

Eurochild's key messages on the European Pillar of Social Rights¹

1. The Social Pillar should be **underpinned by a child-rights approach**. Investing in Europe needs to start by investing in children, families and communities. This is crucial to achieve social cohesion and inclusion, alongside economic growth and prosperity - now and in the longer term. The European Commission must - as an absolute minimum – respect, protect, promote and seek to fulfil the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights treaties to which their Member States have become a party. Such should be the foundations of a Social Pillar and not just a basis of inspiration. The new initiative should build on and reinforce existing principles that have been established in the Recommendation 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage.' To ensure that children are visible throughout the Social Pillar, the child rights-based preventative approach needs to be mainstreamed across each policy domain.
2. The key concerns for a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) should include **promoting equality and breaking the cycle of disadvantage**. The background document to the consultation mentions that the pillar would address key concerns of the EMU – such as the need to boost competitiveness, increase participation in the labour market, develop adequate social protection floors, etc. By failing to recognise poverty as a major obstacle to deeper and fairer growth, promoting equality will remain on the margins of EU policy making rather than being fully integrated into it. Eurochild reiterates its argument that investing in children will strengthen society and the economy in the long-term. Therefore we believe that **investing in children, promoting children's rights and well-being has to be one of the principles of the Social Pillar framework itself**.
3. The purpose of the Social Pillar goes beyond trying to offset the damage caused by economic and monetary decisions. It has to make sure economic decisions strive towards a more equal society in the future. Despite years of economic crisis spiralling into social crises, the EU still pushes strongly on fiscal and macroeconomic coordination. Whilst it is useful to have a reference framework to monitor Member States' performance on social and employment indicators, **unless it is at the same level as macroeconomic coordination – and hence binding – it will not be effective**. The Social Pillar should strengthen the social dimension of the existing European Semester process and help achieve the Europe 2020 targets on education, employment and poverty.

¹ This document summarises Eurochild's key messages that its response to the European Commission consultation reflects. See also [July Policy Briefing](#). For more information contact Réka Tunyogi, Head of Advocacy: reka.tunyogi@eurochild.org

4. Eurochild is very concerned that this proposal risks to undermine past progress on social policy coordination, especially if it ends up with a more limited geographical scope. Implementation of existing EU policy guidance such as the 2013 Social Investment Package and **in particular the Recommendation on Investing in Children should be supported through the Social Pillar**. This is of vital importance especially as the well-crafted EU guidance is lacking implementation in EU Member States. The Recommendation outlines a holistic approach for tackling child poverty and promoting child-wellbeing based on three pillars:

- a) Access to adequate resources - including parents' participation on the labour market, promoting work-life balance, as well as adequate social protection levels;
- b) Ensuring equal access to quality affordable services for all children – including education, early childhood and health care services;
- c) The participation of children and young people in the community and in decisions affecting their lives.

The EU can and should play a more proactive role in encouraging all EU Member States to adopt reforms in policy and public spending that follow this guidance. This should not only be restricted to Eurozone countries.

5. We appreciate the role this initiative could play in emphasising how Europe helps citizens exercise their social rights. However, as the proposal is referring to *rights* it risks giving a narrower interpretation of existing rights enshrined in the Council of Europe, EU and United Nations conventions and laws. All these existing bodies of law have their enforcement mechanisms which the Pillar would not – and could not – have. Instead, the Pillar should be **promoting the enforcement of these rights through the available EU *acquis*, which children's rights are part of**.

6. The Pillar should put a stronger emphasis on citizens and civil society engagement and empowerment. Eurochild invites the Commission to continue strengthening the **role of civil dialogue and participatory democracy** in policy processes and governance, and fostering a meaningful engagement of the civil society, especially children and young people themselves. We recommend that the Social Pillar be used to encourage strategies and mechanisms at national level so that children can be involved in decisions affecting them.

Eurochild's priorities for putting the Pillar of Social Rights into practice

- **Via legislation:** We encourage the European Commission to present a comprehensive package of legislative and non-legislative measures on work-life balance, based on a child-centered approach. The package should include safer and more adequate leave arrangements - maternity, paternity and parental - for parents and ensuring access to high quality early childhood education and care services for all children. The emphasis of these measures needs to be on the benefit to children's well-being rather than as primarily a support for labour market integration
- **Through benchmarking:** Monitoring and reporting on Member States' progress is key to assess impact and develop evidence-based policy measures. As a starting point the Social Pillar must include the existing data on **children at risk of poverty or social exclusion** in the EU Member States, encouraging all Member States to set targets for reducing child poverty. Eurochild has been calling for including a specific and binding indicator on the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the scoreboard of key employment and social indicators to strengthen the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union.

Benchmarks should also reinforce the commitments of all countries to deliver the **Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care** (both for 3 to school age; and under the age of 3). Implementation of the Barcelona targets have been lagging behind, and data suggests that demand in childcare for children under 3 continues to be largely unmet.²

When it comes to child specific indicators, the Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children set up a portfolio of child well-being indicators, however the indicators portfolio is incomplete due to the lack of availability of robust, comparable and timely data across the European Union. The development of specific indicators on children will be crucial within the integrated performance indicators of the Social Pillar to assess whether and how policies are impacting on children's lives.

The monitoring and delivery on the benchmarks should happen through the European Semester. The aim should therefore be that all EU Member States participate in this scheme and not just the Eurozone countries.

- **Using 'soft' policy coordination:** The legacy of the Social Open Method of Coordination has delivered progress on many social inclusion areas, including child

² Ibid. and Eurostat data available [here](#).



poverty and well-being in converging Member States' policies. Despite its more voluntary nature, instruments such as peer reviews and peer learnings, annual social themes, ESPN country and synthesis reports and the work of the Social Protection Committee have contributed to shaping the EU's policy guidance on investing in children. We encourage to keep the useful elements of soft coordination alive and serving also as the platform for exchanges between policy-makers, practitioners and civil society.

- Underpinning the various forms of implementation above are the **existing European, and international treaties** which EU countries have ratified. The principles enshrined in these treaties should not only be a source of ambition but the foundations on which the Social Pillar will stand, and indeed reinforce rather than undermine. Eurochild recalls the following in particular
 - The **EU Treaties** and the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**, in particular article 3.3 TEU "...It shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child..."
 - The **European Social Charter** of the Council of Europe already provides a comprehensive framework for the protection of fundamental social and economic rights in the EU.
 - **European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children** outlining a holistic approach for tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being.
 - **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, which a.o. stipulates that "States parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation". The recently adopted **General Comment 19** on public budgeting for the realization of children's rights provides more guidance for the implementation of this article.
 - The new **Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)** which has five priority areas:
 1. equal opportunities for all children;
 2. participation of all children;
 3. a life free from violence for all children;
 4. child-friendly justice for all children;
 5. rights of the child in the digital environment.

