



OVERALL ASSESSMENT

OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION ON

“Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage”

& SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL¹

March 2013

Eurochild is an international network of over 100 children’s organisations working across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Eurochild is one of the largest advocacy organisations on children’s issues at EU level whose work is underpinned by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Eurochild campaigns for the realisation of children’s rights across Europe. We focus particularly on those children at risk of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. Our members are working directly with children and families or are campaigning on their behalf.

1. BACKGROUND

The long-awaited European Commission [Recommendation](#) on child poverty and well-being, entitled “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage”, was adopted on 20 February 2013 as part of the Social Investment Package for Growth and Cohesion ([SIP](#))².

It comes at a crucial time when social inclusion policies need greater visibility, investment and effectiveness. The Recommendation and the broader SIP clearly spell out that social investment in Member States’ social policies is not an add-on in times of plenty. It must be an integral part of the exit strategy to the current crisis.

Child poverty is widely recognised to be a major drain on resources and waste of human potential. The moral duty on governments to respect and implement children’s rights is also gaining credence. But despite this understanding, investment does not necessarily follow, and most countries are using the crisis as an excuse to cut spending³. The EU policy framework can help to highlight the gaps between rhetoric and policy and the risk this poses to the lives of millions of children. By withdrawing investment in children and families, we store up problems for the future. By contrast, breaking the chain in childhood means Europe can achieve an overall reduction in poverty in society by preventing a new, upcoming generation of poor and disadvantaged.

The European Commission Recommendation provides helpful guidance to Member States on how to tackle child poverty and promote children’s well-being, and sets up a common European framework, based on

¹ This paper was drafted by Agata D’Addato, Eurochild Policy Coordinator, with valuable inputs from Janina Arsenjeva, Michela Costa, Mafalda Leal and Reka Tunyogi, who contributed to the thematic assessment (section 2) and provided helpful comments and integrations to previous drafts.

² The Social Investment Package consists of a main European Commission [Communication on Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion](#), a Commission [Recommendation on child poverty](#) and 8 Staff Working Documents (SWDs) (on demographic and social trends – [part 1](#) and [part 2](#), on [active inclusion](#), on [social services of general interest](#), on [long-term care](#), on [homelessness](#), on [health](#), and on [European Social Fund](#)). It also contains a [summary](#) and [key facts and figures](#). The Commission Recommendation and Communication have the most status, with the SWDs being mainly informative, representing the views and initiatives of the Commission, but not adopted by the Council. Its main impact will be in how it is mainstreamed through Europe 2020 and the European Semester, Cohesion policy and other EU funds, but also – and most importantly – in agenda setting at Member State level.

³ Eurochild (2012), [Report](#) on „How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children and young people in Europe”.

recognition of children as rights-holders. By doing so, it takes a step away from the dominant paradigm of seeing children solely as dependents, towards an emphasis on children's own agency and influence on their surroundings.

Eurochild welcomes the European Commission's horizontal approach, which places children's rights, the best interests of the child, equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged whilst ensuring quality universal provisions for all, at the centre of efforts to combat child poverty. Viewed through a lens of children's rights, child poverty is understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing not only income deprivation, but also other forms of deprivation and loss of dignity – lack of access to appropriate housing and living environment, education, health services, social services in the field of prevention and a more general lack of opportunity in society.

The time has come now to apply these principles in practice. **The ball is now in the court of the Member States who must use the EU guidance and invest in children's well-being.** The Recommendation calls for comprehensive approaches to tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being within a framework of national strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion. It stresses the importance of a rights-based approach. It acknowledges that investment in children is an investment in society as a whole and is essential to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

WHY THIS PAPER AND WHO IS IT FOR?

A positive EU framework for cooperation and political leadership can and does make a difference to policy making at national and regional level. However, **the Recommendation can only be implemented if national actors act.**

This document aims to unwrap the Recommendation's principles and translate them into policies and practices. It also aims to highlight opportunities for civil society organisations, including Eurochild members, to act at national and regional policy making level, using the tools and mechanisms available through the EU to influence and persuade governments where they can make the greatest difference to children's lives, and taking the recently launched Recommendation as a European reference base for developing national child poverty and inclusion strategies rooted in the UNCRC.

2. TRANSLATING THE RECOMMENDATION'S PRINCIPLES INTO POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The Recommendation calls for a children's rights approach and integrated strategies based on three pillars:

- access to adequate resources;
- access to affordable quality services; and
- children's right to participate.

2.1 ACCESS TO ADEQUATE RESOURCES

Income poverty and material deprivation will be reduced, by maximising household incomes and reducing pressure on household budgets among low income families – through measures such as maximising the potential for parents to access and sustain good quality employment, investing in affordable childcare and through adequate child and family benefits.

→ SUPPORT PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The primary focus of this pillar is on **supporting parents' participation in quality inclusive jobs**, tackling disincentives, making work pay, but also increasing working conditions and support measures, i.e. parental leave and access to affordable quality early childhood education and care (ECEC).

The European Commission insists that measures to improve the family's economic situation, such as employment support, can prevent the intergenerational poverty trap. To deliver the best possible outcomes for children and young people, however, it is not enough to only address material poverty. The quality of relationships is arguably of greater importance to children's well-being and children need to spend quality time with their parents and to form secure attachments. It is crucial to hold on to these child-centred values, especially where poorer families feel they have to struggle even harder to get the things for their children that other better off children have.

A policy approach that focuses exclusively on moving families out of material poverty through more active labour market participation and through a "back to work" perspective⁴ runs the dual risk of, not only fuelling a materialistic approach, but also disadvantaging children emotionally if they have to spend most of their day in childcare, away from a family environment. A rights-based approach to moving families out of material poverty means putting effective child-centred measures in place to create decent employment opportunities for parents that do not involve long working hours on low pay, that entitles both parents to flexible working hours and paid parental leave, that ensures adequate family benefits and income support and that does not just focus on children as 'the next working generation' but as children who need a good childhood now.

→ PROVIDE FOR ADEQUATE LIVING STANDARDS THROUGH A COMBINATION OF BENEFITS

A secondary focus is on **ensuring adequate living standards through benefits**, complementing cash income support with in-kind benefits in key services. Adequacy, coverage, take up all should be considered as well as sensitive approaches to means-testing to avoid stigmatization. The dangers of conditionality are highlighted in the Recommendation, although discretionary use is supported.

However, a stronger emphasis on universal benefits and services as well as targeted services would be welcomed, as there is a greater emphasis on targeting/means-testing, which could undermine preventative role and support for well-being.

The raising of the issue of conditionality of benefits linked to concrete outcomes in education or in the labour market is deeply worrying, and raises concerns over how far human rights should be made conditional. Families must be eligible for benefits according to the needs of their children and not the needs of the labour market or

⁴ This approach is predominant in the Staff Working Document „Follow-up on the implementation by the Member States of the 2008 European Commission recommendation on active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market - Towards a social investment approach", SWD(2013)39.

education system, using it as a means of incentivising parents back into the labour market or penalising parenting whose children do not attend school. Such an approach is in direct opposition to the UNCRC.

Parents should not be forced back to work through punitive approaches. Eurochild believes that employment is the best long-term safeguard against poverty and parents should be encouraged and supported back into the labour market through provision of training and re-integration schemes that respect parents' care responsibilities.

Several Central and Eastern Europe countries have introduced or are considering to introduce conditional cash transfers as a tool for reducing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma population. However, such programmes in fact contribute to reinforcing and increasing ethnic segregation in education⁵. Lack of attendance is principally caused because of discrimination, poor quality instruction, lack of accessibility, overcrowding and lack of resources. Only when quality and quantity of education provision is improved can enrolment and attendance incentives be considered.

2.2 ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE QUALITY SERVICES

Ensuring all children have equal access to good quality services is key to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage and is the hallmark of an effective child poverty approach. Poor quality services are destined to have the opposite effect, reducing life chances and potentially incurring long-lasting detrimental effects on children's development.

The Annual Growth Survey 2013⁶ also calls on Member States to ensure '*broad access to affordable and high-quality services such as social and health services, childcare, housing and energy supply*', as part of their efforts to promote social inclusion and to tackle poverty.

➔ REDUCE INEQUALITY AT A YOUNG AGE BY INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

A main focus of this pillar is **investing in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**, as a social investment to address inequality, ensuring affordability and adaptable provision. As complementary to the role of the family, they contribute to the social and personal development of the child to give the child a good start in life.

The Recommendation highlights services provided must be of high quality, inclusive and affordable – and importantly – must reach those from disadvantaged backgrounds. At a time when many Member States have not yet fulfilled the commitments of Barcelona⁷ and where financial pressures risk to undermine the quality of services, it is more than ever crucial to support this call for quality. Preparatory works are on-going to develop a European quality framework for ECEC and Member States must use this opportunity to develop and reform their early years' systems.

An important point is made regarding the need for services to be available to all children, independently of the parents' labour market situation, as indeed ECEC offers an invaluable service to parents who want to enter the labour market.

The accompanying document to the SIP on social services of general interest⁸, stresses that social services (including childcare) play a prevention and social cohesion role in European societies and have a potential for creating jobs. This is a crucial aspect in the ECEC field where the Structural Funds can be valuable to support staff training.

The SIP Communication furthermore mentions a forthcoming study on how conditional cash transfer (CCT) schemes – offering financial incentives to ensure children's attendance in early childhood services – can support the use of ECEC. There are some positive experiences⁹ of targeted support and incentives for disadvantaged families to access early childhood services and education but their success can be attributed to the two factors: (1) they offer additional cash incentives. They do not threaten to withdraw families access to income support schemes - a regressive, punitive approach that can drive families and children further into severe poverty and

⁵ Friedman E., Krigerová E., Herczog M., Surdu L. (2009), „Assessing Conditional Cash Transfers as a Tool for Reducing the Gap in Educational Outcomes Between Roma and Non-Roma”, Roma Education Fund.

⁶ COM(2012)750 of 28 November 2011.

⁷ To provide childcare places to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

⁸ Staff Working Document “3rd Biennial Report on Social Services of General Interest”, SWD(2013)40.

⁹ For example please see www.ovid.ro.

deprivation; and (2) the financial incentives are coupled with support for more inclusive, accessible services e.g. through professional training, as well as interventions that strengthen families and improve parenting skills.

→ IMPROVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS' IMPACT ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Education systems need to be made more inclusive to break the cycle of disadvantage, promoting high quality education that ensures equal opportunities for all children and that fosters the social, emotional, and physical, development of the child.

Reducing early school leaving is a headline target of the Europe 2020 strategy and an investment priority of the European Social Funds (ESF). A series of measures are recommended, with particular emphasis in targeting resources and opportunities towards the most disadvantaged (Roma children, children from migrant backgrounds, students with low basic skills). A strong focus is also put on preventive measures, as well as enhanced cooperation of schools with, and support to, parents.

→ IMPROVE THE RESPONSIVENESS OF HEALTH SYSTEMS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

The Recommendation reiterates **the universal right of all children to health care**. This right is to be realised through disease prevention and health promotion on the one hand, and through access to quality health services on the other.

Health promotion must include widely available child-friendly information about preventive and health-promoting behaviour. Counselling on nutrition, healthy lifestyles, sexual and reproductive choices, substance abuse and mental health should be provided by trained professionals, be age- and gender-appropriate and take into account cultural and linguistic aspects.

Access to health service is addressed in depth in the Commission Staff Working Document "Investing in Health" that accompanies the SIP. It notes that health outcomes do not always grow proportionately to healthcare expenditure. It is not only how much money is spent, but also how it is spent, that determines the health status of a nation. Intelligently investing in children's healthcare is an indispensable component of sustainable long-term health services. Children who enjoy universal access to primary healthcare services that are available, affordable, accessible and of quality are able to attain the best possible level of physical and mental health more easily and are less likely to experience ill-health in the adult life.

Recognising the link between deprivation and ill-health¹⁰, the Recommendation calls to improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the physical and mental health of children living in poor socio-economic conditions. Health risks associated with deprivation and resulting from malnutrition, energy poverty or unacceptable housing conditions require targeted and urgent attention. The need to reach out to vulnerable individuals and their communities must be factored in the reform of on-going national health systems and focus on prevention.

The Recommendation further urges the Member States to devote special attention to children in vulnerable situations. This may include making sure that health services are accessible to children with disabilities (including those with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities), are not conditional on residency status and do not, either directly or indirectly, exclude children based on their cultural or linguistic background.

The European Commission encourages the use of the EU funds, including the EU Health Programme and cohesion funds to achieve this, and other objectives set by the Social Investment Package.

→ PROVIDE CHILDREN WITH A SAFE, ADEQUATE HOUSING AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT

The Recommendation insists that **children's living environment** has a profound influence on children's long-term health and education outcomes. Overcrowded accommodation in a disadvantaged neighbourhood will almost certainly contribute to poor health, low educational attainment, and early school drop-out. The Commission is worried that more and more families with children find themselves in the situation of homelessness or insecure and inadequate housing, whereas unaccompanied asylum-seeking children,

¹⁰ This link is also reiterated in the Staff Working Document "Confronting Homelessness in the European Union", SWD(2013)42.

undocumented or non-registered children, children leaving care and Roma children are especially at risk. The latter are also vulnerable to the detrimental effects to living in insalubrious segregated areas and are more at risk of eviction.

The Staff Working Document “Confronting Homelessness in the European Union” outlines the necessary elements for tackling homelessness, which comprise prevention, service delivery, re-housing and reintegration, prevention being of crucial importance for children and young people. Effective delivery of measures preventing homelessness is conditional on good coordination between welfare, housing and homelessness. Coordination with child protection services should be added to the list in order to address situations where children and adolescents are at risk of homelessness.

The Commission stresses that prevention policies must be tailor-made and directed towards the root causes of homelessness. Addressing early school leaving, provision of family and parenting support services to prevent separation of families, and availability of information in accessible formats and languages are important and can prevent homelessness among young unemployed, young people leaving institutions and undocumented migrants.

The Staff Working Document rightly suggests that the ultimate solution to homelessness is getting access to affordable permanent accommodation. Coupled with the guidance of the Recommendation, this indicates that housing children and their families in temporary accommodation, such as shelters or hostels must only be used in exceptional cases, since it does not provide the stability that the children require to achieve their maximum potential. The quality of housing is essential, and availability of social housing to all groups of population, including large families and families representing ethnic minorities must not be overlooked.

➔ ENHANCED FAMILY SUPPORT AND THE QUALITY OF ALTERNATIVE CARE SETTINGS

The Recommendation explicitly addresses the linkages between poverty, social exclusion and **children in alternative care**¹¹. It calls for reinforcing preventative and non-stigmatising social services to support parenting skills, coupled with quality alternatives for children who cannot be cared for by their biological parents. It is explicitly mentioned that poverty should never be a justification for removing a child from parental care or an obstacle to the reintegration of children into their family of origin. According to Eurochild members' experience, although most European States officially exclude poverty and material deprivation as reasons for the placement of a child, these are often important underlying factors for family breakdown¹².

The text recognises the crucial role played by gate-keeping measures to prevent children being placed in institutions. It recommends Member States to stop the expansion of institutional care settings by promoting quality family- and community-based care instead, and ensuring that children's voices is give due consideration.

The Recommendation acknowledges also the need to ensure provision of quality services for children leaving the care systems (e.g. health, education, employment, social assistance, security and housing). Finally, it calls attention on the specific situation of children left behind by parents who migrated abroad to work – a phenomenon that has been highlighted also by Eurochild members in the past¹³.

Although the Recommendation does not spell it out explicitly, a Commission Working Document accompanying the Social Investment Package addresses the issue of data and indicators development for children in the most vulnerable situation, such as children outside traditional households (e.g. in alternative care). The text recognises that specific efforts should be devoted to exploring possible sources and methodologies for data collection in this respect¹⁴.

Another Commission Working Document calls attention on the high number of children growing up in alternative care for reasons associated to a disadvantaged background of poverty and social exclusion. Strengthening support for families at risk, suggests the text, would enable more parents in difficult situations to care for their children themselves. The document recognises the negative impact of institutional care on children's health and

¹¹ The Recommendation draws on the June 2012 Social Protection Committee advisory report “Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being”, which also included important references to children in alternative care.

¹² Eurochild (2012), Working Paper on “[De-institutionalisation and quality alternative care for children in Europe - Lessons learned and the way forward](#)”, p. 12-13.

¹³ Together with Italian member Fondazione l'Albero della Vita, on 2 March 2011 Eurochild organised the conference “Left Behind - The impact of economic migration on children left behind and their families”, Brussels.

¹⁴ Staff Working Document “[Evidence on Demographic and Social Trends – Social Policies' Contribution to Inclusion, Employment and the Economy](#)”, Part II, SWD(2013)38.

psychosocial development and calls for the provision of supportive, secure environment for children placed outside the family of origin to help them developing to their full potential¹⁵.

The specific situation of young people leaving institutions or alternative foster care homes is addressed by the Commission Staff Working Document on homelessness, which identifies care leavers as a group particularly at risk of homelessness due to the fact that they have been forced to become self-sufficient at a much younger age than their peers growing up in families¹⁶.

2.3 CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

The standards and principles of the UNCRC must continue to guide EU policies and actions that have an impact on the rights of the child. In this spirit, it is expressly mentioned in the preamble of the Recommendation, that children's right to participate is recognised as paramount to promote social inclusion. Suggested actions are in two areas:

➔ SUPPORT THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL CHILDREN IN PLAY, RECREATION, SPORT AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Children's resilience and influence over their own well-being must be recognised and nurtured. In addition to more inclusive, learner-centred education, it is important to increase the provision of non-formal and informal learning opportunities through more investment in after-school care, recreational sport and cultural activities.

It is important to address financial, cultural and physical barriers that prevent children from participating in such activities. Other measures proposed include creating enabling environments for participatory activities by engaging schools, communities and families; promoting participatory approaches such as community volunteering; and developing activities that foster solidarity between generations.

➔ PUT IN PLACE MECHANISMS THAT PROMOTE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING THAT AFFECT THEIR LIVES

Member States are encouraged to build on existing mechanisms to involve children in service delivery and to consult them on policy planning, as well as to encourage professionals working with and for children to involve them.

For example, in what regards child protection, the UN Guidelines for the alternative care of children and the recently launched handbook on their implementation provide useful guidance of how children should be involved in decisions related to alternative care placement¹⁷.

A specific link and highlight is made to the implementation of the right to be heard in all justice-related decisions. Member States have here a good opportunity to build on the Council of Europe guidelines on child friendly system to ensure children's right to be listened to is fully respected.

Whilst the Recommendation provides a list of indicators to monitor its implementation for the overall objective and for the pillars on adequate resources and access to services, there are no indicators for the participation pillar. However, this is a window of opportunity to use the self-assessment framework currently being developed for the implementation of the Council of Europe Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18¹⁸, and join up both monitoring processes.

¹⁵ [Staff Working Document "Evidence on Demographic and Social Trends – Social Policies' Contribution to Inclusion, Employment and the Economy", Part I, SWD\(2013\)38.](#)

¹⁶ Staff Working Document "Confronting Homelessness in the European Union", SWD(2013)42.

¹⁷ [UN Guidelines for the Alternative care of children & Handbook 'Moving Forward: Implementing the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children'](#).

¹⁸ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATIONAL LEVEL ACTION

The European Commission Recommendation serves as an important incentive for concrete and robust action in EU Member States and Accession Countries. **Eurochild members and other civil society actors will be using the EU's policy guidance to apply pressure to national and regional governments to prioritise child poverty and well-being as part of national anti-poverty strategies** that reflect Member States' commitment to children's rights, promoting the best interest of the child, and recognise that addressing basic needs and anti-discrimination contribute to tackling child poverty and social exclusion.

→ INFLUENCE THE EUROPE 2020 PROCESS

The principles agreed in the Recommendation must be reflected in the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy¹⁹ and mainstreamed into the Europe 2020 governance cycle. Giving greater visibility to children in the Europe 2020 processes will demonstrate the necessary political will to promote and invest in children's well-being. Child poverty and well-being must become an integral part of the Europe 2020 strategy.

The Europe 2020 strategy has an annual governance cycle (for a visual description of such a cycle please see Eurochild policy briefing 2011)²⁰ and key elements for tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being - priority setting through the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), reporting in the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs), and implementation and evaluation of the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs).^{21,22}

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Get in touch with your Social Protection Committee (SPC) member to identify who is drafting the NRPs/NSRs in your country and to find out more details about the process²¹. These are your first point of entry. You should be trying to develop an on-going relationship with them.
- Try to influence the Europe 2020 process at national level, participate in the consultations on NRPs and NSRs and advocate alternative CSRs.
- Build alliances with the EU [Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion](#), who will be responsible for revising the NRPs and NSRs for the European Commission each year, and maybe involved in contributing proposals to the CSRs²². Send your inputs/messages and proposals of Recommendations to them.
- Try to get your National Parliaments engaged, as there was little parliamentary involvement in last year European Semester, and involve your Members of European Parliament (MEPs).
- Call upon Member States to carry out ex-ante and ex-post social impact assessment of austerity measures, to ensure that such measures do not increase child poverty and social exclusion, as well as proactive policies to promote child well-being.
- Send information to Eurochild. We facilitate this process by relaying the information received from our national members on the implementation of Europe 2020 strategy to the European Commission, and by collating the national evidence into a periodic report on the impact of the economic crisis on children.

¹⁹ Eurochild (2010), [Policy briefing](#) on „Europe 2020 and the European Platform against Poverty. Where will action against child poverty & social exclusion fit within the next EU 10-year strategy?“.

²⁰ Eurochild (2011), [Policy briefing](#) on „Europe 2020 and the National Reform Programmes. How to ensure action against and social exclusion in the new framework of EU economic governance?“.

²¹ The national delegates of the SPC (representatives from the Social Ministries from the Member States) provide a voice for national governments in the framework of the EU strategy for social inclusion and social protection, and monitor closely the initiatives launched in this process. Download [here](#) the list of contacts (it is updated every summer).

²² Download the list of contacts [here](#).

➔ **PUSH FOR THE ADOPTION OF NATIONAL TARGETS FOR REDUCING CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

The poverty target can also make a difference, if used intelligently by all stakeholders (civil society, professionals, academics, people themselves experiencing poverty) to hold government to account. And almost all Member States have acknowledged that to eradicate poverty in the long term, particular priority must be given to children and families. The Recommendation encourages Member States to adopt national targets for reducing child poverty and social exclusion in their NRP and a strong action at national level is needed to put pressure on governments.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ➔ Advocate for specific (sub)national level targets for the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion with a view to its extinction - accompanied by broader indicators to measure child well-being.

➔ **SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES AT LOCAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL AND PROMOTE INTEGRATED AND COORDINATED POLICY MAKING AND DELIVERY**

The approach proposed in the Recommendation also requires better policy coordination at national level as well as mainstreaming social inclusion in all national policies. It is vital to support partnership approaches at local, regional and national level which can engage civil society as well as local authorities, social partners, etc.

Involving a wide range of stakeholders in the development and monitoring of the national reports can contribute to raising awareness of the national mainstreaming of children's rights and well-being. Engaging public authorities and civil society working with and for children, and children themselves, is vital to ensure that their views are taken into account in future policy making that may aim to fill gaps in public policy or improve its consistency. This takes us back to the original purpose of the Recommendation, which is to support governments to develop more effective public policy that aims to lift children out of poverty and improve their well-being.

However, to date stakeholder involvement has been weak or non-existent, undermining the credibility of the Europe 2020 strategy and the accountability of national governments. The European Commission had previously suggested²³ to set up guidelines on the involvement of stakeholders by Member States in the preparation of the NRPs and to make a bigger effort to consult civil society organisations, including those working directly on child poverty and social exclusion, in the process of the AGS and CSRs. The SIP, however, only refers briefly to possible initiatives to "streamline governance and reporting".

A key barrier to achieving a comprehensive and holistic approach is often the lack of institutional arrangements to achieve an integrated and coordinated approach to the development of policies for children at national and sub-national level and to delivery of services at local level. Thus, developing such arrangements at national and sub-national levels is crucial. Integrated planning helps ensure that organisations and agencies work closely together towards the same goals; resource are maximised; services are delivered efficiently; public funds are focused on impact and that better outcomes are achieved for children and young people.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ➔ Try to build strong alliances with other organisations that share our values and concerns, for example with trade unions, but also with other NGOs or NGO platforms, academics, politicians, the media.
- ➔ Include the development of integrated and coordinated policy making and delivering among your key recommendations to national governments and advocate for its implementation.
- ➔ Advocate for recognising the crucial role of NGOs as service providers in cooperation with local, regional and national authorities.

²³ [EC Communication \(COM/2010/758\)](#), European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion: a European framework for social and territorial cohesion.

→ INFLUENCE PROGRAMMES OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN VIEW OF EP ELECTIONS

The European Parliament (EP) elections will take place in May/June 2014. There is a window of opportunity for national level action to influence EU and national political parties and potential MEPs who will be drawing up programmes and campaigning.

Following and influencing the work of MEPs are important channels through which organisations such as Eurochild and its members can engage in EU decision-making. Ensuring that there are MEPs who share our understanding of a rights-based approach to child well-being, and who are willing to put in efforts to that end throughout their five-year mandate, is a very valuable asset to our work. Given the EP's increased role in decision-making, the follow-up it will give to the Recommendation will be an important step in its implementation.

MEPs sit in political groups in the EP and represent not only their party but also their European political family. MEPs are ultimately accountable to their local constituency. The majority of campaigning for the EP elections therefore still takes place at national level. In some countries the EP elections also coincide with national/regional/local elections. Hence, the first half of 2014 will see an increased political activism and potential to raise issues in policy debates. Campaigning politicians can be expected to be more open to taking up issues promoted by civil society. Eurochild will draw up a European Manifesto on children's rights which will be a tool for organisations working with and for children to take national level action in the EP election campaign.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Address the various political parties and MEP candidates with an open letter, perhaps using the upcoming Eurochild Manifesto that call on them to champion children's rights and well-being upon their election to the European Parliament.
- Write to your national parliament's committee responsible for poverty and social inclusion calling on them to ensure children's issues will be represented by the MEP candidates.
- Following the elections, address the MEPs that your country elected (especially the ones from your town/region) holding them to account to promoting children's rights in the European Parliament.

→ REACH OUT DECISION MAKERS ON ECONOMIC AND FISCAL GOVERNANCE

There is an increasing link between countries' social policy development and priority-setting for macroeconomic and fiscal stability (especially for compliance with the EU's fiscal rules²⁴): the cycles of reporting to the EU on the poverty target (within the NRPs) and on the fiscal performance under the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) coincide in time. The EU economic governance became interlinked with the Europe 2020 strategy due to the on-going economic, financial and debt crisis. Through this parallel annual process the EU tries to encourage Member States to align their budgetary, economic, labour market and social policies in order to prevent fiscal and competitiveness imbalances. This implicitly cautions governments not to be too ambitious in their NRPs and NSRs, the results of which have been a weak focus on social investment over the past two years.

However, the European discourse is starting to look at this nexus from the opposite direction; encouraging fiscal and economic policies to have a stronger social dimension in order to improve overall macroeconomic coordination. As the EMU is advancing towards a deeper integration of countries, tackling the social impact of the downturn has been identified as a necessary indicator²⁵. European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor has frequently underlined that deepening the EMU implies ensuring that "economic efficiency and social equity are pursued simultaneously"²⁶. What is needed, therefore, is a better understanding from financial and economic policy-makers about their role in promoting social inclusion through social investment and social protection, and not undermining the importance of automatic stabilisers.

²⁴ On 13 December 2011 a new set of rules on enhanced EU economic governance entered into force. For more please information please see the European Commission [website](#).

²⁵ [European Council conclusions on completing EMU, adopted on 14 December 2012](#).

²⁶ Speech of Commissioner László Andor on "[Looking Forward: Social Investment as a way out of the crisis](#)" at Eurofound Forum Social and Employment Policies for a Fair and Competitive Europe, Dublin, 15 February 2013.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Seek out alliances with whom to advocate for a stronger social dimension in both your country's convergence/stability programme and in the National Reform Programme (for the latter see also point above on Europe 2020), and enter into dialogue with the ministries responsible for economy or finance²⁷.
- Advocate for a stronger involvement of the ministries responsible for employment and social affairs to have their say in all policy areas, and not to be squeezed out by overarching economic and financial constraints in the drafting process.

→ DEVELOP HIGH QUALITY, RELEVANT DATA TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING

Monitoring and reporting on Member States progress is key to assess impact and develop evidence-based policy measures. The European Commission Recommendation has set up a portfolio of child well-being indicators which will be used to monitor its implementation in all 27 Member States.

It is, however, acknowledged that the indicators portfolio is incomplete due to the lack of availability of robust, comparable and timely data across the European Union. Reporting could be improved with the provision of more detailed information on specific measures, which would allow a systematic follow-up of the progress achieved. The development of specific indicators on children is crucial to assess whether and how policies are impacting on children's lives. There is a need to review and develop more indicators that better reflect the policy needs of children, i.e. early childhood care, access to education, participation, civil and leisure activities, social relationships, family environment as well as children and young people's perspectives, and to collect data on the most vulnerable children who, due to their situation or characteristics, are most at risk of poor well-being outcomes. There is a need to develop new data sources that can better monitor children's strengths and capacities (the goals of children's well-being) and the distinctive situations of particularly disadvantaged groups. It is also important to collect data that takes account of the perceptions and experiences of children and young people themselves.

Filling this gap with high quality, relevant data is critical to supporting evidence-based policy making²⁸. In 2012, UNICEF²⁹ shows that there are very different outcomes for children in countries with the same levels of GDP. It matters how governments view and invest in children, child poverty is not inevitable, and some countries are doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children. This shows that comprehensive monitoring of child poverty and well-being indicators is key for EU Member States to develop sound policies for protecting children from poverty and social exclusion³⁰

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Advocate for Member States to provide reliable, relevant, comparable and timely data on children (including children in vulnerable situations and children living outside of traditional households).
- Promote NGOs-led initiatives to enhance the evidence-base at national level³¹.

²⁷ Eurochild is a member of the Social Platform and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). Through them Eurochild campaigns for a more social Europe. You may choose link up to the national EAPN network or other national members of the other networks in membership of the Social Platform.

²⁸ It is expected that the outcomes of a new research project "Towards a European longitudinal childhood and youth survey" under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), will be able to make recommendations as to what is really needed for countries to provide the required set of information on child poverty and well-being, and such recommendations have a much higher chance of being taken forward and used in policy making by EU Member States. The outcomes of this project are therefore expected to have a direct and tangible impact on how the implementation of the European Commission Recommendation can be monitored. The FP7 project will also look at the pertinence, feasibility and preconditions of launching a new European longitudinal childhood and youth survey, which would capture the full picture of the growing process from birth to the end of a child's education – possibly including aspects related to the transition to work and parenthood.

²⁹ UNICEF (2012), „Measuring child poverty. New league tables of child poverty in the world's rich countries“, Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 10.

³⁰ More and better indicators measuring child poverty and well-being should also be included in the Social Protection Performance Monitor, developed by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the European Commission, which will form the basis of the Trends to Watch of the SPC annual report and the CSRs, and will allow Member States to assess the effectiveness of social investment at EU and national levels.

³¹ In the field of children in alternative care, some important efforts for data collection and assessment were undertaken by Eurochild member organisations: see SOS Children's Villages International, [Assessment Tool for the Implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of](#)

→ USE EVIDENCE-BASE AND LEARNING AS ADVOCACY TOOLS IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

It is important that policies and practice build on what works and constantly look to improve through evidence-based and learning.

Often, being aware of and learning about what is happening in other countries, regions or localities can generate new ideas and approaches. While contexts may be very different, it is possible to learn from and apply elements of initiatives taken in other countries. Given diversity of European countries, it is, however, important to build on common languages (i.e. through the common framework in the Recommendation) with which to understand and assess different approaches.

Alongside the framework of the Recommendation, the European Commission set up an [online Platform for Investing in Children](#) that will collect and disseminate innovative practices that have demonstrable impact on better outcomes for children in areas where there is a need for policy and practice reform, and that would serve as a European forum for mutual learning and exchange.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Help the European Commission to populate the online Platform for Investing in Children with innovative practices at national, regional and local level that have had demonstrable positive impact on children³².
- Use the outcomes of mutual learning exercises, research and peer reviews as a basis to develop your advocacy tools, to ensure they are taken into due consideration in decision making processes at all levels.

→ STRENGTHEN NATIONAL MONITORING MECHANISMS ON CHILD POVERTY AND WELL-BEING

Support should be given to strengthen independent monitoring mechanisms on child poverty and well-being at national level.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Draw on the work of the EU [Independent Network of Experts in Social Inclusion](#) which assists the European Commission in monitoring and evaluating the situation with regard to poverty and social exclusion and the policies that are relevant in this respect in the Member States and Accession Countries. Each year, experts provide two reports on their respective countries with regard to a specific subject that is being examined in the context of the EU social inclusion process. Get in touch with your national expert as they can be very useful allies.
- Advocate for the establishment of a panel of independent experts for children at national level. Try to bring together various key actors from authorities and government representatives (for instance the ombudsperson for children's rights if the function exists, with contacts in the Ministry of Social Affairs) and independent experts, using the Recommendation as the trigger for debate on monitoring and implementation.

[Children](#), 2012; and Hope and Homes for Children Romania and Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), [The Audit of Social Services for Children in Romania - Executive summary](#), April 2012.

³² For case studies on family and parenting support see Eurochild (2012), [Compendium](#) of inspiring practices on "Early intervention and prevention in family and parenting support".

→ GET INVOLVED IN THE ALLOCATION OF STRUCTURAL FUNDS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

National governments should increase investment in children and ensure it becomes more efficient. The next European budgetary framework (MFF 2014-2020), to be agreed in 2013, will have an impact on resources available to tackle child poverty in EU Member States. The EU structural funds, which include thematic objectives to invest in education, promote social inclusion and combat poverty, will have to be used efficiently and transparently to tackle child poverty and promote child well-being.

The Recommendation clearly mentions the need to make full use of EU financial instruments. The potential of the Structural Funds is recognised in particular to support children and families. The Recommendation also mentions in this regard the principle of partnership in the programming and access to Structural Funds by NGOs in order to mobilise action to combat child poverty. The SIP Communication, as well as a separate [Staff Working Document on Social Investment through the ESF](#) also give guidance to Member States on how best to use EU financial support, notably from the ESF, to implement the outlined objectives³³.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Get involved in the process of programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Structural Funds (e.g. the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund) at national level³⁴.
- Ensure the Partnership Contracts and Operational Programmes negotiated between Member States and the European Commission foresee investment in comprehensive policies on child poverty and well-being.

→ ENSURE COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN THE REPORTING MECHANISMS OF THE RECOMMENDATION AND THE REPORT TO THE UNCRC COMMITTEE

Under their obligations to the UNCRC (which all EU Member States have ratified), States are required to develop national children's strategies or action plans, and to develop indicators and collect relevant data to monitor child rights implementation. State Parties are furthermore required to submit national reports every five years that are reviewed by the UN Committee on the rights of the child. National reports are often shadowed by alternative reports put together by NGOs, which increasingly include inputs from children.

Efforts made to gather information and data for reporting on the implementation of the Recommendation can only benefit from existing processes leading to the UNCRC reporting exercise. By linking both processes resources are maximised, time saved, and progress made easily assessed. Notably, it will be useful to draw on measures taken to address the UNCRC Committee's Concluding Observations. This will support the comprehensive approach to child poverty and well-being and support a stronger evidence-base. It will also make the UNCRC processes more relevant to national and EU policy making and implementation. Positive examples of bridging UN and EU reporting obligations could be shared through the Open Methods of Coordination providing a good opportunity to exchange practice and lessons learned between Member States in developing their reporting processes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a means to advocate change and trigger action for children's rights:

- Take every opportunity to bring relevant recommendations of the UNCRC Committee (or other human rights bodies and procedures) to the officials/ministries responsible for reporting on the implementation of the Recommendation.
- Raise concerns expressed and share data collected for the CRC alternative report with the authorities drafting the NRPs & NSPs, in order to complement their assessment of gaps and identify what measures should be put into practice.

³³ In particular, annex 1 to the SWD presents a table which shows how Member States can use the ESF to implement the 2012 CSRs by mapping each of the CSRs addressing social investment issues onto the relevant Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities from the draft ESF Regulation. It details which specific Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities have been recommended by the European Commission for using the ESF to support implementation of each of these CSRs in the Commission Position Papers sent to Member States in November 2012.

³⁴ For an example of advocacy opportunities relating to Structural Funds and children in alternative care/de-institutionalisation reforms, see the [Eurochild Guidance Note on Structural Funds](#) (Members only). Another useful tool is the Toolkit on the Use of European Union Funds for the Transition from Institutional to Community-Based Care, available at: <http://deinstitutionalisationguide.eu/>.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Recommendation provides us with an excellent policy tool to remind the governments about their obligation to mainstream children's well-being in their actions against poverty and social exclusion and to actively invest in children's policies and services.

Children and young people must be accorded greater priority and made more visible in all levels of government policy and planning. Fully committing to the implementation of the Recommendation is one way to do this. Civil society actors need to report how the Recommendation was followed up in their country, how governments reassessed existing policies and developed new or more coherent national strategies to address child poverty and promote child well-being based on the agreed principles.

Such strategies should include key elements like: political leadership and commitment, diagnosis of causes as well as symptoms including growing inequalities, commitment to children's rights and mainstreaming of child poverty and well-being objectives across all relevant policy areas of policy making including budgetary decision making, strategic approach with clear objectives and targets incorporating an integrated approach based on the principles agreed in the Recommendation, an evidence-based approach to policy making based on good data and analysis, ensuring effective delivery, monitoring and evaluation involving stakeholders including organisations working with children and children themselves.

The new Recommendation can give extra impetus to policy making by national and sub-national governments, especially safeguarding policies and services that benefit children in times of crisis, during which investment in children should not be compromised. In practice this means protecting education and early childhood services from spending cuts, ensuring welfare reforms do not undermine the adequate safety net for vulnerable families, strengthening early intervention and prevention in family support, providing integrated services that support children's flourishing.

Children only have one childhood. If we do not invest now, we risk a lost generation and huge, long term social and economic costs. There needs to be a re-thinking of priorities during this difficult economic time. Protecting the interests of children – and in particular the most vulnerable children – is the most sure way of protecting the interests of society at large.



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***Eurochild** is a network of organisations and individuals promoting the rights and welfare of children and young people in Europe. The network currently has 90 members in 32 European countries. Our work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

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The seven-year Programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-27, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries. PROGRESS mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States' commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society. To that effect, PROGRESS will be instrumental in: providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas; monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas; promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large.