

Greece

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

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30.5%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

30.2%¹

Poverty gap for children under 18 at risk of poverty in 2018

18.6%²

Severe material deprivation - children under 18 severely lacking coverage of basic material needs in 2018



1 Child poverty in crisis and in recovery. Smile of the Child. 2019.

2 Ibid

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2014	86	2,850 3,000 ¹ (2019)
Children with disabilities		900
Children 0-3		150
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2018		NA
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		3,330 ²

1 Feasibility Study on a Child Guarantee, Target Group Discussion Paper on Children in Alternative Care, 2019, European Commission, DG EMPL.

2 Asylum Information Database – Country Report: Greece.

Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- To promote direct communication with all children including very young children, since information was shared in a non-child friendly way most of the time. Children's lives were disrupted and they needed to understand the complexity of the issue.
- To ensure child participation in decision shaping and decision making in relation to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Authorities should communicate efficiently with the public about the existence of 24/7 shelters as well as Emergency and Helplines since they are crucial in times of crisis.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Direct communication with children, more structural guidance to educational response and distance-learning, less dependence on ad-hoc solutions and the professional dedication of individual teachers, and enhancement of public support of well-established and professionally run emergency and helplines. These require structural and sustained political investment.
- Make the education system better equipped technologically, methodologically and personally to tackle crisis situations in the future. Make online education accessible for all children.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Prioritise support for families and children in vulnerable situations including the promotion of and awareness raising about foster care and better incentives for foster care parents.
- Mapping the number of children in child protection and placed in out-of-home care in Greece should be a priority.
- Improve the coordination and cooperation between the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice as the social protection services provided by these three ministries overlap but are poorly aligned.

Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:

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Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:

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2020 Country Specific Recommendations:

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Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:

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Government's protection of children's right to participate:

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Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis

Negative developments

The social and psychological disorientation resulting from the pandemic was felt by all segments of the population, including children. Children were heavily impacted by news in the media with regard to mortality figures, causes of death, the increased risk for age groups to which their grandparents and some of their other loved ones belong, etc. Direct communication with children is therefore all the more important.

Social support services to families in need were either re-oriented to food-donations or suspended due to various restrictions (travel) and challenges (online counselling, lack of staff). In the event of a new lockdown, nationwide or regional, the Smile of the Child proposes that people who need to travel to social service centres be guaranteed an exemption.

Measures to ensure the continuation of children's education:



The disruption of education is an issue recognised by all and at all levels. From the perspective of children, school is not just a learning place but also a determining component of their social context. Digital education from a distance was to some extent a remedy for the academic part of the problem. The digital divide between children with access to computers and the internet and those without has definitely become deeper as a result of the temporary closure of schools and the replacement by distant learning. Schools, civil society organisations, and solidarity groups distributed computers to socially disadvantaged children. However, many families struggled with access to the internet. Private schools and some public schools were quite quick to replace physical classes by digital learning, whereas many public schools were slower in launching online education. The Smile of the Child suggests having an aligned approach as well as school certification procedures in crisis situations.

The closing of schools meant that problems of family violence, abuse or exploitation were not so visible. There was no readily available replacement for this. Moreover, the existence of 24/7 well-established and professionally run Emergency and Helplines was not promoted sufficiently. Nonetheless, the National Helpline for Children SOS 1056 received a lot of calls from children speaking in a whisper. Most of the calls were related to domestic violence.

Good practice

- Publication of communication / information materials regarding the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures
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- Operation of telephone lines for psychological support of children and parents – caregivers
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- A voluntary blood donation scheme organised by the Smile of

the Child in collaboration with the General Secretariat of Sports.

- Online seminars on crisis management for parents and carers of children by the experts of the Smile of the Child.

Concrete examples of challenges in supporting families and children

At the end of March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic and as our country was in quarantine, when almost no services were working normally, the NGO 'The Smile of the Child' received a phone call from a mother. She said, with great anxiety, that her child would soon have to travel to Germany for his scheduled surgery, which could not be postponed, as was confirmed by the child's neuro-surgeon. As there were no flights, the chances of a positive outcome were slim. We immediately addressed the office of the Prime Minister, who approved our request to proceed with the air transportation procedures. In collaboration with the National Emergency Aid Centre (EKAB) and the Department of Air Transport and the INI Clinic in Hannover (Germany), the transportation of the child from the rehabilitation centre to Athens airport, with an ambulance of our organisation, and an onward transport to Hanover was arranged. Upon arrival, the child suffered a heart attack and was taken for immediate surgery, although it had been scheduled for the next day. The surgery was successful, the child received further treatment and the return to Greece took place in the care of our organisation, in the same way as the outbound journey.

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

There is no specific national strategy for child poverty. Some measures exist such as food programmes for children.

The Smile of the Child hopes that the National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child, which is being elaborated by the Ministry of Justice, will also provide measures to reduce child poverty. Only a comprehensive and well-coordinated approach stands a chance of having a wide, sustained and lasting impact. Child poverty is structural and requires a more comprehensive strategic approach.

EU influence on national developments

The EU has insufficiently influenced the government to implement child-centred legislation.

To be more efficient in pressuring European governments towards

child-centred legislation implementation the EU needs to further develop effective instruments to act and influence government, directly and indirectly via civil society organisations. A European strategy only has value when it is accompanied by concrete instruments: conditionality in funding child-related policies and projects (in the sector of education and culture).

The Smile of the Child calls on the EU to work with national civil society and thus empower the civil society organisations at local/national level, helping to guarantee continuity and a better impact at lower financial cost. For example, in the migration crisis in Greece the EU followed a policy that excluded well-established but local organisations, in favour of global NGOs.

The 2020 country specific recommendations were disappointingly focused only on economic recovery and did not mention children.

The rather general recommendations partly focus

on the need to strengthen the healthcare system. Policies specifically directed at youth and children, whose development and future is the most compromised by the pandemic, are only briefly mentioned in references to social inclusion and youth.

Access to financial resources and services of high quality

The efforts made by Greece in ensuring adequate resources and services to families and children are unsatisfactory.

The Smile of the Child considers that children were hit disproportionately, particularly those in families under the poverty threshold. They still represent a considerable proportion of the children in Greece. Before COVID, the recovery of the economy had been steady but apparently insufficient to decisively reduce poverty and the risk of slipping into poverty for children. With regard to future measures at EU level, the answer lies in the Child Guarantee, and at national level in a commitment to earmark financial means from the national budget

and from the European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) (not exclusively European Social Fund plus (ESF+) to structurally improve services such as education, healthcare, childcare, housing, and nutrition.

Children's participation

The efforts made by Greece in ensuring children's right to participate were adequate.

A structural approach is needed, that is applied across all relevant

areas of public sector competence to communicate with children in a direct way.

New mechanisms by which children are heard by parliament before decisions affecting them are taken should be set up. Children's advisory councils in cooperation with the Children's Ombudsperson should be on board.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Children living in residential settings and unaccompanied minors became invisible during the corona virus crisis in Greece, the Research Roots Centre Greece suggests. There was no information about what should happened to the children if any child was ill, whether they were tested, or if there was any communication

with their birth family. The main public office responsible for the protection of children in institutions and unaccompanied children did not provide any information, no data or any other explanation. Residential centres were understaffed and voluntary staff were not allowed. Institutions working with children with disabilities were operating under an unclear regime, too. Moreover, many vulnerable families became more vulnerable due to job losses and an absence of any

support during the crisis. A one-time benefit was given to families where at least one member had to stop working due to the lockdown.

Several NGOs had to stop their operations and received no financial contributions, which left some organisations heavily in debt, as they still had to pay for overheads (rent, electricity and other expenses).

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Roots Research Centre insists that not enough is being done to prevent children being separated from their families, despite the government's claims. They registered several family separations during the crisis. The procedure for removing a child

from their family is not adequate either. Roots Research Centre notes that a child can be separated from their family merely on the basis of an accusation or complaint, without the regional or municipal social services being notified and without the adequate investigation process needed if a child is at risk.

Progress on child protection and care reform

There has been no progress on child protection reforms. Even the foster care system that was recently created by adoption of the law on foster care in 2018 has not been activated therefore Roots Research Centre launched an online petition. The aim was to raise awareness about this problem because even children who were already assessed for foster care remained in residential institutions.

Foster parents' rights and responsibilities do not correspond with every day needs and situations. The child remains under the guardianship of its biological

parent who is entitled to approve the transfer of the child to foster care and all other actions. For example, if the child needs a medical intervention, the foster parent cannot give permission to the doctor to operate, as there is no temporary guardianship-type agreement.

There is no service provision or support for the family at risk and whose child has been taken. Re-unification of children with their birth families happen rarely and preference is given to adoption. Roots Research Centre believes that foster care is the best solution and if the conditions in the family of origin improves a child can be re-united with his/her parents. Similarly, foster care in Greece is underdeveloped, as most people want to adopt rather than foster. Foster care parents receive an allowance, but only if the child is placed in foster care through a public hospital in Athens and not through a hospital of another region of the country. Foster care parents with children with disabilities do not receive support for making the necessary alterations in their home. Foster care mothers are not offered parental leave or days off to care for their foster child.

Roots Research Centre therefore calls for a change in the current law, in particular as regards the guardianship scheme since the current version does not respond adequately to the needs of a child. On the other hand, in Greece there is a very good evaluation process of the foster families, so when the children are placed in foster families, they will receive appropriate care from their foster parents.

The government started preparing a deinstitutionalisation strategy in 2019 that focuses on children with and without disabilities, adults with disabilities, and the elderly to address all recurring challenges to the child protection system and the disabled and elderly population.

Care leavers

Young people who leave alternative, prevalingly institutional, care face multiple challenges in Greece. Roots Research Centre believes that supported accommodation is the most urgent issue to be addressed. Supported living apartments will provide accommodation for adolescents with prior criminal backgrounds, care leavers or

adolescents whose adoption has been terminated.

Children in migration

Regarding the impact of the coronavirus on children in migration, Roots Research Centre explains that some unaccompanied children hosted by NGOs were protected, but the rest who stayed in camps, police facilities and in the streets were not offered any protection. The re-location of unaccompanied minors to re-unite with their families has been also delayed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Following the commitment that 1,500 unaccompanied minors would be able to travel from Athens and the Greek islands to other European countries, only 250 have travelled so far. To date, there is no centralised general secretariat or office to tackle the issues related to unaccompanied children.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org.