

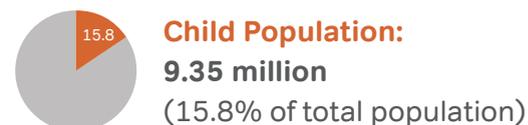
## “ Country recommendation

Italy should take action to enhance the current situation of children, especially regarding educational and digital poverty and children's right to be heard. This demand is highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019).

## Country Profile 2022



# Italy



\* higher compared to pre-covid rates in 2019

### RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

Laboratorio di sostenibilità socio-educativa of Milano Bicocca University, 'Riccardo Massa' Department of Human Sciences for Education, University of Milano-Bicocca

Fondazione S.O.S – il Telefono Azzurro Onlus

Fondazione L'Albero della Vita

## European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

### Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's *European Semester Country Report for Italy* clearly refers to the situation of children living in poverty and social exclusion, acknowledging Italy has one of the highest rates in the EU. In this light, the country report summarises the introduction of a universal child allowance, designed to improve this situation.

However, the **areas covered in the country report were not representative enough of the reality on the ground**. Children are not have a particular focus and are mentioned superficially within the context of different topics. Fondazione L'Albero della Vita (FADV), Fondazione S.O.S - il Telefono Azzurro Onlus and Laboratorio di sostenibilità socio-educativa of Milano Bicocca University **call for a more comprehensive approach**

**to meet the needs of children**, along with a dedicated set of measures that accounts for them as active rights holders and direct beneficiaries.

Eurochild members felt **education was very well represented**, along with early childhood education and care (ECEC). In fact, the country report mainly focuses on the fight against early school drop-out, the gender gap, and improving educational infrastructures. Education is one of the key deliverables expected under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) in 2022/2023. The plan calls for comprehensive reforms and substantial investments to **strengthen education and improve primary and secondary educational outcomes**.

According to the country report, Italy has **one of the lowest rates of children under 3-years-old in formal childcare**. And while the report does include **early childhood development and education**, this area is not framed from a child protection or

care service lens. In addition to the shortage of places, the **key challenge is to reduce regional disparities** for early childhood education and care through to higher education. Furthermore, **a child-centred focus is needed** since welfare policy for very young children is often focused on families instead of the child.

Eurochild members were pleased to see the inclusion of **children impacted by the pandemic in the report**. Italian primary and secondary education systems, already affected by structural problems, have been worsened by the pandemic. As a consequence, the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) has increased, further exacerbating social inequalities.

However, a crucial missing point of the country report is the impact of the pandemic on **children's mental health**, an aspect of children's lives that must be prioritised at national level. In 2021, Telefono Azzurro's Helpline handled 3,573 cases, 32.5% of these calls were coming from

children and adolescents reaching out for mental health-related reasons.

According to Eurochild members, the country report failed to mention several groups of vulnerable children. Refugee children are missing from the report, as well as a lack of special focus on **migrant children**, responding to their specific needs.

**Deinstitutionalisation and child protection systems for children separated from their families** are key for child wellbeing and, therefore, should have been included in the report. Moreover, there is no reference to a child's right to be heard, recognised in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*. **Children should actively participate in decision-making processes**, and more so when the decisions affect them. Italy does not have an all-encompassing legislative measure establishing the right of the child to be heard and mechanisms to ensure such participation in

the family environment and in any administrative, judicial or mediation procedure in which the child is involved.

Finally, despite a focus on the digital transition and on digitalisation processes, the report lacks attention to **children's rights in the digital environment**. Actions aligning with the latest European strategies on the subject, including awareness raising for the European Commission's *Better Internet for Kids Strategy* is much needed. Telefono Azzurro – in its [\*Manifesto for Childhood and Adolescence\*](#) – argues that children's identity and dignity should be guaranteed both online and offline, that they should be protected in any environment, and that adequate and effective age verification systems should be offered.

## Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The [\*Country Specific Recommendations for Italy\*](#) correspond to the major reform needs of the country. However, **children are invisible in these recommendations**. While these structural reforms will benefit children, Eurochild members stress the importance of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding in education because of its spillover effects and connection with other points. Point 21 of the Recommendations<sup>1</sup> states that planned reforms and investments in education, skills development, and research sectors have the potential to enhance human capital. **Because educational poverty is an unresolved issue in the country, Eurochild members call for the prioritisation of funding in this key area.**

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Italy

Italy has a total [child population of 9.35 million](#), [29.7% of which lived at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021](#). Behind this number, one can identify specific groups of children, namely minors in a situation of severe housing hardship, minors with a migrant background or non-accompanied ones, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care, minors belonging to national minorities, and victims of sexual abuse.

The services these children need are most notably education, social and health care, and child friendly justice. To end child poverty, the Italian government must start investing in these areas to ensure no child is left behind. More concretely, three priority actions

need to be taken in order to tackle child poverty in Italy:

1. Expand childcare subsidies.
2. Create a Universal Child Allowance.
3. Increase migrants' access to safety net programmes, such as social assistance.

Two **good examples of interventions that can contribute to the mitigation of child poverty rates** are the *Cittadinanza Digitale: più consapevoli, più sicuri, più liberi project* and the *Varcare la Soglia – Crossing the Threshold project*.

The [\*Cittadinanza Digitale: più consapevoli, più sicuri, più liberi\*](#) project was implemented by Telefono Azzurro with the support of Google.org. It aimed to support the acquisition of digital skills, tools, and a deeper understanding of the dynamics that children experience in a virtual dimension. It consisted of training with digital tools (webinars, events, publications, summer schools,

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, [\*Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2022 National Reform programme of Italy and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme for Italy\*](#),

learning kits for schools, etc.) for teachers at all levels of education. It also aimed to raise students' awareness of these issues, with a view of pursuing the wellbeing of every child and adolescent, and their right to grow up in a safe digital environment.

The second example is the project [Varcare la Soglia – Crossing the Threshold](#) by FADV, which consisted on personalised interventions with the active participation of the family unit, bringing a focus on three levels: the adult in his or her individuality, the child, and the relationship between adult and children. Through the support of practitioners, families identify their primary needs by setting clear, shared, and achievable goals. It started as an experimental programme in Milan and Palermo, but it has now been transformed into a national programme.

## European Child Guarantee

### Italy National Action Plan

The [Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee](#) asked Member States to submit a National Action Plan (NAP) that would outline how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at national level by 15 March 2022. These Action Plans should outline the children most in need, the planned and existing policy actions, and measures to support them and a monitoring and evaluation framework. The plans should also be drafted in consultation with children, civil society, and national authorities.

The [National Action Plan of Italy](#) was published on 12 April 2022. According to Fondazione L'Albero della Vita, only large NGOs or international organisations were

consulted. As medium/small sized NGOs, Eurochild members struggled to influence, or even find information about, the drafting process of the NAP. The Italian government should have ensured more transparency on the process of stakeholder engagement.

**23 children, aged between 14 and 21 years-old, were involved in the drafting of the NAP** through a pilot project carried out by UNICEF. An effort was made to ensure that the **children involved represented different target groups** as outlined in the Child Guarantee Recommendation, also in terms of gender and geographical representation. This included providing insights on social exclusion, nutrition, health, education, housing, early childhood education, care, and participation. According to FADV, Telefono Azzurro, and Laboratorio di sostenibilità socio-educativa, there

is a need for a child monitoring and implementation system at regional and local level through direct permanent mechanisms (consultation groups) and indirect mechanisms (periodic surveys).

The NAP rightfully identifies the children in need in the country. In fact, members highlighted the inclusion of **children fleeing Ukraine** and **children in homelessness** or in a situation of severe housing hardship. Moreover, they would like to echo the proposal of the Youth Advisory Board<sup>2</sup>, involved during the consultations in the drafting phase, to give proper attention towards **mental health** problems.<sup>3</sup> In terms of scope, members welcomed the inclusion of **children's rights in the digital environment** and child sexual abuse, both online and offline.

Overall, the plan is coherent with Italian policies in terms of

<sup>2</sup> The Youth Advisory Board is a participatory body – composed of 23 boys and girls aged 14-21 from all over Italy – that is supported by UNICEF and participated in the drafting of the NAP. It will remain active for the duration of the Child Guarantee (2021-2030) and will be integrated in the permanent mechanism for child and adolescent participation as planned in the National Guidelines for Child and Adolescent Participation.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Italy, [National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee](#) (NAP), 2022, 18.

childhood and covers all the five priorities identified by the Council Recommendation, namely actions in ECEC, education, health, nutrition, and housing.

However, it has some **gaps concerning the information collection and systematic reporting**, failing to provide an enabling policy framework to create a 'whole government approach'. Moreover, there has been a **lack of dissemination** among the wider public. Eurochild members expressed some concerns regarding the implementation and monitoring of the NAP, especially related to the complexity of funding involved (both national and EU funds). The monitoring phase of the Child Guarantee should be transparent and include civil society, i.e. local steering committees.

## EU Funding

### Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Italy for

actions that invest in children. Members are sufficiently aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional, and local levels to invest in children. Accessibility to such funds depends on the policy area. For instance, accessing youth funds is more difficult. Fondazione L'Albero della Vita has a unit that monitors funding opportunities at local, national, and European level. According to their experience, ESF+ and the European Regional Development Fund Plus (ERDF+) are more difficult to access for NGOs, while the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) is a recurrent source of funding for them. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) are less commonly used by small/medium NGOs.

### Projects funded by the EU in Italy

Telefono Azzurro was involved in a project called [CARE - Leaving with Care, Living with Care](#). The project addresses the potential for child

victims of violence to experience a second trauma during the process of investigation, removal, and out-of-home placement. CARE aims to raise awareness regarding the trauma that children may experience during these processes and what first responders (social workers, law enforcement, officials, doctors, and caregivers) can do to reduce the stress levels associated with these processes.

In recent years, FADV has been receiving EU funds (Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, AMIF, Erasmus) to boost foster care for unaccompanied migrant children through the project [FORUM](#) (in partnership with Eurochild). This project also promotes efficient and sustainable services as an alternative to the reception centres.

### Priorities for EU funding in Italy

Italy is one of the countries bound by the [agreement](#) reached in January 2021 that compels Member States with a

level of child poverty above the EU average to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty. This commitment has been reflected in the [Partnership Agreement for 2021-21](#), with an expected 5% allocation of ESF+ funds to tackling child poverty.<sup>4</sup>

According to FADV, Telefono Azzurro, and Laboratorio di sostenibilità socio-educativa, to ensure these funds reach the most vulnerable children, the Italian government should prioritise investments on:

- building an integrated system to implement and monitor children's rights (child participation, safeguarding policies);
- education and care, with a particular reference to the digital transition and the correct use of the internet;
- mental health, which has been put at stake due to, among others, the impact of Covid-19, and the war in Ukraine.