

Country Report Italy

Eurochild Child Guarantee Taskforce

Recommendations for the Child
Guarantee National Action Plan
in Italy



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Taskforce Lead

Fondazione L'Albero della Vita

Taskforce Team Members

CIFA, SOS Villaggi dei bambini, Telefono Azzurro, Learning for Wellbeing Foundation.



There are 9,433,159 children in Italy. Children make up 15.8% of the total population. 27.1% of children in Italy are at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Governance

National actors and their functions

At the time of publishing this report, it was not possible to name the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee in Italy.

The European Commission publishes a list of National Coordinators as provided by the national governments. It is not necessarily up-to-date.

There has also been no strategic communication between the government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). However, in October 2021, the Italian Government created a Commission to focus on the Child Guarantee. The Commission consists of representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department for Family Policies, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, The Italian Ombudsperson for Children and Adolescents, and other public and private stakeholders.

Best practices of reaching out to stakeholders and relevant parties

It is encouraging that the Italian government has created a Child Guarantee Commission. However, at this time, no information has been shared with the public about designing the National Action Plan. Selected members of CSOs and related ministries are part of the Commission and are expected to draft the Action Plan. The current arrangement does not allow for a fruitful exchange with stakeholders or for integrating the multiple perspectives of the very active Italian non-profit sector. Nor is there provision for children's participation in the public debate on the Child Guarantee. There is a concern that a last-minute call to involve children in the process might replicate negative habits of involving children only to support decisions already taken. There must be a meaningful process of child participation for all policy matters impacting children.

The Child Guarantee and the impact on children's well-being is even absent from public debate in the media, which is why we are calling for more visibility for the government's next steps.

Main Recommendations by Taskforce Italy

- We need a framework of policies to fill the legislative gaps and enable effective implementation of the Child Guarantee to reinforce prevention and meet the needs of the most vulnerable children;
- The education and digital divide, that existed before the pandemic, has increased over the past two years. This must be one of the priorities in the National Action Plan;
- With EU funding, we must trigger more national investment in children and make the programmes sustainable. As local authorities play a decisive role in the management of the resources, it is important to ensure a technical support mechanism for the efficient management of the funds. Equally, the complex bureaucracy hampering the administrative process at multiple levels must be overcome to facilitate access to funds by small municipalities and the non-profit sector;
- Make child well-being a priority when child poverty is discussed and policies are developed;
- Activate the national database to overcome the lack of data on children living outside the family;
- Take a whole of government approach, to not only implement the Child Guarantee National Action Plan and funding mechanisms, but also to monitor these effectively and transparently;
- Italian policies must be 'person centred'. The child must be considered as the subject of their own rights. Child participation must be consistent at all levels of political and public life. Promoting participation means both creating opportunities and developing the skills needed to guarantee meaningful participation. The rights of the child should be heard in all policies that affect them;
- Cooperation between civil society organisations and the public sector should be guaranteed through a memorandum of understanding.

Children in Need and Outreach Measures

Towards a consensus on who children in need are and why

Children living in poverty

According to ISTAT (2020), there were 1,346,000, (13.5%) children in Italy living in absolute poverty, the highest percentage since 2005. In addition, 27.1% of children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (from 0 to 17 years). The COVID pandemic has underlined new aspects of education poverty. Children suffered from existing links between material poverty and educational poverty. There has been, and will continue to be, a profound impact on children's education due to: on-line teaching; the lack of availability of dedicated space in homes; lack of digital devices and insufficient internet connection. All of which are essential to access online education. Data on youth (15-29 years old) shows the percentage of those not in education nor employment (NEET) has risen from 22.1% in 2019, to 22.3% in 2020, high above the European average of 13.7% of NEET youth.

Children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children in precarious family situation

Italy urgently needs to set up a national system of data recording with common indicators for all the Regions, for children living outside family care. Information about care-leavers also needs to be standardised urgently. Foster care it is still not a priority and not considered a preventive measure, despite positive developments in the last 20 years.

Unaccompanied and separated children

Unaccompanied migrant minors arrive in Italy after harrowing journeys and are often witnesses to or victims of violence. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs monitoring report, the number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Italy has put the Italian reception system under stress for years. The latest challenge is to prepare unaccompanied children, mainly 16 (23.2%) and 17 year olds (64%), for independent living and build solid networks. Although the law gives priority to foster care and family-based care, only 3% of

unaccompanied and separated migrant children benefit from it.

Children with disabilities

Disability must be considered as a cross-cutting policy issue to enable children with a disability to fully access their rights, no matter what their economic background. More must be done to ensure child participation in accordance with Article 12 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child: The right to be heard and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. Italian policies are not 'person centred'. The child is considered as external to policy measures, therefore the needs of the child are not prioritised.

“

To have the impact needed to reduce the number of children living in poverty or social exclusion in Italy, we must have coherent approaches to policy development, the Child Guarantee National Action Plan must be complementary with the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR), and 'puts the best interest of the child as a primary consideration'.

”

Targeting the needs of children 0-6 years

Children under 6 years of age should be given special attention. Services (especially educational) for the 0-6 age group are poorly implemented in Italy and must be strengthened. This will allow children to develop cognitively and socially, and could also break the cycle of gender imbalances rooted in Italian society.

Previous or ongoing outreach activities by the government as well as other relevant actors

Italy has been part of a 'test run' for the implementation of the Child Guarantee. The European Commission is working with the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO) to pilot projects across seven Member States, including Italy. These pilot projects are expected to end in July 2022. The most recent programmatic update, *The European Child Guarantee - Phase III of the Preparation Action: Testing the EU Child Guarantee in the EU Member States*, aims to focus on the needs of: children affected by migration; without parental care; in precarious family situations; with disabilities; and with mental health issues.

Stepping up efforts - reaching more children in need

We have been in contact with key stakeholders, including UNICEF Italy, who provided us with an update on the current status of their work. The Taskforce plans to share the recommendations in this report with UNICEF Italy. UNICEF will soon publish an in-depth analysis, that we expect will form the starting point for drafting the National Action Plan.



Key Services and Policy Reform for Children in Need

Current national policies and strategies

In Italy, policies on children are the responsibility of the Department of Family Policies. The National Observatory for Childhood and Adolescence is representative of different institutions and sectors involved in the design of children's policies. The Observatory produces a bi-annual action plan which aims to set goals and prioritise policies for childhood and to respect international agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2021-2024). The fifth action plan was adopted in May 2021, and is shaped around three areas:

- **Education:** specific action to fill the gaps in the education system for 0-3 years. The new plan includes: the promotion of extracurricular activities in schools; of healthy life styles; skills training for professionals working with children;
- **Equity:** poverty reduction, the promotion of educational activities to enhance social inclusion, closing the digital divide and reducing the number of children who leave school early, better protection for vulnerable children, improve the reception of unaccompanied minors;
- **Empowerment:** focusing on participation, not only as a recognised right but as common practice at all levels. The specific needs of children with disabilities, or children from vulnerable families or with migrant backgrounds, must be considered. Community education should be reinforced, involving different local actors in an educative path beyond school itself.

Italy has a *Children's Ombudsperson (Autorità Garante per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, AGIA)* who expresses non-binding opinions on the National Children Plan and on any law concerning children. AGIA also monitors the unaccompanied migrant children guardians' system.

In June 2020, the Family Act was adopted. It reinforces family welfare through a universal and comprehensive allowance, and has revised parental leave to mainstream the sharing of family care between parents.

Other poverty reduction measures include the basic income adopted in 2019 and distributed on the basis of citizenship and economic need, which may be reviewed to facilitate access by large families. The emergency income was also established in 2020 for those who do not benefit from other subsidies.

Gaps and omissions in current national policies

The 2001 reform of the Italian Constitution, which decentralised certain sectors towards regional authorities, exacerbates pre-existing inequalities in the provision of services among the Italian regions, by omitting to set quality standards on civil and social rights. Furthermore, the lack of a stable national fund for the protection of children does not make the situation any easier, not to mention the lack of stable cooperation between the State, regions, local authorities and the Third Sector.



Building an Enabling Policy Framework to create a ‘whole of government approach’

Current national policies and strategies on children and young people

The latest data shows severe poverty in Italy, and considers the different aspects of poverty from basic needs to access to rights and opportunities. This data suggests there will not be a positive future for children in Italy, unless there is a whole of government approach.

Suggested steps to improve the national response to child poverty

European and national policies must imperatively break the cycles of disadvantage. A large amount of EU resources has been allocated to recover from the economic impact of the COVID pandemic. This includes the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the ESF+. Italy is one of the Member States in which the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is above the EU average. Such funding could change the lived experiences of children in need in Italy. However, the Child Guarantee and the ESF+ should not be seen as the only mechanisms to lift children out of poverty. We need policies that fill the gaps at legislative level and enable effective implementation of the Child Guarantee to reinforce prevention and reach out to the most vulnerable children. This can be implemented through EU funding but must trigger more national investment in children.

Children are directly affected by health, education, social protection and gender equality policies, the

key components of well-being. Well-being is the pivotal new narrative, characterised by numerous and complex indicators describing different interconnected fields. Consequently, a multi-dimensional understanding of children's well-being is necessary to improve the assessment strategies, monitoring and effectiveness of policies. In 2016, Italy adopted a pioneering law (163/2016) which foresees the implementations of a number of indicators of fair and sustainable wellbeing. It is important to follow up with these indicators and include them in the National Action Plan.

NextGenerationEU has allocated €235.6 billion to Italy to recover from the crisis caused by the COVID pandemic. To access to the funds, Italy is obliged to put in place reforms in public administration and justice, and simplify the legislation and anti-trust promotion and ensuring transparency of business competition.

In April 2021 Italy presented its national recovery and resilience plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, PNRR). The CRC Working Group, – a network composed of more than 100 civil society organisations, coordinated by Save The Children Italy, analysed the inclusion of a child rights perspective. The *Resources dedicated to childhood and adolescences in Italy* report was published in May 2021.

The Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) is organised in six missions. All seven European flagships areas are covered by the six missions. Childhood is the main topic of mission 4 on the rights of education and inclusive schools from early ages; in addition, Mission 5 embraces social inclusion and cohesion reforms. An impact on children's well-being is indirectly foreseen in all the missions. Youth is included within the transversal priorities applying to all the missions, with the perspective of increasing skills and labour opportunities. However, the PNRR was drafted during a period of emergency with no contribution from civil society. It is important to stress that while generational rebalancing is one of the cross-cutting priorities, children and adolescents are only directly included in one of the six ‘missions’ within this recovery plan.



Accountability - Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Existing checks and balances

At present, ISTAT provides the main tool to track the situation of children at the institutional level. However, the report on poverty in Italy sees families as the main target of observation, thus treating children as a dependent variable. The ISTAT statistical basket is divided into three categories: food, housing and a “residual” part, which includes clothing, health, leisure time, and other. The methodology used to calculate the basket was defined in 2005.

The key services (categories) outlined in the Child Guarantee, namely: free healthcare, early childhood education and care, education, at least one healthy meal each school day, effective access to healthy nutrition and housing, cannot be seen clearly from the ISTAT reports - most need to be disaggregated first. The indicators used by ISTAT are useful for tracking the situation of children, even though the ones related to health, clothing, leisure time and education are collected all together in the “residual” category. As the family is the main target, there is no focus on children’s rights. For example, leisure time can be considered a plus for an adult, but shall be considered a right when talking about children.

Suggested steps towards a more robust monitoring and evaluation framework

When considering which indicators should be included in the national plan, we must also ask **why children are not considered a specific target when talking about poverty in Italy?** As children are not a specific target, data about children are scattered among countless pieces of research on other issues, making it difficult to create a complete picture of children and poverty in Italy.

In-depth work can be shared during the following months among the EU Institutions and civil society regarding the common comparable EU data that a monitoring framework of the child guarantee should include: free healthcare, early childhood education

and care, education, at least one healthy meal each school day, effective access to healthy nutrition and housing; but also:

- Dropping out;
- Accessible programmes to reduce school dropout;
- Free access to sports and cultural opportunities;
- Free access to opportunities to reduce the digital divide;
- Easy access to public;
- Safe and clean playgrounds;
- Free access to wellbeing (both mental and physical) support;
- Access to adoption and foster care.

Other key suggestions for Italy from the Child Guarantee Taskforce include:

- The lack of stable cooperation between the State, regions, local authorities and the Third Sector is an obstacle to achieving a positive impact on the lives of all children in need in Italy;
- Quality standards on civil and social rights must be ensured;
- The gaps between the central- north and central-south regions of Italy is not acceptable anymore;
- A strong, transparent national monitoring framework is needed to oversee the implementation of the Child Guarantee, and funding mechanisms at all levels: national, local and regional.

