



## **Eurochild: overall assessment of the SPC advisory report to the EC on “Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being” & suggestions for future actions**

July 2012

On 27 June 2012, the [Social Protection Committee](#) (SPC), the body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the social protection and social inclusion process of the EU, adopted an advisory report to the European Commission (EC) on "Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being".

The EC will build on this report when developing the Recommendation on child poverty and well-being, which we hope will be adopted by the end of 2012. The Recommendation comes at a crucial time when social inclusion policies need greater visibility, investment and effectiveness. Our longer-term future depends on children growing up happy and healthy. The current reality across much of Europe is that policy changes and austerity measures are jeopardizing the quality of childhood in the present – which will also have dire consequences for the long-term economic, political and social stability of the EU.

The SPC advisory report makes a number of proposals on:

- common principles in key areas such as resources, services and child participation;
- a range of indicators of child well-being;
- recommendations to the EC and the Member States with regard to follow-up and the most adequate framework for implementing and monitoring the Recommendation in the context of Europe 2020.

### **Overall assessment**

**Eurochild welcomes the SPC report.** We support – and have strongly advocated for – the vision expressed in the report that tackling child poverty requires a holistic and multidimensional response, which is concerned not only with improving material well-being of children and families, but also focuses on children’s physical, emotional and social development. We advocate for integrated policies across the sectors of health, education, social (including housing and environment) and employment sectors that are underpinned by the UNCRC. We believe the right of the child to be heard, the right to play, to relax, to participate in a wide range of leisure, sport, cultural activities plays a crucial role in children’s well-being. It also gives due attention to social inclusion, equality of opportunity, and development of children’s full potential. Based on this vision and policy principles, **we believe the SPC report comprises all the necessary elements and is well referenced.**

**However, we caution against an over-reliance on getting parents' back into the labour market as the main measure for tackling child poverty and promoting well-being.** Policies are increasingly tending towards coercion and punitive measures for non-working parents. It is therefore essential that the upcoming EC Recommendation on child poverty and well-being gives strong counter-arguments to this trend. **For many parents finding work is not an option but through interventions such as parent support, strengthening family networks, peer support, etc. it is possible to build self-esteem and skills that will improve long-term employability and improve children's outcomes and well-being.**

#### **What's good about the Report**

- Recognition of the importance to **place children at the centre**. We cannot discuss child poverty/ well-being on the margins. What is good for children is good for society as a whole. We would also say that if we look at how to support the most vulnerable in society, we will probably get it right for the rest of society.
- Recognition of the need for **a multi-dimensional approach** in helping children out of poverty, comprising employment policies (to support parents finding work); family policies; the design of tax-benefit systems; the provision of key services such as quality child care; education and protection of children's rights; the importance of listening to children and supporting them to fully participate in society.
- **Mainstreaming** economic, employment, health, education and other policies to deliver on comprehensive child poverty reduction strategies.
- Recognition of the contribution of **early years education and care** in the fight against child poverty and **linkage with other important dimensions** such as children's participation, access to resources, and access to other services. Care within the family and centre-based care must not be seen as contradictory, but must be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Whilst parents and family members have primary responsibility for their children, high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can help to address development delays among children growing up in families struggling to fully meet children's needs. High quality ECEC is therefore crucially important but by no means the only service – it has to be part of **a wider package of intervention**.
- References to children in alternative care and de-institutionalisation, with a focus on **prevention and high quality social services** – an issue Eurochild has been strongly advocating for over the last years.
- Recognition of the need to develop a detailed portfolio of **indicators that cover the policy pillars of the Recommendation**: access to resources; access to quality services; and children's participation.
- Recognition of the need to improve sources and methodologies for **data collection on children living in vulnerable situations**, including children outside of traditional households.
- Recognition of the need to ensure stronger investment in promoting social inclusion in general, and combating/ preventing child poverty and promoting child well-being in particular, through the **Structural Funds**.
- Acknowledgement that the EC Recommendation on child poverty and well-being can only reach its full impact if accompanied by concrete proposals regarding **implementation, monitoring and accountability**.

## Our concerns

- **There remains an overriding focus on growth and employment** as the main instrument to combat child poverty and promote well-being. It would be extremely worrying that during this economic crisis the main policy message is that parents need to get back to work. Firstly there are few jobs available. Secondly, it could send a message that any job is better than none. But jobs that exploit employees have negative effect on mental health and well-being. If they reduce parents' physical and emotional availability for children it can have lasting damage. It is crucial to invest in training, employment schemes and parenting support programmes that can raise not only parents' qualifications and employability but also help build their parenting skills, their confidence and overall well-being and improve children's outcomes.
- There is a real danger across Europe of the discourse changing into blaming the poor for their situation. The emphasis on activation where there are no jobs to be had, or those that exist are poorly paid, temporary, characterized by unsociable hours, is dangerous. **There is no attempt to break structural barriers that would tackle long-term social inequalities.** A shift to a development model which has equity and sustainability at its core is not foreseen. We end up having to fire-fight and face ballooning costs in the child protection or juvenile justice systems. We know economic arguments are hard and fast. Still there is an up-front investment to be made and it needs political boldness.
- **Not enough emphasis on the importance of family and parenting support services**, that support children within families (it can be as simple as information / helplines to parents on children's development and upbringing, to supporting informal peer support groups of parents and families, to more complex training and support programmes). Family and parenting support can dramatically improve children's outcomes by improving parent's self-esteem and overall well-being.
- **No reference to social innovation/ experimentation.** It is important that policies and practice build on what works and constantly look to improve through evidence base and learning. This is at the heart of social innovation.
- **Investment in high-quality after-school services and activities for all**, ensuring on-going support for youth clubs, community and street workers specialised in working with disadvantaged children and young people, and encouraging children's involvement in volunteer activities should be further strengthened. It is crucially important to **address children's participation** in cultural, social, sporting and recreational activities **from the perspective of social inclusion and opportunities for children that face social marginalization and discrimination.** There is an ever widening gap in the opportunities children have according to their parents' social and economic background. Increasingly extra-curricula activities including access to play spaces have to be purchased, exacerbating social inequalities. Conversely, public investment in play can make an important contribution to social inclusion and equal opportunities.
- The emphasis on encouraging all professionals working with and for children and their families to **listen to children and ensure their views are reflected** in service design and delivery is not reflected. **Support for children's involvement in policy making** through development of local, regional and national participatory structures and effective consultation mechanisms should also be encouraged.
- The comparative overview of Member States' performance on child poverty and well-being must achieve significant political visibility and impact. **The portfolio of indicators** that we expect to accompany the upcoming EC Recommendation on child

poverty and well-being **should** also **open workstreams that will fill necessary policy gaps**, such as monitoring the situation of groups of children living in particularly vulnerable situations who are invisible in official statistics (i.e. collecting common base line indicators on children in alternative care – we conducted a survey across the EU but impossible to compare data across states), and understanding the links between tackling child poverty and promoting well-being with wider social and economic goals. It is also necessary to continue to develop ways of **capturing and understanding children’s own perspectives**.

- For Eurochild it is important that **reporting and monitoring mechanisms** of the upcoming Recommendation are **built into the Europe 2020 architecture**. This means that Member States must be encouraged to adopt specific national sub-targets to reduce child poverty. It would also require that Member States identify child poverty as a particular priority in their National Reform Programmes, that National Social Reports are strengthened and at regular intervals (every 3 years) specific, more in-depth attention is given to child poverty and well-being, accompanied by a detailed portfolio of indicators that cover the policy pillars of the Recommendation: access to resources; access to quality services; and children’s participation.

## **Suggestions on possible follow-up and future action**

### **1. Further work in mutual learning / peer review (policies)**

*We would suggest that peer reviews in social inclusion and social protection are more strategic, i.e. the EC plays a more important role in guiding themes that follow thematic priorities.*

Suggested areas for a peer review are as follows:

- a) Vertical coordination of children policies. Links between national/ regional/ local policy making and funding for children’s services. Issues around ring-fencing of budgets at local level for some services (e.g. child protection) and not for others (e.g. family support services, youth work), which therefore get dropped in times of austerity, could be explored. The need to tackle regional disparities could also be addressed (poorest regions=weakest services=further decline). It would also be very useful to address the issue of funding models that can work against best outcomes for children (e.g. where institutional care funded by national government but prevention & community-based services funded locally can act as a disincentive to support children & families locally).
- b) Horizontal coordination of children’s policies. Good practice in ensuring all policies address children’s well-being/ child poverty/ social exclusion can be reviewed. E.g. UNCRC scrutiny committee in Wales; children’s minister in Ireland. The issue of cross-dimensional indicators could also be addressed (countries which have good indicators on child well-being).
- c) Early childhood – It would be useful to look at different models of provision and their impact on equality of access to services (e.g. to compare/ contrast universal vs. targeted services; different models of provision - e.g. marketization model to state provision). There is a need to emphasise and learn much more around the 0-3 year group – since 4 upwards is already addressed within EU2020 target of 95% 4 to school age.

## **2. Social experimentation (evidence-based/ practice)**

*There is a real need to evidence how policy principles can be applied in practice. It is acknowledged that there is an overlap with other DG's priorities – but we believe that they are crucial to break the inter-generational inheritance of poverty and DG EMPL can legitimately take the lead as there is a link with structural disadvantage/ inequalities. Projects that are supported must have potential to be 'scaled up' to ensure mainstream provision adopts practices that have demonstrable impact on better outcomes for children.*

- a) Intensive family support (interface with DG JUST regarding child protection/ combating violence priorities) – One could look at integrated services to intervene where children are 'on the cusp' of care, services that empower and strengthen families and local communities. Strong links with active inclusion agenda arise – as it is also around working with parents furthest from the labour market to build self-esteem through improved parenting. This could also link to support for particular minority groups, e.g. Roma. Other related areas are: housing, environment, play and leisure facilities.
- b) Child participation in decision-making (links to DG EAC active citizenship – YiA includes pillar of young people's involvement in decision-making) – this should particularly support good practices on how children and young people are involved in decision-making and project delivery. It must be able to demonstrate better long-term outcomes for children and also impact on local community.
- c) Addressing social determinants of health inequalities (link to DG SANCO) – One could in particular look at innovative services/ other interventions that help families become more aware and change practices that have negative long-term effects on children's health – promoting healthy eating, active lifestyles, etc..
- d) (Re-)Training professionals in social care/ family- & community-based services (link to DG REGIO re: priority on transition from institutional to community-based services) – One could look at the need to up-skill staff that have worked in 'institutional settings' to move to local community-based and/or family-based alternatives. It would be good to support projects that demonstrate how this works in practice.

## **3. Analysis (research)**

*We would suggest to invest more in research/ analysis and in strengthening the analytical capacity.*

Suggested topics are as follows:

- a) Setting up a Pan-European longitudinal database on children – Using good examples of national/ regional longitudinal projects would be excellent to support pan-European study to show country comparisons.
- b) Public spending on children/ families – Research is needed to compare / contrast different models of spending on children and families and measurement of outcomes for children. Research could analyse national budgets to measure spending on children / families – aside from social transfers. Modelling could also look at outcomes for children using recognised social inclusion/ health indicators. This could include developing a tool to assess government budget

outcomes on child benefits, parental leave, etc..

c) Measuring subjective well-being of children – There is an increased recognition that children’s own perception of their well-being is important to measure and can provide important policy messages. Some good examples of how this can be done exist – but it would be useful to have a pan-European study to assess its implementation in different countries/ different levels. It would also be important to assess how the results can input into policy development.

d) Application of the early childhood development index – It is a research tool that looks at outcomes for children and can measure the impact of interventions in socially/ materially deprived areas. It is successfully applied in Canada/Australia/Tanzania – there is a real interest to apply this tool in a comparative way in different parts of Europe.

#### **4. Establish effective national monitoring frameworks and reporting mechanisms for child poverty and well-being**

*A major step forward in implementing the upcoming Recommendation can be achieved through the development of national-level monitoring and reporting frameworks.*

Eurochild and UNICEF see a huge potential in setting up a 3-years pilot project to develop and promote national monitoring frameworks on child poverty and well-being. Through their national members and committees, Eurochild and UNICEF would seek to develop partnership with lead government departments in each country.

Countries that already have good indicator sets on child poverty and well-being –perhaps linked to the UNCRC – would be selected. The existing data collection and monitoring tools available at national level will be evaluated according to their relevance to the policy principles outlines in the Recommendation and a new framework proposed. Depending on national data collection and reporting timeframes, the country will develop the framework and publish data to ensure relevance and compatibility with the EU policy framework. Each country should have a governance structure to ensure coordination across departments. It is expected that at the end of 3-years cycle, the detailed frameworks will be compared and contrasted at an EU level and used to influence other Member States in the process of developing effective monitoring frameworks for child poverty and well-being.

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i Eurochild is an active network of 116 organisations working across 35 European countries to promote the rights and wellbeing of children and young people. Our work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are co-funded by the European Commission through the PROGRESS Programme. For more information see: [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)

ii This assessment was written by Agata D’Addato (Policy Officer).

