withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments. Improve the provision of quality, affordable full-time childcare.”*

Childcare

Budgets 2016 and 2017 provided for a new “Childcare Package”,⁷ which includes an extension to the

Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme. The Scheme will now be open to children from the age of 3 until they start primary school⁸ and represents on average 23 additional weeks of free pre-school for 3 hours a day. It also provides a very positive new model to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in early-years education. Around 50 additional mentors will be recruited to provide specialist early years' and inclusion advice and support to disabled children and their families.

Importantly, the package will replace existing childcare subsidisation schemes (excluding the free pre-school scheme) with a single, streamlined Affordable Childcare Programme.⁹ The highest levels of subsidy will be provided to those on the lowest incomes, approx. €8,000 a year based on the maximum of 40-hours childcare a week. It will also provide a universal subsidy of up to €80 per month towards the costs of registered childcare services for children from six months to three years old. This equates to over €900

per annum for parents working full time and will be paid pro-rata.

The 2016 CR report notes the high costs, capacity and quality issues linked to the provision of ECEC, including its impact on female labour market participation. Ireland's 2016 NRP includes a target on early school leaving. However, more detail should be included, such as the manner in which quality provision should be achieved in early years and afterschool care. Ireland's Operational Programme targets some funding at education, but is focused on adult and youth employment and education, rather than on children.

⁴ Department of Social Protection, Budget 2017.

⁵ European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

⁶ As discussed in detail at the 'Making Child Poverty Policies Real' conference, supported by Eurochild, Dublin, June 2016.

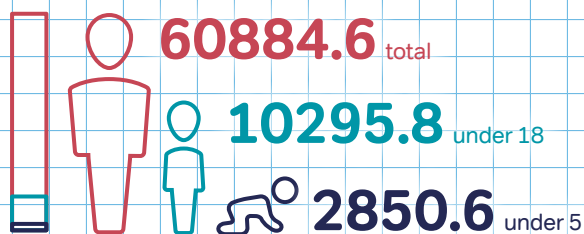
⁷ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Childcare in Budget 2016: further detail.

⁸ Provided they are not older than five and a half by the end of the pre-school year.

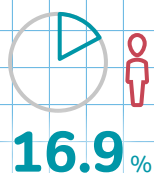
⁹ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Statement by Minister of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016.

Italy

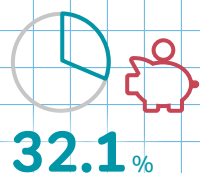
Country Profile for Semester Report



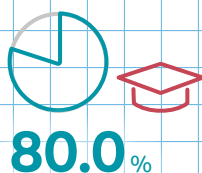
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *The Recommendation on Investing in Children is directly mentioned in most of the main child-focused legislative and policy measures recently put in place by the Italian government and has become a widely known document.*

Respondent:

Organisation(s): Fondazione L'Albero della Vita Onlus and Salesiani per il Sociale

Engagement with the Semester process:

Respondents did not engage with the European Semester process. The main difficulty is represented by a lack of information on how to participate.

Access to EU funds: Respondents have not accessed EU funds for child-poverty-related projects, 2015-2016. Fondazione L'Albero della Vita participates in the projecting process of EU-funded activities of local welfare reinforcement in the context of the National Strategy to Combat Poverty.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Italy to take action to implement the National Strategy to Combat Poverty and to review and rationalise social expenditure in order to gradually reach all people in absolute poverty as well as engage in actions to strengthen local welfare.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Italy to take action to implement a child-rights-based approach to all its policies, taking into

consideration the principle of the best interest of the child, as enshrined in the UNCRC.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Italy to take action to involve children in decision-making processes, fostering their right to participate, as well as to finally make operative the IV National Plan of Action for the 'protection of the rights and the development of subjects in evolutionary age'.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The respondents provide the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Overall, there have been some positive developments in the implementation of children's rights. The Recommendation on Investing in Children is directly mentioned in most of the main child-focused legislative and policy measures recently put in place by the Italian government. The Recommendation has become a widely known document: advocacy networks rely on it to influence institutions and the political agenda, particularly on child poverty.

The IV National Plan of Action for the 'protection of the rights and the development of subjects in evolutionary age'¹ (August 2016) will have a duration of two years and has the aim of implementing the

UNCRC in Italy. It focuses on four areas: combating poverty; promoting socio-educational services for early childhood and improving the quality of the educational system; establishing strategies and actions to address the school system and social integration; and implementing parenting support.

As for the Semester process, while one respondent reported that the situation of children in Italy was accurately described in the [2016 Country Report](#) (CR), particularly in relation to child poverty, education and work-life balance, another respondent noted that there is still not enough focus on the specific needs of children.

Child poverty

In its 2016 Budget, the Italian Government approved a national structural investment, which aims to implement a holistic approach to combating poverty and social exclusion. The Fund makes available € 600 million in 2016 and € 1 billion in 2017 and 2018, for providing economic support and services, focusing on the principle of active inclusion of people in poverty. The

1 Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, [IV Piano Nazionale di Azione e di Interventi per la Tutela dei Diritti e lo Sviluppo dei Soggetti in Età Evolutiva](#).

Fund calls for some priority to be given to families in absolute poverty with children under 18.

Italy's 2016 National Reform Programme (NRP) references the National Strategy to Combat Poverty. It includes the provision of minimum income schemes from 2017, referring to the implementation of economic measures to help disadvantaged families with children under 18: the NRP states that EU Structural Funds will be invested to support social services.

Despite the positive developments, 2015 data provided by Italy's National Institute for Statistics² show that children are still one of the groups most affected by poverty. The National Strategy to Combat Poverty should be extended to all families with children under 18, with a particular focus on younger children. In addition to financial support, more efforts should be made to improve social services through a better organised and structured social services network. The real impact of the Strategy

should be monitored to improve its effectiveness.

Education

Italy's 2016 NRP mentions a three-year special plan to further develop socio-educational services for early childhood. Italy's new educational reform, *La Buona Scuola*³ (the Good School), is expected to provide more funds and human resources, as well as invest in teachers' training and professional development. The overall objective is to invest in schools, in order to promote inclusive education and tackle early school leaving.

One of the most recent developments has been the involvement of the private sector, including bank foundations, as a key stakeholder. The latter contributed to the establishment of a 3-year fund to tackle the negative impact of poverty on education: the fund will finance experimental projects aimed at improving access to quality education for disadvantaged children and fostering their personal growth outside the school

³ Law n. 107/2015, Reform of the national educational system.

environment. Italy's 2016 NRP mentions such funds, and states that it will support measures on increasing access to sport and cultural activities, as well as on improving parenting skills.

Employment

The 2016 NRP for Italy mentions Law 80/2015,⁴ which is linked to the first pillar of the Recommendation on Investing in Children, on access to adequate resources. The law focuses on implementing measures to address work-life balance.

There is also a strong focus on youth employment in the new Jobs Act.⁵ This focus is referenced in the Semester Process, however it does not adequately address the specific needs of children and young people themselves.

Children's participation in decision-making

Italy still lacks measures fostering children's active participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives. Children should be

allowed to have their own voices heard: regrettably, this is not considered a priority in the political agenda.

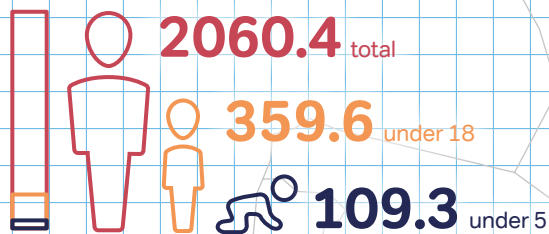
² ISTAT, La Povertà in Italia, 2016.

⁴ Law Decree n. 80/2015.

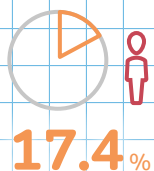
⁵ Jobs Act.

Latvia

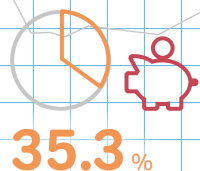
Country Profile for Semester Report



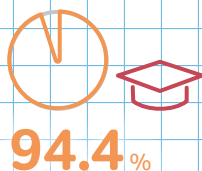
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ In the European Semester children and young people are only referenced with regards to education system reform or youth unemployment, neither of which is addressed from a child rights perspective. ”

Respondent

Organisation: Latvian Child Welfare Network

Engagement with the Semester process: The Latvian Child Welfare Network was not involved in the Semester process. The biggest barrier to their engagement are their limited capacity and resources. The Network is currently focusing its efforts on monitoring the implementation of the recommendations issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Access to EU funds: The Latvian Child Welfare Network has not applied for EU funds yet, as it is a relatively young organisation. The

main barriers to accessing EU funds are the need for co-financing and the heavy mechanism and extensive paperwork, which are time and resource consuming.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Latvian Child Welfare Network provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Latvia has seen some positive developments in relation to the implementation of children's rights since 2015. However, it is not possible to monitor the impact of the Recommendation on Investing on Children, as it is not mentioned in any of the plans and strategies adopted by the government.

In relation to the European Semester, children's rights were not visible in any of the [2015](#) and [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) or the [2016 Country Report](#) (CR). Generally, children or young

people are only referenced with regards to education system reform or youth unemployment, neither of which is addressed from a child-rights perspective.

Child poverty

One of the most recent developments in the implementation of children's rights in Latvia is the "Minimum Income Reform", which is expected to improve the quality of social benefits, reduce social exclusion as well as the rates of families and children living in poverty.

The [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) states that positive steps were taken in order to combat poverty in Latvia: both the minimum wage and the monthly Personal Independence Payment allowance for dependent persons were increased (from € 360 to € 370, and from € 165 to € 175, respectively). The NRP also states that EU funds for European Aid to the Most Deprived are currently being allocated to provide food and assistance to children.

Education

The 2016 NRP includes two child-specific targets related to education: the rate of children in pre-school to raise to 95% by 2020; and the rate of dropouts to be reduced to 10%. It notes that additional reforms are needed to improve education. Nevertheless, an adequate focus on children's needs is still lacking.

The 2016 CR includes references to the ongoing reform of the school system. Unfortunately, this provides for the closing of several small schools in order to reduce costs. This will have a negative impact on access to education for children living in remote areas.

The planned reforms fail to mention aspects that are crucial to children's development, such as health and quality of education. Structural reforms are needed to address the issue of boarding schools, often serving as 'orphanages' for children from disadvantaged families. More provisions are also urgently needed for children with special needs who should be provided with additional support to be better integrated into the school environment.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Latvia to take action to implement a system to measure and monitor child poverty and children's well-being, in order to establish targets and goals to be achieved.



Alternative care

Another development is represented by the “Deinstitutionalisation Plan”, which aims at reducing the number of children in institutional care: the implementation phase should start by the end of 2016.

Health

The 2016 CR states that one of the main challenges in Latvia is unequal access to healthcare. The NRP notes that additional reforms are needed, particularly to improve the accessibility and quality of healthcare services. However, no mention is made on how such issues may impact on children, who can be considered as a priority group.

Youth employment

As outlined in Latvia’s NRP, the government implemented a number of programmes and policies supporting access to vocational education or employment for young people. The Programme for Continuing Vocational Education for Unemployed in State or Municipal Educational Institutions, as well as other youth employment

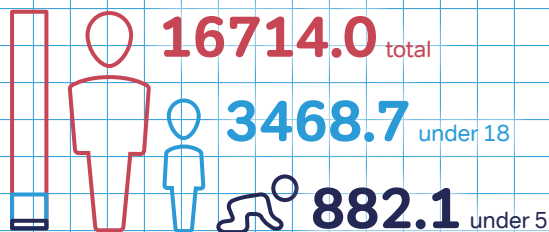
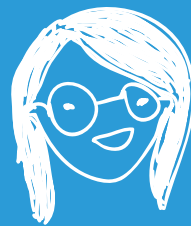
programmes, aim at reducing youth unemployment.

Children’s participation

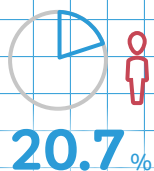
The NRP does not give enough relevance to child participation, which remains a rather theoretical concept in Latvia.

Netherlands

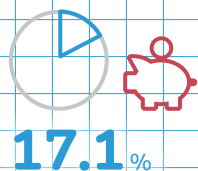
Country Profile for Semester Report



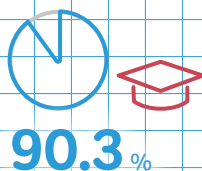
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: *UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2*

“ *The National Reform Programme lists several measures that have been taken to improve women's economic independence and which could positively impact children's right to participate.*

Respondent

Organisation: Defence for Children International

Engagement with the Semester process: Defence for Children International disseminated news and articles on the process and was in touch with the European Semester officers in the Netherlands to discuss the Country Specific Recommendations for the Netherlands. They were also invited by the European Commission (DG ECFIN) to join in a two-day 'Civil Society Dialogue Session' amongst NGOs/experts in Brussels, where the Semester process and Member States' engagement were discussed. However, a lack of capacity and resources are a big barrier to

sustained direct engagement with the process.

Access to EU funds: Defence for Children International has not accessed any EU fund since June 2015. However, the organisation is involved in other EU funding opportunities, which are used to develop activities to implement the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Barriers to accessing EU funds are linked to the complexity of the proposal phase and the reporting requirements, which can often become extremely time-consuming.

‘Investing in Children’ and the Semester Process 2015-2016

Defence for Children International provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

There have been some positive developments in the implementation of children's rights in the Netherlands, particularly in relation

to child budgeting. Despite this, the Dutch government is yet to withdraw its reservation on Article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is not in line with the general principle of empowering children and giving them an 'all-over protection'.

In relation to the European Semester, the process did not give enough attention to children and their specific needs. The [2015 Country Specific Recommendations \(CSRs\)](#) for the Netherlands did not include any reference to children or the Recommendation on 'Investing in Children'. The [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) does not reflect the situation of children at all, but focuses mainly on economic indicators.

The [2016 National Reform Programme \(NRP\)](#) for the Netherlands includes sections that indirectly relate to children and to the three pillars of the Recommendation on Investing in Children. These sections mainly focus on poverty and female participation in the labour market.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend the Netherlands to take action to provide equal opportunities for all children in terms of access to social security and social insurances, starting with withdrawing the reservation to article 26 of the UNCRC to create a base for all children in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (including Caribbean soil) to grow up in equal circumstances.

We call on the European Commission to recommend the Netherlands to take action to coordinate participation of children and young people, both in policy making and in monitoring of children and youth policy, on a national level, and encourage municipalities to involve children and young people in their local community on a regular and meaningful basis.

Poverty

The 2016 NRP reported that the Dutch government made an extra € 100 million available last year for municipalities to fight poverty in the Netherlands. Many municipalities now have a “child package”: providing vouchers and discounts on several activities (e.g. sports) aiming that children growing up in poverty or in a temporary disadvantaged situation have the same chances as other children.

However, this budget has not been specifically allocated to addressing the situation of children or of any other vulnerable group and the Child Package is not mandatory. Whilst some municipalities have developed a great and useful package, others do not provide one at all. Additional reforms and specific budget allocations are necessary to fight poverty amongst children.

The NRP also includes provisions on childcare allowance, child benefit and extending subsidy schemes for civil society organisations to affect a comprehensive approach to combating poverty and/or debt.

Although children are not specifically mentioned, ESF programming to provide ‘special support for the four largest cities in the Netherlands’ could support efforts to address the relatively high rates of poverty/social exclusion amongst children in these areas.

Defence for Children International is currently working with several political parties to support the drafting of an action plan on poverty, which will include a focus on children.

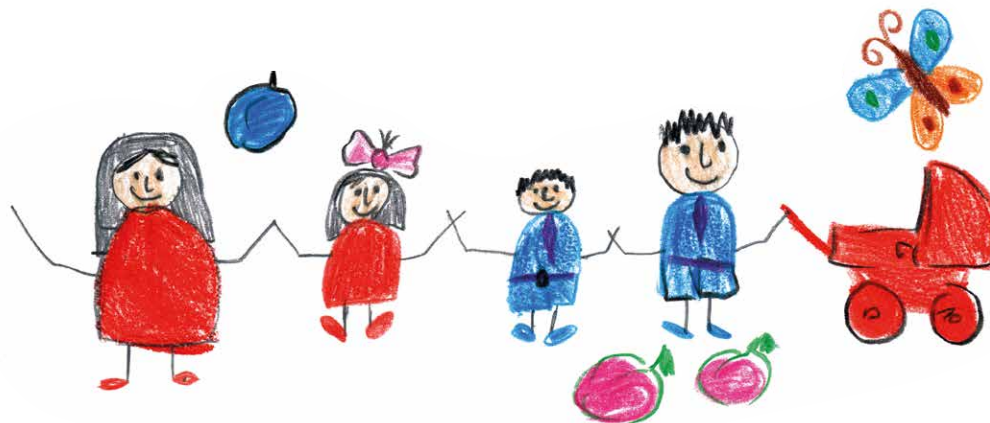
Female participation in the labour market

The 2016 NRP includes sections aiming to render work more financially rewarding, notably for (single) parents, in order to encourage more parents of young children to work. They have implemented a number of significant tax reductions, such as the increase in the employed person's tax credit and the general tax credit.

The NRP lists several measures that have been taken to improve women's economic independence and which could positively impact children's right to participate.

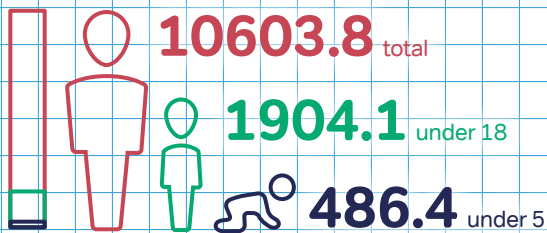
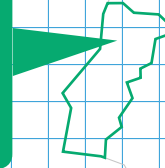
Over 70% of the ESF budget (€ 720 million) is programmed for ‘inclusion through education and employment’, which aims to integrate excluded groups into the labour market.

One of the 2016 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) includes an indirect reference to children: by tackling the remaining barriers to hiring staff on permanent contracts and promoting access of the self-employed to affordable social protection, it includes measures that would allow mothers to reach a better balance between work and family life.

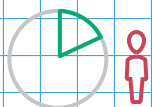


Portugal

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



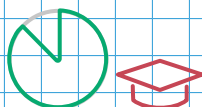
17.9%

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



31.4%

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



77.6%

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: [UNICEF](#), [Eurostat 1 & 2](#)

“ The Country Report highlights that children have been particularly affected by the economic and financial crisis - households with children are at much greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than the rest of the population.

Respondent

Organisation: Sergio Araujo

Engagement with the Semester process: For the first time, the debate around the Semester process had some visibility in the media. However, participation was not encouraged.

‘Investing in Children’ and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The respondent provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Due to the political shift in Portugal in October 2015, priorities changed: social policies have gained momentum within the political and public debate. Such changes are reflected in the Portuguese [2016 National Reform Programme \(NRP\)](#), which includes a focus on children. However, while some of the priorities of the Recommendation on 'Investing in Children' seem to be included in the NRP, it is unclear whether it had any role in influencing policies.

Portugal's [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) includes references to children in relation to poverty, education and employment. Despite this, the [2015](#) and [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) do not include references to children.

Nor does the Operation Programme include references to children for the allocation of EU Funding. In particular, children in alternative care are still missing.

Child poverty

In 2016, Decree-Law n. 2/2016 was passed, increasing child benefits by between 2% and 3.5%. Nevertheless, it is still too

early to assess the impact of these measures on child poverty. Furthermore, the 2016 CR highlights that children have been particularly affected by the economic and financial crisis - official data for 2014 show how households with children are at much greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than the rest of the population. A factor that contributed to the worsening situation were cuts in childcare benefits between October 2010 and December 2015 when one in three beneficiaries lost access to child benefits.

A positive development, following the 2016 CSRs, was the increase in the minimum wage and the changes in the minimum income scheme. Such measures are likely to have a positive impact on disadvantaged households and, therefore, on children.

The 2016 NRP addresses child poverty by focusing on reinforcing social benefits and increasing investments in family allowances. It also establishes measures directed at promoting a better balance between work and family life, partly as a means to improve children's quality of life.

Education

The 2016 CR addresses the situation of disadvantaged children within the school system, and the hardship faced by their families. It mentions a specific programme, *Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária (TEIP)*,¹ which covers 16% of schools in Portugal, and supports those with high rates of disadvantaged children.

The CR also provides some general information on children, such as the rate of early school leaving, which has been decreasing since 2009; and the budget cuts that halted the recruitment of new teachers during the past 5 years. However, the NRP mentions increased investment in education.

Youth employment

The 2016 CR provides some insight into the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (*Garantia Jovem*) initiative in Portugal.² While the programme was able to reach around 300,000 young people who are not

1 [Direcção Geral da Educação, Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária \(TEIP\).](#)

2 [Garantia Jovem.](#)



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017 - 2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Portugal to take action to promote children's rights to protection and participation, and implement concrete measures, particularly to address the needs of children with disabilities, children in alternative care, etc.

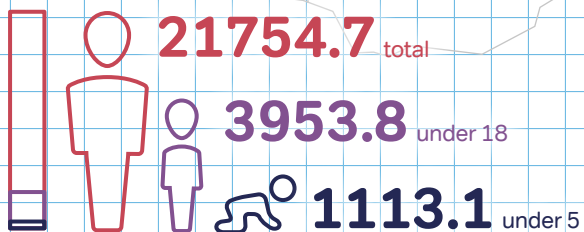
in employment, education or training (NEETs) and some progress is noted, challenges in its implementation remain. An important step forward has been the creation of an online platform where NEETs can register.

Healthcare

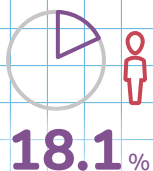
The NRP includes measures on increasing investments in health and in prioritising healthcare for children and adolescents with mental disabilities or in palliative care.

Romania

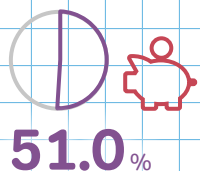
Country Profile for Semester Report



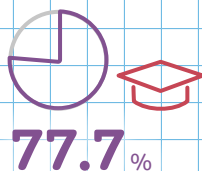
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: [UNICEF](#), [Eurostat 1 & 2](#)

“ *The deinstitutionalisation of children has been integrated as an objective. However, the funds allocated in practice are still insufficient and support varies significantly across the country.*

Respondents

Organisations: Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations for the Child (FONPC) and Hope and Homes for Children Romania (HHC).

Engagement with the Semester process: The FONPC and HHC have not been involved in the 2016 European Semester process at a sub-national or national level in Romania. National authorities do not organise consultations or dialogue with national NGOs to widen participation and input into the Semester process.

Access to EU funds: FONPC and HHC did not access any EU funds. Funding is not offered to umbrella organisations, but only for

services providers. Furthermore, reimbursement procedures are bureaucratic and delays are problematic.

‘Investing in Children’ and the Semester Process 2015-2016

FONPC and the HHC provide the following overall assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

There have been some positive developments, including a new strategy and action plan for children's rights in Romania.¹ It is felt that the Recommendation on ‘Investing in Children’ played a significant role in support of deinstitutionalisation and the development of community-based services for children.

In relation to the European Semester, Romania's [2015 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) did not include any recommendation

directly related to children although some of the recommendations could be indirectly linked to young people, particularly in relation to employment. The same is true for the [2016 Country Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs).

The [2016 Country Report](#) (CR) for Romania and the [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) include references to children, some of which correspond to the Recommendation on ‘Investing in Children’, for example on education, poverty, employment (youth employment and female participation), and deinstitutionalisation.

Child poverty

The Romanian government, following up on the European Commission analysis for the 2015 CSRs, adopted an Integrated Anti-Poverty Package,² which takes an integrated approach to tackling poverty, establishes responsibilities and, most importantly, identifies resources to achieve its goals. The Package is complementary to the National Strategy for Social Inclusion

and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020,³ and uses some of its provisions by coordinating them with other existing policies and strategies.

Some of the most important provisions of the Anti-Poverty Package are: provision of social housing; grants for improving living conditions; strategic mapping of the existing and needed social services; prevention of the separation of children from their families; deinstitutionalisation and some ‘safety net’ measures, to provide support at key stages of life.

Following the 2015 CSRs mentioning the introduction of the minimum financial support, this has replaced all other forms of welfare and state support for families at risk and persons in difficult situations.

The 2016 CR recognises that the poverty rate in Romania is the highest in the EU and that inequalities increased over the past few years, with 32% of the children in Romania living in severe material deprivation and one in two children

being at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The report also mentions that institutionalised children and people with disabilities are at higher risk of poverty and severe material deprivation and links poverty to the inexistence or inefficiency of social services.

The 2016 NRP includes some indirect references to children and poverty, as it lists a series of commitments to help families. Notably, it mentions a system of social vouchers and facilities for families at risk of poverty.

Child protection

An important development is the adoption of a Methodology regulating joint interventions by the General Directorate for Child Protection and Public Social Services. This methodology works alongside the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights,⁴ which describes child protection as a continuum of services and focuses on the entire family rather than on the child alone.

1 [Strategy and action plan for children in Romania \(2014 - 2020\)](#).

2 Government of Romania, [Integrated Anti-Poverty Package](#).

3 Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, [National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Protection 2015-2020](#).

4 Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, [National Strategy for the Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights](#).



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017 - 2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Romania to take action to develop and finance mixed social services to be provided by local authorities and NGOs for the prevention of family separation and institutionalisation, to facilitate the transition from institutional care to community-based services for children and families and the transition of young adults leaving institutions into independent living.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Romania to take action to implement a clearer and more flexible allocation of funds at local level for the implementation of social programmes and for implementing the reform of the child protection system in Romania.

The methodology includes three main developments: it sets a framework to foster cooperation between local and county child protection authorities, and provides a standard procedure to be implemented when working with children (assessment, intervention and monitoring); it includes a set of criteria to identify children and family at risk, including economic and social status, health and living conditions; and it clearly states the responsibilities of each of the authorities involved in child protection.

The 2016 CR mentions that prevention work remains a very important issue in the implementation of the reform of the child protection system and references the 2014-2020 national strategy for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child as the catalyst for better services for children.

Education

The Romanian Government has adopted a national programme for

early childhood stimulation which includes provisions on the expansion of early education services (including services for children with disabilities). The NRP mentions this, along with the modernisation and updating of the school curriculum for lower and upper secondary education and actions to develop a national after-school programme.

The 2016 CR correctly identifies the important issue of early school leaving in Romania, giving attention to vulnerable categories such as Roma children or children from poor families. However, it also recognises that Romania has not achieved any progress in meeting its targets – or responding to the 2015 CSRs – on this issue. The percentage of children leaving school early increased in 2014, Romania being one of the countries with the highest rates in the EU.

The 2016 CR mentions that educational and vocational training are in higher demand and refers to efforts to strengthen investment in education, as well as a strategy for the modernisation of educational

infrastructures adopted and enforced in 2015.

An aspect that is not mentioned in the CR is the participation of institutionalised children in the learning process, starting with access to education. Although there are provisions related to the integration of children with special needs in mainstream schools, not much progress has been achieved.

Employment

The 2015 CSRs called for measures regarding the access and inclusion on the labour market of all long-term unemployed persons and especially young adults. The 2016 CR reflects the situation of the labour market, mentioning both the ongoing challenges and the progress achieved in this area with some decreases in youth unemployment 2013-2015.

The Operational Programmes includes references to the need to use EU funding in support of creating jobs and employment opportunities for young adults (16 - 24).

Although the Romanian legal framework includes provisions on promoting equality between men and women in the labour market, women still face difficulties in finding and keeping jobs and single mothers are especially vulnerable. The 2016 CR does not reflect on these specific CR challenges, which impact on children.

Deinstitutionalisation

The deinstitutionalisation of children has been integrated within the programmes financed by EU structural funds as an objective – it is referred to in priority 4 of the Human Capital programme. However, the funds allocated to this objective in practice are still insufficient and support varies significantly across the country.

More focus is needed on: developing social infrastructure to facilitate the deinstitutionalisation process; supporting young adults to make the transition into independent living; and implementing better public spending for the implementation of social programmes and reforming the child protection system.

Healthcare

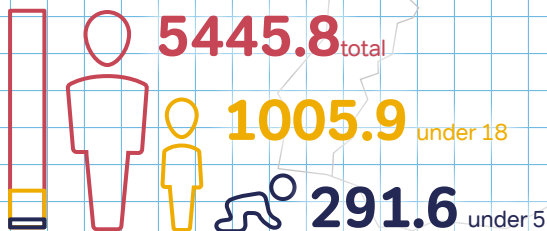
Following the 2015 CSRs, the National Health Strategy,⁵ providing all categories, including children, with access to quality healthcare, was implemented.



5 Ministry of Health, [National Health Strategy](#).

Slovakia

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)



18.4 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



23.6 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



84.9 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *There have been some positive developments in supporting the implementation of children's rights and reforms in the education system, with particular regard to inclusive education. Yet educational outcomes are still weak and inequalities appear high in an international comparison.*

Respondent

Organisation: Coalition for Children Slovakia (and member organisations)

Engagement with the Semester process: Members of the Coalition for Children did not take part in the Semester process. The main barriers are lack of capacity and financial resources to engage as well as information on the process.

Access to EU funds: The Coalition for Children Slovakia has been an 'expert partner' in an EU-funded national project under the Ministry of Social Affairs since 2015. However, this does not include any financial resources for the Coalition. The main obstacles to accessing EU funds



Alternative Country Specific

Recommendations for 2017 - 2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Slovakia to take action to create a comprehensive and cross-sectoral system of care for each child from birth and including implementation of the principle of inclusive education to ensure the natural inclusion in society of all children whether socially or physically disadvantaged, gifted, migrants or belonging to ethnic minorities.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Slovakia to take action to increase real involvement of civil society, and particularly NGOs and individuals with the appropriate expertise, as well as children and youth, in the implementation of the relevant reforms.

for NGOs' are negative experiences from the previous programme periods, lack of capacity to manage the large grants provided by the ESI Funds, associated heavy reporting mechanisms and corruption.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Coalition for Children Slovakia provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

There have been some positive developments in supporting the implementation of children's rights and reforms in the education system, with particular regard to inclusive education. Yet much remains to be done.

In relation to the European Semester process, children were mentioned in both the [2015](#) and [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations. The [2016 Country Report](#) (CR) and the [2016 National Reform Programme](#) (NRP) mainly refer to

children in regards to education and employment.

In relation to the Investing in Children Recommendation, a National Seminar was organised on the subject by the Committee for Children and Youth of the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality in January 2016. The objective was to inform how EU funds can be used by NGOs to implement the EC Recommendation. However, the majority of the planned national projects in partnership with NGOs or calls in which the NGOs were supposed to be the eligible receivers were stopped due to the elections in spring 2016 and have still not started.

Child rights

There has been some progress around child-friendly justice, including increased training of judges on family law, capacity building of professionals, child-friendly environment while interrogating/questioning children etc.

A new Children's Commissioner Office has been created, which is a largely positive development, although some concerns still remain about the independence of the new body and certain corruption allegations that others have made against the new Commissioner.

Education

The 2016 NRP includes provisions to reform the regional school system, including increasing teacher's salary on an annual basis by 6% and connecting education and the labour market's needs by promoting dual education and technical subjects. However, investments in education and science are still below the average compared to other developed States, particularly in relation to primary and secondary education.

The 2016 CR and NRP include provisions for improving the conditions for inclusion of children with special needs, from Roma communities and other socially disadvantaged environments. It states that all programmes developed between 2014 and 2020 in the field of inclusive education

will focus on early years education, maternal schools/kindergartens, maintaining teachers' assistants and educational activities in Roma communities.

The CR underlines that, despite recent developments, educational outcomes are still weak and inequalities appear high in an international comparison. Children and education were included in both the 2015 and 2016 CSRs, in regards to increasing the participation of Roma children in mainstream and high-quality early childhood education; and improving educational outcomes by making the teaching profession more attractive.

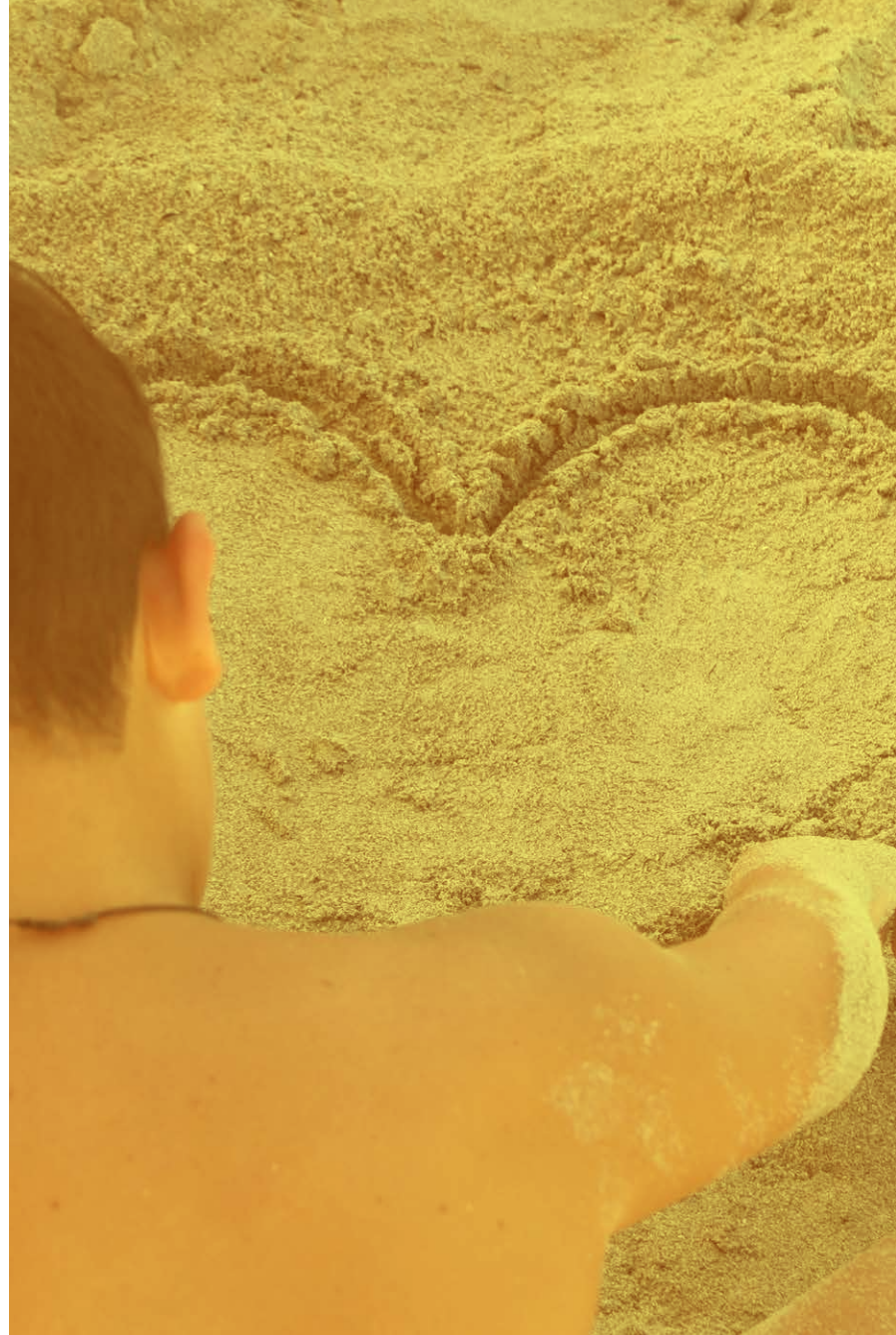
The Ministry of Education has created a new expert group - made up of seven members - to draft a National Plan for Education and Training Development¹ for the next 10 years and the expert discussion on the document including civil society has been started.

Childcare

The 2016 NRP mentions the need for: increasing the accessibility of good quality and affordable childcare services for children under 3 years; multiple sources for financing of social services; support for deinstitutionalisation; and implementing National Programmes to support marginalised Roma communities, including fostering integration of Roma children from early age and continuation of field work aimed at preschool and school education.

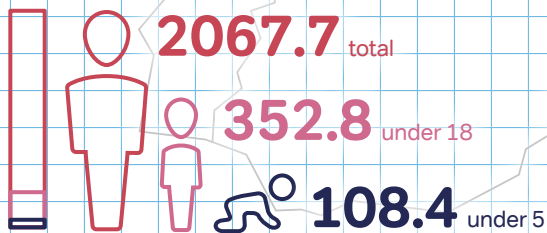
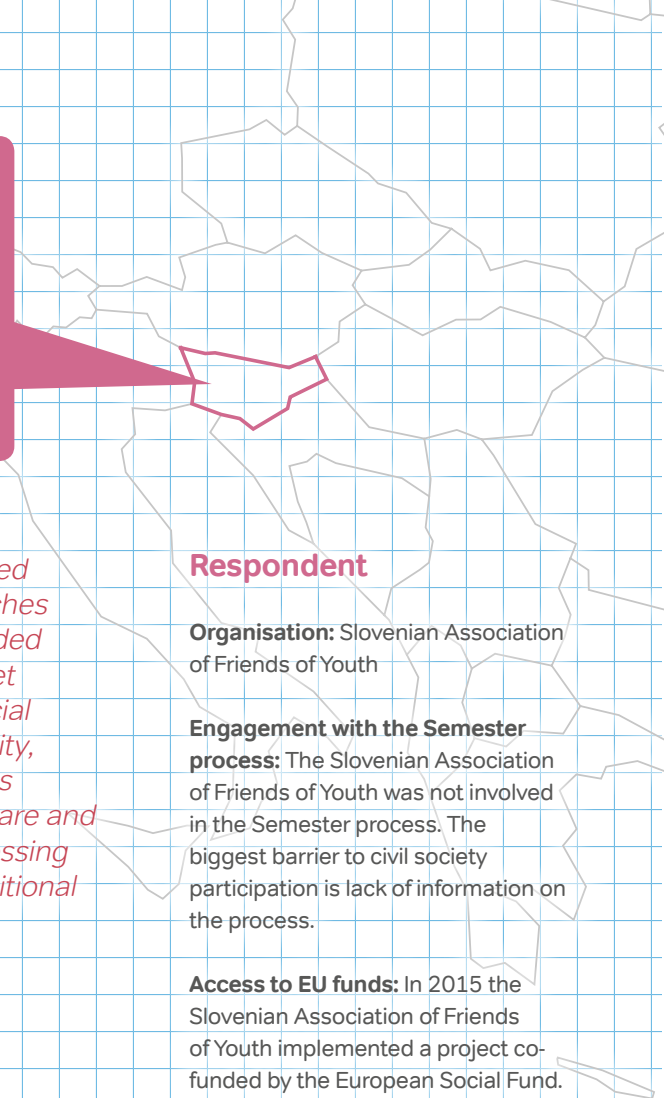
Childcare is mentioned in both the 2015 and 2016 CSRs, which state that Slovakia should improve the incentives for women to remain in or return to employment by improving the provision of affordable childcare facilities.

1 Ministry of Education, [National Plan for Education and Training Development](#), 2016.

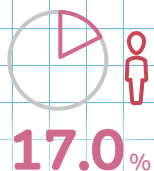


Slovenia

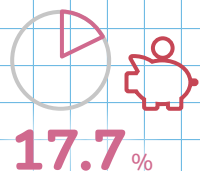
Country Profile for Semester Report



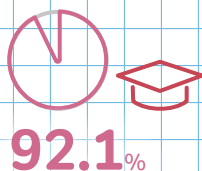
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ *Integrated approaches are needed that directly target child poverty, social inclusion, inequality, access to services including healthcare and specifically addressing children with additional support needs.* ”

Respondent

Organisation: Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth

Engagement with the Semester process: The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth was not involved in the Semester process. The biggest barrier to civil society participation is lack of information on the process.

Access to EU funds: In 2015 the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth implemented a project co-funded by the European Social Fund. The call was led by the Ministry for Public Administration, and only co-financed by the ESF, which made the application process less complex.



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Slovenia to take action to implement a new National Programme for children and youth (2016-2021) through a comprehensive, concrete and binding action plan, recognising the responsibilities of each actor in society.

We call on the European Commission to recommend Slovenia to take action to implement and monitor implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children in key policy and legislative measures at domestic level, including clear guidelines for the prevention of child poverty, based on quantified targets.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth provides the following assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

The Slovenian government is in the process of adopting several laws and policies, which constitute steps forwards in the implementation of children's rights, notably: a National Programme for Children and Youth, a new Family Law and amendments to the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence. However, there is no clear link with the Recommendation on 'Investing in Children'.

The [2016 Country Report \(CR\)](#) for Slovenia and the [2016 National Reform Programme \(NRP\)](#) include some references to children in the following areas: female market participation; early school leaving; child poverty; and youth unemployment. However, children were not visible in either the [2015](#) or the [2016](#) Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

Poverty

According to the 2016 CR, poverty affects 9.5% of the total population and 10.5% of children. Moreover, the rate of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased from 17.5 to 17.7%.

The NRP includes a list of reforms aiming to increase social inclusion and tackle poverty and states that a budget allocation of over € 150 million is available. The Operational Programme (OP) for allocation of EU funding reiterates the need to target social exclusion and poverty and support NGOs working with and for children. However, such support has yet to be provided.

Integrated approaches are needed that directly target child poverty, social inclusion, inequality and access to services including healthcare, and specifically address children with special needs.

Child rights

More consideration should be given to reforming the juvenile justice system, including the prevention of violations of children's rights in court proceedings and the establishment of dedicated children's courts.

More should also be done to prevent and combat violence against children and deal with issues around child labour, child trafficking, Roma children, ethnic minorities, unaccompanied children, asylum seekers and refugees. Child rights are not sufficiently referenced in the Operational Programme.

Early school leaving

The 2016 CR states that the 2020 early school leaving target of 5% has been already achieved. Yet, early school leaving increased from 3.4% in 2013 to 4.4% in 2014 so the trend is worrying.

Youth unemployment

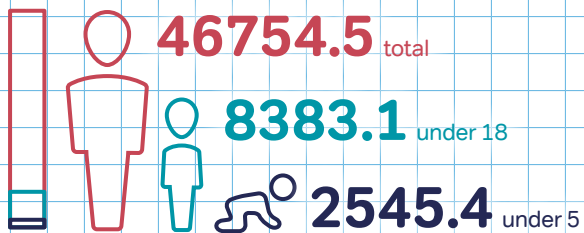
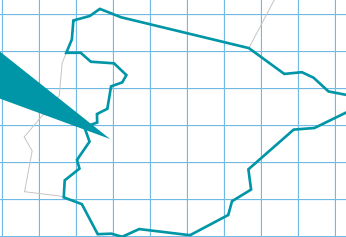
Young people's participation in the labour market has substantially improved, as young people from 18 to 24 represent the age group whose unemployment rate has decreased the most (from 13.4% in 2014 to 12.9% in 2015).

Nevertheless, youth unemployment remains an important issue in Slovenia. The NRP states that almost € 500 million will be invested in strengthening human resources, with part of the funds allocated to the education and training system for a quicker transition into the labour market.

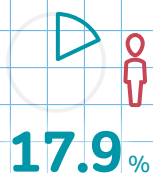


Spain

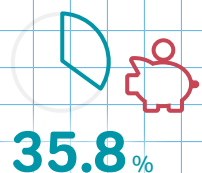
Country Profile for Semester Report



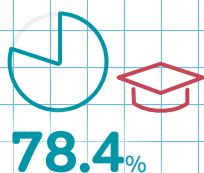
Population (thousands, 2012)



Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

“ The Country Report explicitly recognises that adequate childcare is lacking, negatively affecting children’s opportunities and women’s participation in the labour market.

Respondent

Organisation: FICE Spain and Don Bosco International

Engagement with the Semester process: The respondents were not involved in the 2015-2016 European Semester and questioned whether participation in debates relating to the Semester process would guarantee the presence of children’s rights in the final documents. Often limited resources tend to be focused on existing programmes and fundraising.

Access to EU funds: FICE Spain has obtained EU funding to develop ‘Youth Guarantee’ projects for youngsters at risk of social exclusion. The biggest barriers to accessing EU



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

We call on the European Commission to recommend Spain to take action to improve childcare services by promoting a transition towards more community-based care services whilst providing enough resources to keep the quality of residential care services already in place.

funds remain access to information regarding the calls and the administrative burden. Competition between a large number of organisations is also an issue.

'Investing in Children' and the Semester Process 2015-2016

FICE Spain and Don Bosco International provide the following overall assessment of the place of children in recent policy documents:

Although the 2015 Organic Law amending the protection system for childhood and adolescence is a positive development, the economic crisis and the precarious conditions of the labour market have overall had a negative impact on children in Spain. NGOs and their volunteers have been very active – despite reductions in their grants – in reducing the effects of this economic crisis and avoiding an even bigger social problem. Many of these civil society organisations have been calling for a new 'pact for childhood'.

In terms of the European Semester, the 2016 Country Report (CR) for Spain includes some references to children, particularly in relation to poverty.

The 2016 National Reform Programme (NRP) for Spain includes several provisions related to children's rights. It states that the II National Strategic Plan for Children and Adolescents 2013-2016, aimed at protecting the rights of these groups, will remain in place, as will the Integral Plan of Family support aimed at supporting families at risk of poverty.

The 2015 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for Spain indirectly referred to children by addressing unemployment and lack of family support services. The 2016 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) do not mention child poverty and fail to highlight the situation of children in Spain at all.

Child poverty

The CR reports that indicators relating to poverty and social exclusion are still very high compared to the EU average.

Children are particularly at risk. In 2014, almost 3 million children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and of these, 1.3 million were living in low-income households. Children are directly affected by the precarious situation of their working-age parents. Single parents – particularly women living alone with their children – continue to face the highest risks of poverty.

The National Social Report 2014 includes actions and measures aimed at cushioning the social consequences of the economic crisis such as the approval of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2013- 2016.

While social transfers can contribute to alleviating child poverty, the impact of such measures in Spain is still one of the lowest in the EU. The CR states that "in 2014, social transfers (excluding pensions) reduced child poverty by 22% as compared to the 39% in the EU, expenditure on family and housing benefits is particularly low compared to the EU average." Social Protection spending on family and children, after peaking at € 343 per capita in

2009, decreased to € 295 per capita in 2013.

Although not effectively addressed by the Semester process, child poverty is considered a cross-cutting theme in the Operational Programme (OP). The OP states that EU funding will be allocated to strengthen national programmes and strategies in fields including inclusion and specifically to combat child poverty, especially in relation to access to basic goods, housing, education and health.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

The 2015 CSRs for Spain referred to ECEC in the sense that: “the lack of adequate and affordable child care and long-term care provision discourages women, in particular, from taking up a job.” The European Commission’s analysis recommends the implementation of measures to “address gaps and disparities in minimum income schemes and improve family support schemes, including access to quality childcare and long-term care.”

The 2016 CR explicitly recognises that adequate childcare is lacking, negatively affecting children’s opportunities and women’s participation in the labour market. Childcare is still largely provided by grandparents, as “places in subsidised childcare facilities are limited, and opening hours and a reduction of extra-curricular activities do not meet the needs of full-time working parents.”

However, measures implemented so far have only really resulted in the creation of low-quality employment, which does not improve the situation of families and children. The attendance rate in early childhood education and care is steadily decreasing, and numbers are even lower for disadvantaged children: this is due to a lack of measures to improve family support schemes.

Education and addressing early school leaving

The 2016 NRP lists several actions to be taken to avoid early school leaving through the implementation of educational reform, including measures for early detection of learning difficulties and

strengthening individual attention for students with difficulties. Furthermore, it encourages the implementation of the Plan for reducing early school leaving 2014-2020, which provides strategic measures against early school leaving for territorial administrations.

However, the educational reform (LOMCE) was opposed by both parents’ and teachers’ associations – from public, semi-private and private sectors – as it installed outdated measures and those which target improving PISA indicators but reduce the quality of educational outcomes in the country.

Some regions have seen reduced grants for providing the same education to young people coming from families with low income. Spain also needs a strong reorganisation of the university system which does not adequately support the employability of young people.

Family support and alternative care

The main national law in relation to the protection of children is the new Organic Law of 22 July 2015

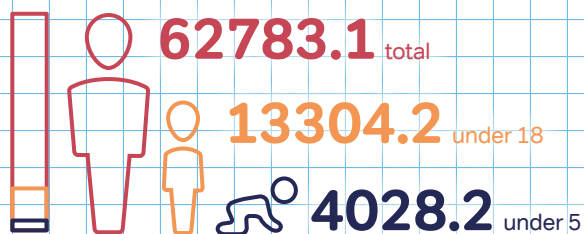
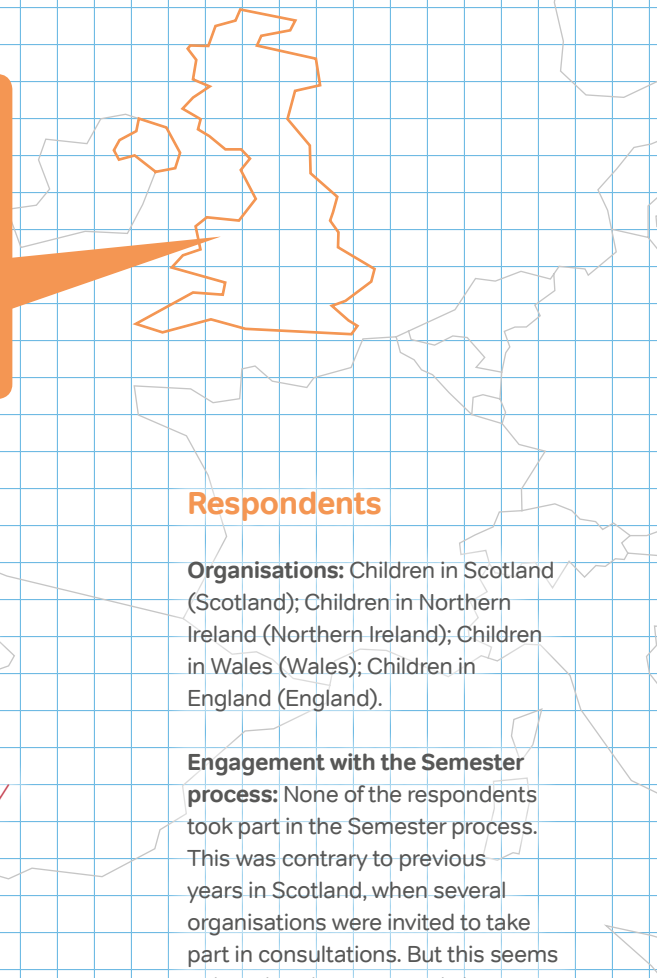
amending the system of protection for childhood and adolescence. The new law introduces improvements, such as prioritising foster care over residential care and long-term over temporary measures. The establishment of foster care is simplified, so that the intervention of a judge will not be mandatory.

The new law also establishes, for the first time, measures for encouraging processes of emancipation of young care leavers: “Public authorities shall offer independent life preparation programmes... starting from two years prior to reaching adult age and thereafter, where needed, seeking their active participation and to ensure they benefit.” This is a significant improvement. Nevertheless, the development of specific policies remains subject to the budgetary decisions of the different Spanish autonomous communities.

Among the listed measures and reforms, the 2016 NRP does not mention deinstitutionalisation and the provision of community-based services.

United Kingdom

Country Profile for Semester Report



Population (thousands, 2012)

“ *Employment, education and poverty were the key topics of relevance to children touched on by the Semester Process. Much of the narrative is a list of commitments with no means by which to track any progress.* ”

Respondents

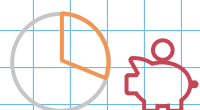
Organisations: Children in Scotland (Scotland); Children in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland); Children in Wales (Wales); Children in England (England).

Engagement with the Semester process: None of the respondents took part in the Semester process. This was contrary to previous years in Scotland, when several organisations were invited to take part in consultations. But this seems to be related to structural changes within the government, rather than an unwillingness to cooperate with civil society.



21.1 %

Population aged 0-18, proportion of total population (% 2012)



31.3 %

Number of children (aged 0-17) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% 2014)



63.3 %

Percentage of 18 year olds in education (2012)

Sources: UNICEF, Eurostat 1 & 2

Access to EU funds: None of the respondents reported directly accessing funding for their own work, although the application process is considered reasonably straightforward in Scotland and the efforts of a dedicated team within the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) to support third sector organisations in accessing EU funds was recognised.

‘Investing in Children’ and the Semester Process 2015-2016

The respondents in Scotland and Wales found that there have been some positive developments in the implementation of children’s rights in their respective devolved administration. Northern Ireland, on the other hand did not see any positive policy developments.

Respondents reported that employment (both youth employment and female participation in the labour market), education and poverty were the key topics of relevance to children

touched on by the Semester Process. Much of the narrative provided by the National Reform Programme (NRP) is criticised for being a list of commitments and objectives with no means by which to track any progress.

Mostly, the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) prioritise economic issues. Only one of the 2015 CSRs directly refers to children and young people: “Address skills mismatches by increasing employers’ engagement in the delivery of apprenticeships. Take action to further reduce the number of young people with low basic skills. Further improve the availability of affordable, high-quality, full-time childcare”.

There are also concerns related to the evidence used to support reforms put in place to address the CSRs. For example, additional investment at national level will not deliver positive results where it coincides with public sector budgets at the local level. Due to their focus on the UK as a whole, most of the Semester Documents fail to provide an adequate reflection of the specific situation of children in

each of the devolved administrations - there are calls for each to be examined separately.

The Operational Programmes for the UK tend to prioritise children and young people only in terms of youth unemployment programmes, training and skills.

Child poverty

Scotland:

The Scottish government is planning new measures addressing the attainment gap between rich and poor children. While details are not yet provided, the programme mentions a new Child Poverty Act:¹ all 3 and 4 year olds will be entitled to 1140 hours per year of early learning and child care — an increase of 540 hours per child.

The concern is that the quality of such services may not be high enough to have a positive impact on children’s outcomes. The Scottish Government has opposed plans set out in the 2016 UK CR to alter the measurement of child poverty

1 Scottish Government, Consultation on a Child Poverty Bill for Scotland, 2016.

targets. It intends to introduce its own child poverty legislation.

The devolved government has also sought to oppose and mitigate the effects of austerity measures adopted as part of overall deficit reduction strategies at UK level and which have reduced social protection and public services. A key issue remains addressing income poverty amongst working households - more than half of poor children in Scotland live in households where at least one adult already works.

The Scottish Government has taken active steps to increase the supply of affordable housing which could benefit at-risk children. It exceeded its 2011 - 2016 target of an additional 30 000 affordable homes, including 20 400 homes for social rent.

Wales:

While the 2016 Country Report (CR) only provides statistics at a UK level, Wales performs badly across a range of income indicators compared to the UK as a whole and the other devolved nations: for

example, Wales presents higher rates of children living in households in relative child poverty. In-work poverty is also a particular challenge in Wales. Couples with children and lone parents have been amongst the hardest hit by recent freezes in the indexation of certain working age income benefits and tax credits.

Nevertheless, there are some new Welsh government legislative and policy developments relevant to child poverty in Wales which reflect the three pillar approach of the Recommendation on Investing in Children. The rates of children living in workless households have fallen in Wales since 2015.

The 2015 revised Child Poverty Strategy for Wales² gives details on measures that the Welsh Government will put in place to reduce the number of children living in poverty, and to improve the lives of children living in low income households. The Strategy reaffirms the ambition of eradicating child poverty in Wales by 2020.

The Financial Inclusion Strategy for Wales 2016³ can also be important in helping families improve their access to financial information and debt advice.

The NRP provides a list of commitments and actions in relation to eradicating child poverty, but an analysis of such efforts is not included.

England:

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2016 Concluding Observation on the need to set up clear accountability mechanisms for the eradication of child poverty, including by re-establishing concrete targets with a set timeframe and measurable indicators, and continue regular monitoring and reporting on child poverty reduction represents a key priority for investing in children in England.

² Welsh Government, [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales](#), 2015.

³ Welsh Government, [Financial Inclusion Strategy for Wales](#), 2016



Alternative Country Specific Recommendations for 2017-2018

Scotland:

We call on the European Commission to recommend Scotland to take action to ensure that the childcare provided is of high quality in terms of workforce qualifications, physical environment, staff ratios and curriculum. Its primary focus should be optimal child development with parent labour market participation as a subsidiary objective.

Northern Ireland:

We call on the European Commission to make specific recommendations for Northern Ireland and not just for the UK, based on a detailed analysis of the specific situation of children and young people in the country.

Wales:

We call on the European Commission to recommend Wales to take action to improve the availability of affordable quality childcare, reduce the number of young people with low basic skills and to develop a social protection system that provides adequate income for families with children complemented by a sufficient range of accessible services and practical help.

England:

We call on the European Commission to recommend England to take action to implement the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2016 Concluding Observation on the United Kingdom, which represent a strong consensus on priorities for improving investment in children in England.

Child rights and wellbeing

Wales:

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014⁴ came into force in April 2016 with an overarching aim to transform the way in which Social Services are delivered and received by children and adults in Wales. The Act places new duties on local authorities to have due regard to the UNCRC when exercising their functions to an individual, including children and young people.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015,⁵ requires public bodies to set and achieve whole population well-being objectives with the aim to achieve progress in terms of tackling poverty and promoting the participation of children and young people. The Act has been regarded as a world first piece of legislation with links to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The new National Action Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Exploitation in

Wales⁶ is another very important recent policy development in Wales.

Northern Ireland:

There has been no positive policy development, nor any new strategy or action plan to improve children's rights in Northern Ireland. The Recommendation on Investing in Children has not played any role within policy making.

England:

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2016 Concluding Observation on the need to rigorously invest in child and adolescent mental health services and develop strategies with clear timeframes, targets, measureable indicators, effective monitoring mechanisms and sufficient human, technical and financial resources represents a key priority for investing in children in England.

Education

The UK CR highlights that the indicator on early school leavers recorded a reduction from 14.9% in 2011 to 11.8% in 2014 which is now around the EU average (11.1%). However, figures were not broken down by devolved authority.

Scotland:

The most-recent Scottish Government programme⁷ includes education among its priorities and establishes that £750m will be invested in school-based initiatives to address this issue.

Wales:

The 2016 UK CR includes a reference to Wales' large-scale curriculum reform which will be implemented by 2018.

The section of the 2016 NRP on education does not reflect the vast policy work that is currently being undertaken in Wales.

Employment

The 2015 CSR on youth employment seems to be focused on the needs of employers rather than on the rights of children. The 2016 CR, moreover, includes few specific mentions of children in relation to work-related childcare and youth unemployment. While the report does not analyse the link between the need to improve childcare availability and female employment, it examines the impact of parenthood on female participation in the labour market.

Scotland:

Most of the references to youth unemployment are to initiatives targeting young people who have left school without completing qualifications that apply exclusively to England. This is despite the fact that there is an extensive Youth Employment Programme in Scotland (funded from ESF) which includes a range of apprenticeship opportunities.

⁴ Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, 2014.

⁵ Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015.

⁶ Welsh Government, National Action Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Exploitation (Wales).

⁷ Scottish Government, A Plan for Scotland 2016-2017.

The 'Scottish Attainment Challenge'⁸ – which has aimed at closing the income-related learning and qualification gap – is mentioned, but most of the report only refers to the situation of children and young people in England.

Wales:

The number of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales has fallen since 2015. There has also been some progress in Wales in reducing youth unemployment rates, although this is not reflected in the UK-focused CR and there is no evidence that the 2015 CSRs have been the driving force for these changes.

EU Funds are also being used to provide support to a new apprenticeship programme in Wales. The 2016 NRP also includes a list of the actions being undertaken to increase employment levels in Wales and improve employability through increasing the skills of people, including young people. However, it does not provide enough analysis of these plans.

In 2014, the impact of parenthood on employment of mothers was among the highest in Europe: lack of childcare services remains a significant barrier to women entering, remaining and progressing in the labour market in Wales, as only 18% of councils in Wales reported having sufficient childcare provision for parents who work full-time.

Access to quality and affordable services

Wales:

The 2016 NRP includes a section on early years' education and care, which reports on good progress in relation to the Flying Start Programme⁹ and states that investments will be made, with the support of the EU, to provide better childcare, particularly addressing the needs of lone parents and parents in workless families. However, the issues of adequate supply and related challenges, some of which are referenced in the CR are not considered in the NRP.

Moreover, the NRP includes little to no reference to health services in relation to Wales. There is a major gap in terms of consideration of groups of children at greater risk of disadvantage (e.g. children in care, migrant and displaced children, or groups of children with protected characteristics e.g. Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Children, and disabled children).

Northern Ireland:

While the 2016 NRP provides a reference to the Early Intervention Transformation Programme,¹⁰ and to the need to invest in access to quality and affordable services, a childcare strategy is yet to be included. The NRP does not refer to any child-specific target.

⁸ Scottish Government, [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#).

⁹ Welsh Government, [Flying Start Programme](#).

¹⁰ Department of Health, [The Early Intervention Transformation Programme](#).



5 Cross-country analysis

Country	Abbreviation
Austria	(AT)
Bulgaria	(BG)
Croatia	(HR)
Denmark	(DK)
England	(UK-EN)
Estonia	(EE)
Finland	(FI)
France	(FR)
Germany	(DE)
Greece	(EL)
Hungary	(HU)
Ireland	(IE)
Italy	(IT)
Latvia	(LV)
Netherlands	(NL)
Northern Ireland	(UK-NI)
Portugal	(PT)
Romania	(RO)
Scotland	(UK-SC)
Slovakia	(SK)
Slovenia	(SI)
Spain	(ES)
Wales	(UK-WA)

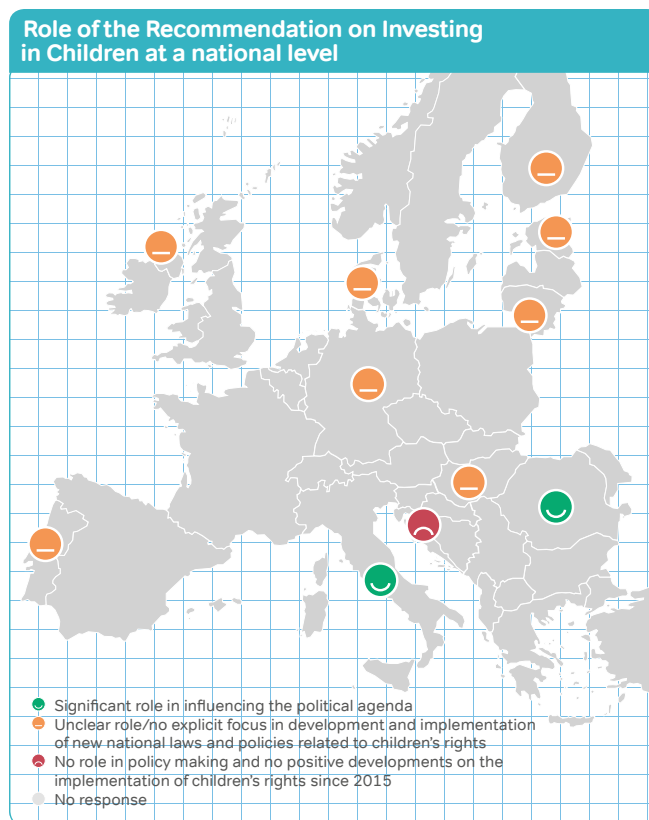
5.1 Part 1: How is Investing in Children reflected in the 2015-2016 Semester Process?

Eurochild members report some progress in terms of how children, and in particular the Recommendation on Investing in Children, are reflected in the 2015-2016 Semester process, compared to the previous annual cycle.

 18/28

18 out of 28 respondents to Eurochild's questionnaire on the European Semester state there have been some positive developments since 2015.

Influence of the Recommendation on Investing in Children at national level



“The Recommendation... played a significant role regarding deinstitutionalisation and developing community-based services for children.”

Romania

“The Recommendation with its three pillars is clearly mentioned in the fourth (2016/2017) national plan of action and measures for the protection of the rights of children...”

Italy

Children in the 2016 Country Reports (CR)

Whilst country reports give more visibility to children and families than any other stage in the European Semester process, Eurochild members felt insufficient space is given to measures and policies that address the specific needs of children.

Key themes in the CRs

a. Education

Recurring themes given particular attention include early school leaving (RO, PT, SI), reducing the dropout rate (EE, DK), addressing the specific needs of children belonging to minority groups or children with additional support

needs (BG, SK, RO), and vocational training (EE, RO).

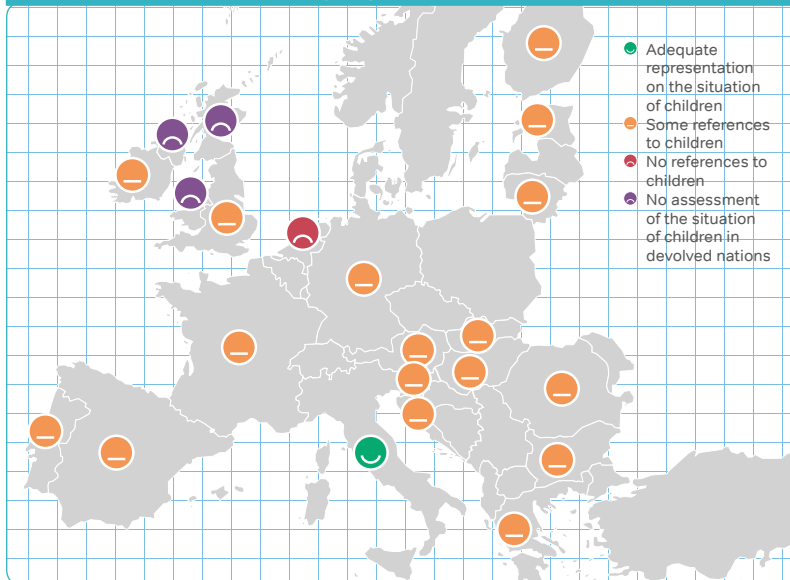
b. Parents' participation in the labour market

Many CRs include a focus on female participation in the labour market. CRs tend to mention lack of accessible and affordable childcare (HU, IE), shortcomings in the maternity leave system (EE), or discrimination against single mothers (RO) as some of the main barriers to female employment.

d. Child poverty

Several CRs provided statistics on poverty and children at risk of poverty (for example FR, SI, RO, IE, EE, BG). However, these statistics are rarely analysed to provide a perspective on how poverty impacts on children. Our members in ES and PT welcomed that their CR highlights failures in the social benefit system to support low-income households and single parents.

Children in the 2016 Country Reports



c. Youth unemployment

The challenge of youth unemployment is recognised in many CRs. Our member in Latvia noted that youth employment was the only topic related to children and young people included in their CR. In some instances the CRs identified positive steps taken to implement measures targeted at young unemployed people (DK, SI).

What is missing?

For example, Finland noted that the 2016 CR did not focus on the impact of the **financial crisis** on the situation of children and families, and Latvia found that their report did not include a **child rights perspective** in relation to areas that are crucial to children's development, such as health and education.

Children in the 2016 National Reform Programmes (NRPs)

The majority of questionnaire respondents found that the 2016 NRPs provided some direct or indirect references to children and young people, but did not always include associated child-specific targets.

Key themes in the NRPs

a. Education

Education received significant attention in the 2016 NRPs. Some recurring themes include **inclusive education** (BG, RO, SI), **early school leaving** (BG, ES, RO), **training**

for teachers and professionals working with children (IT, EE, BG) and **curriculum reform** (HR, SI). Some respondents highlighted that the NRP mentioned **child participation** in education as a means to encourage children and young people's active citizenship (EL, FR).

Other topics raised include **after-school programmes** and **early childhood education and care** (RO) and access to school for migrant children (EL).

c. *Parents' participation in the labour market and youth employment*

Members referred to policies mentioned in the NRPs that support **working parents** with better services and provide a better work-life balance (NL, SK, FI, EE, IT) and **youth skills development and employment** (LV, EE, UK-WA).

Romania referred to the NRP and legislative and policy measures focusing on employment as a means to address social exclusion.

b. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Provision of childcare and pre-school education are referred to in many NRPs linked to measures to implement a better balance between work and family life (UK-WA, SK, EE, FI, IT).

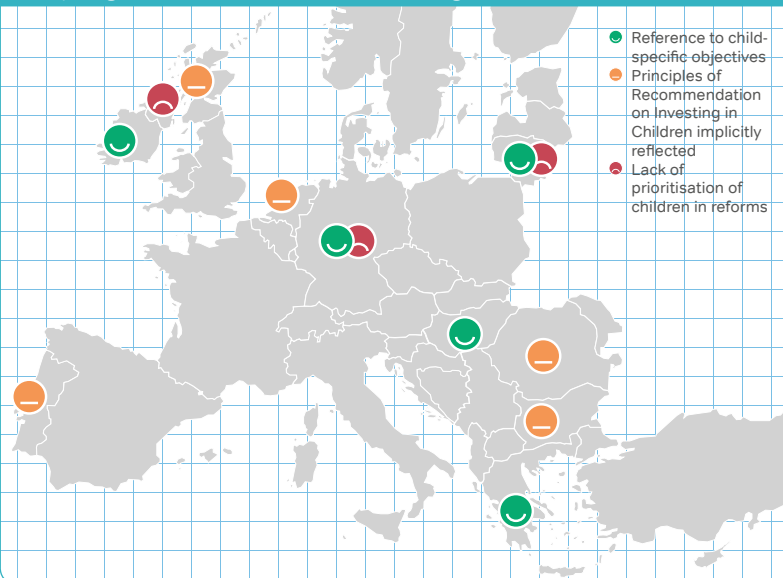
The Bulgarian 2016 NRP refers to measures aimed at establishing a network of affordable and quality social and health services available in the community and at home, developing integrated cross-sectorial services, including for early childhood development and supporting families with children.

d. Poverty

Whilst most NRPs refer to poverty levels and the necessity to address child poverty in particular, very few bring a specific child perspective.

Repeated themes reported by Eurochild members in the NRPs included **provisions on social transfers, monthly allowances** (including childcare allowance) and **child benefits** (LV, NL, EE, BG, IE), tax reductions (NL, EE), increasing the **minimum wage or implementing minimum income schemes** to help disadvantaged families (LV, IT) and

Analysing the 2016 National Reform Programmes



support and services for those who are socially excluded (NL, HR).

Wales reported that the NRP provided a list of commitments and actions in relation to eradicating child poverty but an analysis of such efforts was not included.

e. Access to services

Children and young people were explicitly mentioned as beneficiaries of **healthcare** reforms and particular attention was given to **children with disabilities** (PT, BG, HR). However, other members regretted that children are not explicitly mentioned in relation to reforms intended to improve access to **affordable and quality services** (EL, EE).

What is missing?

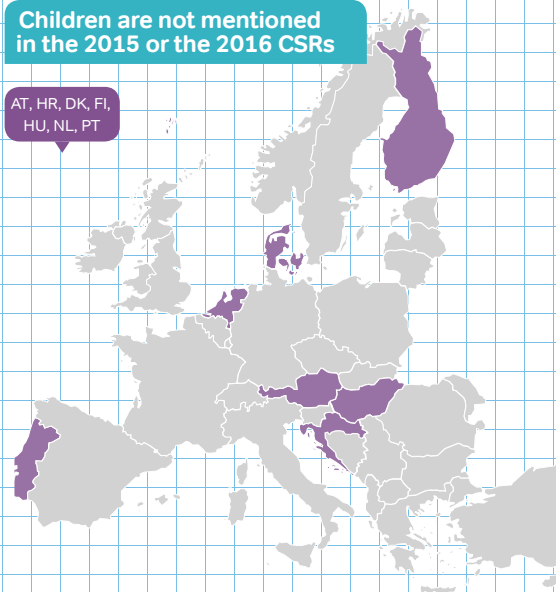
Child participation: IT, PT, LV, BG
Deinstitutionalisation and children in alternative care: ES, UK-WA, RO, PT, EL
Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms on child policies: FI, UK-WA, HU

Children in the 2016 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)

As felt by the majority of respondents to Eurochild's 2015 European Semester questionnaire, the macro-economic focus and prioritisation of economic over social issues has led to very few CSRs on investing in children.

Children are not mentioned in the 2015 or the 2016 CSRs

AT, HR, DK, FI, HU, NL, PT



Continuing themes from 2015 CSRs

FR, IE, IT, RO, UK-SC, UK-WA, SK, ES



Children mentioned only in relation to employment

IE



A specific focus on child poverty

BG, DE, RO, SK



Investment in education

Addressed in 2015 but dropped in 2016 CSRs

IT, FR, RO



Youth unemployment

Topics in 2016 CSRs

BG



Youth unemployment

SK, ES, EE



Provision of childcare and improving work-life

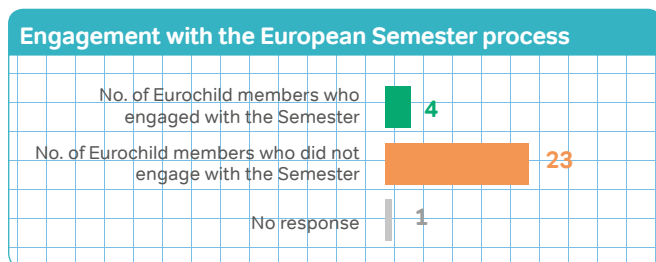
BG, SK



The education of Roma children

5.2 Part 2: How members engage in the European Semester process

Eurochild members' engagement in the European Semester varies widely. Of the 28 member responses, only 4 indicated an active engagement in the last year.



Meaningful stakeholder engagement improves policy making and the chances of policies being successfully implemented. It also helps to ensure the transparent and effective use of EU funds.

The Integrated Guidelines (for the Semester) and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (for the ESIF programming cycle) set out provisions and criteria for cooperation and partnership between public authorities and, among others, civil society organisations in development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The European Commission developed Integrated Guidelines to help Member States implement the overarching targets of the Europe 2020 strategy. They require that implementation, monitoring and evaluation should be done in partnership and that representatives of civil society can contribute to the elaboration and implementation of the National Reform Programmes (Recital 16).

However, there are no accompanying enforcement mechanisms so civil society organisations (CSOs) working with and for children are rarely systematically directly consulted, and if they are, it is generally done in a superficial way. Furthermore, there is no consideration of how children and young people themselves can be meaningfully involved in these processes, even though child participation is a cornerstone of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is critical for the development of child-centred policies.

Engagement with the European Semester process

Eurochild members' low level of engagement in the Semester process is largely due to (1) lack of members' capacity to meaningfully engage, both in terms of time and expertise; and (2) governments' failure to reach out to civil society organisations and support their involvement. The findings of Eurochild's 2015 European Semester report were the same, meaning that the situation has not improved.

a. Lack of member capacity and resources

Several members (NL, LV, HR, SI, FR) mentioned that governments had organised events linked to the Semester process, but this did not translate into a real engagement because of lack of capacity and resources. Members felt that to further children's rights in domestic policies, their **advocacy efforts are best invested elsewhere**.

For example, the Latvian Child Welfare Network stressed that engaging in the reporting and follow-up of the process accompanying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child brought greater added value at a domestic level than the annual Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) published as part of the European Semester.

In carrying out its analysis, Eurochild prioritised national members who are themselves networks of organisations so as to bring a broader perspective on the situation of children and the best policy responses. However **networks are often less well-resourced than the member organisations**, restricting their capacity to engage in such consultation processes. Individual organisations might be better placed to get involved. For example, in Croatia the Coordination of Associations for Children stated that several members could contribute by providing input to the European Commission for the drafting of the CSRs.

b. Governments' unwillingness to cooperate with civil society

Several Eurochild members (EE, ES, HU, UK-NI, RO, DK) noted that, despite their availability to engage in dialogue with State authorities, the European Semester process is perceived as a **remote political process**, where NGO participation is neither encouraged, nor thought to have any real impact.

In the UK, all four member networks in the devolved administrations felt that the UK National Reform Programme is developed behind **'closed doors'**. Children in Wales referred to the fact that the 2015 CR made *"little reference or dis-aggregated data to present and reflect more accurately the situation in the devolved administrations."* Children in Scotland reported that it is very difficult to contribute to any London-based activities on the Semester.

Governments' lack of efforts to establish a dialogue clearly negatively impacts on civil society organisations' (CSOs) willingness to prioritise the Semester process

into their own advocacy agenda. For example, our member in Slovenia regretted that their national European Semester Officer had not reacted to the 2015 Eurochild Semester Report recommendations which were sent to them.

c. Lack of knowledge on the Semester or how to engage

Some members (SK, SI, IT) felt that the main barrier is the **lack of knowledge of how the process works** and how it impacts on policies related to children.

For example, our member in Austria indicated that they did not participate in the European Semester 2015-2016 because there were **no topics concerning children**, but that if there were, they would participate fully.

d. Positive examples of Semester engagement

Four Eurochild members have been involved in the European Semester process in the past year: IE, UK-SC, BG & DE.



Ireland (Children's Rights Alliance)

- **An ongoing process:**
Advocates for children's-rights-focused Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) in its annual Report Card, budget work and advocacy meetings throughout the year.
- **Input to Social Partnership:**
Offers submissions to the Country Report (CR) as a member of the Community and Voluntary Pillar of the Social Partnership. A short timeframe for civil society organisations (CSOs) to provide a submission was linked to their input being 'barely included' in the final report.
- **Making Rights Real Poverty Conference 2016:** Major events on addressing child poverty have helped to keep children on the agenda.

“ I think we've certainly been instrumental in ensuring that childcare and child poverty stay on the agenda.”

Scotland (Children in Scotland)

- **State's willingness to cooperate:**
Children in Scotland note that the Scottish Government has favoured the involvement of CSOs in the Semester process – particularly in relation to drafting the National Reform Programme (NRP). Organisations have been able to participate in the Semester process through invites by local authorities and universities. Structural changes within the government during the 2015-2016 European Semester seem to explain the organisation (and other NGOs) not being invited to take part in the process this year.



“ Children in Scotland... has continually highlighted the vital importance of investing in services and social support for children and their families. It is therefore reassuring that the Scottish Government's NRP reflects a commitment to a number of measures intended to achieve better and more equitable outcomes for children and young people.”

Bulgaria (National Network for Children, NNC)

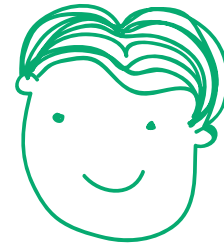
- **High-level meetings:** The NNC is invited to participate in meetings with EU officials and inputs into European Commission fact-finding missions to Member States.
- **Regular reports and updates to the European Commission:** The NNC ensures that up-to-date information on the situation of children and developments in Bulgaria are provided to the responsible European Commission desk officer.
- **Collaboration with other NGOs:** The NNC supports other organisations' efforts to develop and consult on alternative CSRs, and cooperates with the National Alliance for Social Responsibility and EASPD.
- **Active participation in Operational Programme Monitoring Committees:** The NNC provides inputs on the situation of children and families to the development of programmes and concrete operations related to children and parenting support.



“ *Through our involvement with the EU Semester we were able to secure certain commitments and funding for capacity building of NGOs and civil society, and specific operations that are important to the work of our member organisations.*”

Germany (The Child and Youth Welfare Association)

- **Contribution to the National Social Report:** This report complements the NRP. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) organised a consultation involving a range of social partners and welfare associations, the Länder and municipalities. It was felt that the organisations' proposals were not reflected in the final report and that its 2015 statement remains valid: **“It is essential to integrate child and youth welfare associations into the national consultation process on the Europe2020 strategy right from the beginning...as well as the different theme-specific target groups more strongly.”**



“ *The Child and Youth Welfare Association took part in two hearings organised by the BMAS and submitted a written statement at the end of the consultation process. The AGJ will continue to engage in the consultations on the National Social Report in order to promote a stronger consideration of child and youth welfare in the European Semester process.*”

Other recent Eurochild publications

Briefing Paper: A European Pillar of Social Rights & Recommendations for Progressing Children's Rights, 2016
<http://bit.ly/2e2qTEg>

Eurochild Conference 2016 Declaration "Doers should start speaking; speakers should start doing!", 2016
<http://bit.ly/2ebq3EU>

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

Is Europe doing enough to invest in children? 2015 Eurochild Report on the European Semester, 2015
<http://bit.ly/2dhhsOy>

Conditional cash transfers and their appeal: recommendations and key issues for debate, 2015
<http://bit.ly/1YvF8y2>

A child-centred investment strategy: Why the Investment Plan for Europe needs to prioritise children, 2015
<http://bit.ly/1OhUVxl>

Are European Structural and Investment Funds opening doors for Europe's institutionalised children in the 2014-2020 programming period?, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/1Tgl67y>

Building an economic case for a child-friendly justice, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/21hs6Gy>

Policy Position on Evidence and Evaluation Methodologies for Family and Parenting Support Policies and Practice, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/1T6xiXX>

Speak Up! Voices of European Children in Vulnerable Situations, An Explorative Study of Children's Rights in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, 2015
<http://bit.ly/2efy4se>

EU Alliance for Investing in Children - Implementation Handbook, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/1SIYUbr>

Realising the Rights of Every Child Everywhere - Moving forward with the EU (joint publication with UNICEF), 2014 - <http://bit.ly/21hsSmT>



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This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014-2020. For further information please consult <http://ec.europa.eu/social/>

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Design: inxtremis.be - mp 5455. Photos: fotolia.com