

Malta

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

Contributors:

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23.6%

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

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

| | Total number of institutions/ SGHs | Number of children |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Institutional care (in total) in 2019 ¹ | | |
| Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019 | | |
| 0-3 years | 3 | 36 |
| 0-17 years | 11 | 184 |
| Children with disabilities | 6 ² | n/a ³ |
| Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2020 | | 285 |
| Kinship care | | 59 |
| Adoptions | | 215 |
| Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019 | | 31 ⁴ |

- 1 In Malta there is no institutional care.
- 2 Two group homes plus four group homes for disability
- 3 The actual number of children cannot be identified according to the residence because there are children with disability who are in mainstream residential homes.
- 4 Asylum in Europe ... Statistics, Malta

Alternative Recommendations

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

- Ensure children's safety online, set up harsher penalties in this domain and organise information campaigns for both children and guardians.
- Provide empowering sessions focusing on self-esteem, peer pressure and bullying.
- Put early years on the political agenda, especially when it comes to education.

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

- Provide clearer guidelines to educators when it comes to teaching remotely.
- Advocate for an EU Policy on online safety.

- Tackle Child Poverty.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC):

- Support services for the parents and biological family of children who live in the care system should be easily accessible and available as soon as the children enter the system. Access to these services will allow the biological families to work on their issues and explore the possibility to re-unite with their children.
- Continue to develop more outcome measures to ensure that changes are taking place to help improve children's lives.
- Continue to improve on the idea of co-production, thereby involving children and parents in the development and evaluation of projects and initiatives.

Summary of Ratings

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



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



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



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



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



Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate.

It provided a grant of €350 per employee to businesses who have or had employees on quarantine, whether this is mandatory or self-imposed due to possible contact with individuals directly at risk of infection.

Employees of enterprises that suffered from a complete suspension of operations were entitled to a grant of two days' salary per week based on a monthly salary of €800.

Where, after 8 March 2020, at least one of the parents (in the private sector) was required to stay at home to take care of their school-aged children, such parents received a direct payment of €166.15 per week

if working on a full-time basis and €103.85 per week if working on a part-time basis.

Good practice

- The setting up of the Food Aid project by the Malta Trust Foundation (local NGO): During lockdown - from March to June - it fed over 6,000 individuals of which 2000 children. A number of other NGOs, such as Caritas Malta, supported children and families by supplying cooked meals as well.
 - The setting up of the Food Aid project by the Malta Trust Foundation (local NGO), which is currently feeding over 9,000 individuals including over 2,500 families.
 - NGOs in Malta are united to fight poverty as one front.
 - Professionals went on voluntary lockdown to protect their service users, such as those living in out-of-home care settings and in homes for the elderly.
- Home schooling was found to be very complicated. Every educator had to find their own system to teach online.
 - Children felt isolated as they missed contact with their peer group and adults such as educators and family members including grandparents.
 - The lack of routine and structure was deemed to be difficult for most children.

Key challenges experienced by families and children ¹

Key challenges for civil society organisations

- The sudden need to adapt to working remotely.
- Some NGOs were side-lined due to financial elements.
- The necessity to deal with a period of deep uncertainties and challenges.

¹ The points below were elaborated by children. Having said this, a recent EU report rated Malta as having the best E-Education programme during COVID-19.

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

Child poverty is mentioned in the National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion.² Having a national strategy for child poverty is important as it puts the issue on the national political agenda.

The fact that as a country we have accepted to participate in the CPAT project (Child Participation Assessment Tool of the Council of Europe) confirms that Malta is ready to identify the gaps and work to close or eliminate the gaps identified.

One of the problems to address concerns children's access to services. For example, the vast majority of children do not have information about the services available to them.

EU influence on national developments

- **Insufficient involvement of the EU in promoting children's rights.** The EU has not been helpful on many different levels. The fact that in 2020 we still don't have an EU Commissioner for children is unacceptable. National governments have to move from words to concrete action, by allocating enough resources in their recovery plans to invest in children.
- **The Country Specific Recommendations were disappointing.** Children are only mentioned in relation to the EUR 800 grant being given to parents who are employed and neither is able to telework. Recommendations focus only on the economy and helping businesses recover from the impact of this pandemic. No useful reference to our work as the document is mainly based on the economic impact of COVID-19.

- One of the main challenges facing families is a situation where both parents are working long hours and children are being cared for at after school sessions or by other relatives. The Maltese NGOs would like to have a Minister for children focusing solely on the best interests of the child.

Children's participation

The voice of the child is still greatly underestimated in Malta. Children are rarely given the space to participate even on issues concerning them. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is fully committed to give children the space to participate through its various projects and its Children's and Young Persons' Council.

Efforts of the government to ensure child participation

- Meaningful and informed child participation is a right defined by the United Nations Convention on

the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Malta ratified in 1990. Yet, this has not been transposed to national legislation.

- The government must believe in children and young people and value their contribution. We must nurture a listening culture. We need to reach out to children and young people from socially excluded groups.
- The government should ensure the creation of a variety of mechanisms to ensure that children and young people, who use different styles of communication, are included.
- The government should set up reference or advisory groups made up of a small group of children/young people to act as advisors.

2 National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion, Malta 2014-2024.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

General overview of FSWS measures

Services were operated in distinct shifts to ensure continuity and safety at the same time. Practices were changed and adapted to meet the needs of service users', services and employees at large. Moreover, essential services were ensured, such as residential services for children, drug rehabilitation, DETOX (Substance Misuse Outpatients Unit), domestic violence services (together with risk assessments), child protection services and out of hours' emergency services continued operating as if under normal circumstances.

FSWS continued providing crisis intervention services, phone intakes and other emergency services. Office visits were replaced by telephone interventions for service users. Teleworking was provided

to employees with a daily physical presence of 25% at offices. Where applicable, quarantine leave – without loss of income – was given to the employees concerned. As a result, there was no major disruption in the provision of support and services to young people ageing out of care.

Agenzija APPOGG and Alternative Care Directorate

- A new helpline 1772 for those feeling lonely was introduced;
- Supervised access visits were temporarily shifted to online access;
- Different groups of people were reached through food distribution;
- Online pre-assessment training was organised for fostering and adoption services;
- Foster care placements for children who needed out of home care placement continued to take place;

- Weekly webinars for foster carers were introduced.

Child Residential Homes

- Online training and support sessions were delivered for social support workers;
- Staff were provided with protective gear;
- Parents, under staff supervision, spoke with their children using technology;
- Contact with children living in out of home care placements continued within the Looked After Children Service;
- Two online support groups for children living in out of home care placements were organised;
- Social workers within the Domestic Violence Service continued with normal home visits.

Child Protection Services

- In general, operations continued with minor changes;
- Visits were still carried out in high risk areas;
- Plenty of precautions akin to the above-mentioned general precautions were undertaken.

From a child protection point of view, these are the three main challenges that were experienced by the agency:

- People's legitimate resistance to contact;
- Fears by professionals that are limiting visits (e.g. to schools);
- The reduced availability of medical professionals whose time is taken up by the crisis.

From the Children's Directorate's point of view, these are the three main challenges that were experienced:

- Even though the social workers used social media, telephone calls, exchange of letters and cards and other means, the social workers could not carry out visits to the premises/placements where the children in care were residing.
- Foster carers and residential care staff had to be trained and equipped with resources to support children to remain inside and do not leave the premises where they live.
- Supervised and unsupervised access of minors living in care with their family members were stopped to ensure that the minors were safe and to limit their interaction with persons outside their placements.

Story of a girl in foster care



One of the challenges faced by minors residing in care was the lack of contact that they had with their biological family members. The case of an 8-year-old girl who lives in a foster placement, shows how deeply some of the children missed leaving their foster home to have access with their parents, with whom they cannot reside. This girl, who used to meet her mother twice a week, could not understand that it was in her best interests not to leave the house/ have access with persons outside her household. Schools were closed and parents were urged to leave children inside the foster home, thus access with family members was stopped. This girl called her mother and had regular skype calls with her, however the effect of face to face contact could not be replaced. As soon as the restrictions started to loosen and it was safe for children to leave the house, access resumed and the girl and her mother could meet again.

Since the schools closed, foster carers had to make the necessary arrangements to stay at home with the children. In a very short period of time they had to change their routine and make the necessary arrangements. Foster families were supported by regular phone calls. They were also offered free online counselling sessions. Webinars covering a number of topics relevant to COVID-19 and the challenges that it brought about, were also being carried out on a weekly basis.

A story of a foster family



A foster family faced a challenging time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Due to the pandemic one of the foster parents lost her job, while the other was asked to stop reporting to work for a few weeks until the company where he works reopened. The couple have a child of their own and they foster two other children. The foster parents were offered online support by their social worker, while they also had free online counselling sessions. Their social worker liaised with other FSWS professionals to financially help these foster carers during this challenging time, by providing them with baby food and diapers.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

There is a high value in keeping families together. It is a preference, although it will never be an absolute value. If a family is abusive, removal will continue to be an option.

However, Child Protection Services (CPS) make a special effort to access the family resources in order to avoid placements in residential care. There is always an attempt to mitigate and resolve the issues in the families and monitor for a period of time. If not, CPS actually negotiate with the families in question to explore the removal of the child into other placements within the extended family.

The children's directorate continued to work with families in vulnerable situations even during the pandemic. Where possible, interventions took place on the phone. However, social workers also maintained contact with families via face-to-face interventions carried out through safe distancing.

Progress on child protection and care reform

Individualised care with personalised care planning is a right for minors living in care. Minors deserve stability and permanency in their out of home care placements. Foster care and community based care should be given precedence over institutional care. Therefore, in Malta there is no institutional care.

The pandemic had a clear impact on the ability to move ahead with certain reform projects. FSWS suggests that the crisis actually freed up the space for the departments to dedicate time for the reforms, so, the impact was positive. However, because of the limited ability to meet, some things were slow.

The Children's Directorate continued with its interventions with minors residing in out of home care. Since the minors were placed safely in their residences, social workers kept regular contact with them via social media. With regards to youths who needed support, the social workers still met with these youths, ensuring that the necessary precautions

were taken. All meetings took place following the health-protection rules.

EU funds

The Ministry (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity) has been implementing the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) in cooperation with FSWS through the provision of food packages and other social welfare services for families in vulnerable situations to ensure their integration/reintegration into society.

FEAD Eligibility Criteria in Malta:

- Households in receipt of non-contributory means-tested benefits and having two or more children below the age of 16;
- Households having two or more children below the age of 16 with an income not exceeding 80% of National Minimum Wage;
- Households having two or more children below the age of 16 with an income not exceeding the National Minimum Wage;

- Non-single households eligible for non-contributory means tested age pension.

These criteria take into account the financial situation of each household. It is noted that children, along with the elderly, are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion and therefore have a higher risk of material deprivation. There is a notable difference between the at-risk-of-poverty rate of households with and without dependent children. Additionally, households with two or more dependent children are deemed at a greater risk of poverty when compared to households with one dependent child.

During the COVID-19 pandemic provision is being made to deliver aid to people's homes rather than the usual system of collection from one of 17 distribution centres. Furthermore, a follow-up call has been programmed to ensure that the target cohort is duly supported and referred to any other social welfare services where needed.

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