

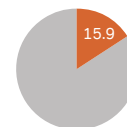
“ Country recommendation

Malta should take action to prioritise children rights starting from the early years.

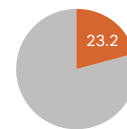
Country Profile 2022



Malta



Child Population:
82.130
(15.9% of total population)



Child Poverty Rate:
23.2% (2021) ▼*

* lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS)
Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM)

European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

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

The [European Semester Country Report for Malta](#) mentions ‘children’ a total of 11 times. However, these mentions are brief and do not really infer a prioritisation of children. Additionally, the report does not clearly identify the main vulnerable groups of children in Malta for national policymakers’ attention.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS) and the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM) identified one positive comment, namely that ‘Malta would benefit from ensuring adequate and effective social protection for disadvantaged groups and

fostering social inclusion of children’.¹ However, there are no comments in regards to recommendations focusing on investing in children.

Although, child poverty and social exclusion are referenced directly, this statement alone lacks depth and clarity. **There is no common understanding as to who the children from disadvantaged groups are and what kind of vulnerable situations they are experiencing.**

Vulnerable children include, but are not limited to those in their early years, unaccompanied children asylum seekers, migrant children, children with disabilities, children in poverty, children in out-of-home care, and intersex children. All of them require access to key services and have specific needs that must be met, otherwise the risk of negatively impacting their wellbeing, learning and, development becomes severe.

A stronger and sharper focus on the objectives of the European Child Guarantee is merited, namely to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and foster equal opportunities for children in need.

The Covid-19 pandemic is given a lot of importance in the report. However, the impact of the pandemic on children is only referred to in regard to childcare attendance.

Investment is mentioned throughout in relation to the economy, but never as an investment in children. The report does not include any reference to children’s mental health and wellbeing, or to children’s rights.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the country report do not address sufficiently the needs on the

ground. In the [Country Specific Recommendations for Malta](#), the European Commission does not fully respond to the country’s needs due to the fact that children are not even mentioned, implying that the **rights of children are not seen as a priority.**

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

Child poverty in Malta

Malta has a total [child population of 82,130](#), [23.2% of which lived at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021](#).

According to the National Statistics Office of Malta, the total number of dependent children in private households increased by 4%, from 92,475 in 2015 to 96,394 in 2019.² The average number of dependent children per household remained stable from 2015 onwards.³

¹ [European Country Report for Malta](#), p. 16.

² National Statistics Office Malta, [press release](#), 14 May 2021.

³ National Statistics Office Malta, [National Statistical Officer Report](#), table 5, p. 7.

All children have the right to high quality education and care from birth. However, the strengthening and development of this key service doesn't seem like a priority in Malta.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta are calling for **high quality early childhood education and care to be a policy priority**. This should include counselling and support for expectant parents and all adults who are entrusted with the education and care of children in their first 7 years of life.

Child participation and democratic engagement in Malta

The MFWS contributed to lifting children out of poverty and social exclusion through the introduction of the [Child Participation Assessment Tool \(CPAT\)](#) in Malta. This tool, developed with the Council of Europe, offers a method

to enable the implementation of children's right to participate.⁴

The CPAT process found that Malta needs to create more awareness and **move from a top-down approach to one that includes children from the get-go**. The CPAT revealed two opposing yet complimentary elements in Malta. On one hand, there is a lack of infrastructure to promote child participation and on the other hand the passion, willingness, and goodwill of the people working directly or indirectly with children are worth of mention.

Through working with CPAT, the MFWS found that despite a number of initiatives at local level focused on children – in collaboration with schools, NGOs and the Church –, the vast majority did not involve children's participation in the organisation and planning of these activities.

Despite these challenges, children in Malta and Gozo remained optimistic, noting that the work of the MFSW, using the CPAT, is an opportunity for both adults and children to learn from each other, given the right support, tools, and training.

Despite the positive results achieved in terms of legislation, **child participation is still often overlooked and fragmented at national level**, and there is still room for improvement in terms of children's democratic engagement.

In 2020, the MFWS supported children's contribution to a European Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) study coordinated by the Eurochild Secretariat, to transmit voices of children coming from diverse and/or vulnerable backgrounds.

The DG JUST study focusing on [child participation in political and](#)

[democratic life](#) sampled a total of 28 children of 12 different nationalities residing in Malta and Gozo, girls and boys. The study was carried out throughout the month of September 2020, during which three separate physical semi-structured focus groups were conducted with diverse cohorts of children, including migrant children living in an open centre, children in a juvenile corrective facility, and children living in an out-of-home care setting.

The DG JUST study highlighted the need to identify the diversity of children within minorities and vulnerable groups. The study also revealed the importance of creating a sense of purpose, identity, and wellbeing in the lives of these children, building on the remains of these children's dreams and aspirations.

Other initiatives such as the MaltaCAN network were established to promote, foster, and support children's rights and

⁴ To learn more, visit the website for the [Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool](#).

child participatory mechanisms in Malta. This network aligns its work to the [UN Convention for the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#).

The MaltaCAN network seeks to raise awareness, and influence policy by creating working groups tasked to react and/or promote topics and issues related to children's rights and child participation, all the while making sure that the fundamental pillar of the network remains the respect of children's voices. Adopting a child-based approach, the network prioritises child participation, and its implementation at a local level, through an integrative and collaborative approach. Projects by the Malta Trust Foundation, the sister organisation of MFWS, also founded and chaired by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca include *Your device Your Right*, *Blossom*, *Adopt a Family* and *Y-assist*. Such initiatives demonstrate the impact of organisations working with children in Malta.

Children's Rights Observatory Malta

The Children's Rights Observatory Malta (CROM) is a joint initiative between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the University of Malta. It was launched in June 2021 and it focuses on bringing together organisations and professionals working with and for children.

It emerged from the needs identified through various processes with children, including those featured above. Even though Malta signed the UNCRC over 30 years ago, this was never transposed into Maltese national legislation.

European Child Guarantee

Malta 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. The [National Action Plan for Malta](#) was published in May 2022.

In January 2022, [Eurochild published recommendations](#) for all Members States to consider when drafting their National Action Plans (NAPs). These 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 [Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society leads the Malta Children's Association Network](#) (MaltaCAN), an umbrella organisation consisting of 16 organisations working with and for children. None of the members of MaltaCAN was involved in the drafting of the NAP.

To counteract the fact that no organisation from MaltaCAN was consulted, the MFWS is

planning to publish a report in December 2022 that will include the feedback of the MaltaCAN network as a response, as a challenge, and in support of the NAP.

The NAP states that a focus group was organised with children. However, the MFWS, the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta and the other 14 organisations within MaltaCAN were not informed, invited, or consulted at any point of the process.



EU Funding

Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Malta for actions that invest in children. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta are aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional, and local levels to invest in children.

However, they identified **three key challenges with EU funds:**

- Co-financing. It is usually impossible for NGOs to contribute 20%.
- Complex procedures, especially the application phase.
- Bureaucratic process, which disheartens NGOs from applying.

At the time of publication, MFWS has just launched a new project

funded by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) focusing on one of main themes that emerged from the CPAT process namely 'The Voice of the Child'. This is underpinned by [Article 12 of the UNCRC](#), whereby 'the right of every child to freely express her or his views, in all matters affecting her or him, and the subsequent right for those views to be given due weight, according to the child's age and maturity'.

This project will develop and implement a country-wide initiative, which will see to the founding of Local Children's Councils, Regional Children's Councils, and a National Children's Council. The project will focus on children residing in both Malta and Gozo, aged 6-18 years old, as the project has been designed to engage children coming from different geographical areas, various socio-economic backgrounds,

and minority groups, including children with disabilities. Such participation ensures gender and age diversity. In addition, the project will target those working with and for children, this involves those in the education system, public services, and local entities such as Local Councils.

Priorities for EU funding in Malta

On 28 January 2021, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement that compels Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23.4% - AROPE 2017-2019) to allocate 5% of European Social Fund Plus resources to tackle child poverty.⁵ The other Member States, such as Malta, should allocate an 'appropriate' amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty.

MFWS and ECDAM call on the government of Malta to prioritise:

- **Investment in high quality early childhood education and care (0-7 years).** High-quality early years programmes have very positive effects on various aspects of children's development, in the immediate and longer-term. The Education Act should be revised to include those aged 0 to 5 and acknowledge child carers and kindergarten educators as professionals. An early childhood education and care strategic action plan is needed to address, among other things, the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce and a rethinking of the formalised approach to education for children aged 7 and under.

This workforce should be upskilled, with a view to pay parity with teachers in primary education. ECEC in Malta needs a dedicated network or advisory group (including

⁵ Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013.

all relevant stakeholders and sectors) to create a systemic approach rather than a programmatic one.

- **Investment in the realisation of children's rights in practice**, with a specific focus on affordable housing, environment, inclusion in cultural events, vulnerable school children, unaccompanied asylum seekers, and healthcare. In particular, there is a concrete need for services to eliminate waiting lists in healthcare once and for all, including for the Child Assessment Development Unit (CDAU) – where children are referred to various health related services including autism, global developmental difficulties, learning difficulties, ADHD, cerebral palsy, head injuries, Down syndrome and other syndromes.

