

“ Country recommendation

‘Portugal should take action to reduce the inequalities that child poverty exacerbates, by improving the timely access to high quality health services for all, with special attention to children.

Country
Profile 2022



Portugal

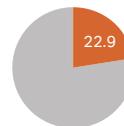


16.5

Child Population:

1.70 million

(16.5% of total population)



22.9

Child Poverty Rate:

22.9% (2021) ▲*

* [higher compared to pre-covid rates in 2019](#)

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Fundação Nossa Senhora o Bom Sucesso](#)

[Instituto de Apoio à Criança](#)

[Sérgio Costa Araújo](#)

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 Portugal* has **failed to outline clearly the main vulnerable groups of children** that should be targeted by national policymakers. This is despite the fact that inequality indicators show that Portugal is one of the countries where the income gap is widening.

This is particularly worrying at a time when 22.4% of the Portuguese population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. According to the most recent data, Portugal became the 8th country in the EU with the highest proportion of the population experiencing poverty. Portugal is also now the Member State with

the greatest increase in income inequality on a year-on-year basis.¹

Eurochild members in Portugal identified that while **only the issue of education was raised** in the report; Portugal is struggling with issues including quality of provision and equity of access, (low) participation in early childhood education, an ageing population of teachers, and teacher shortages. As a result of the pandemic, the country report identifies that disparities may have increased, with **children from more vulnerable socio-economic groups being disproportionately affected by school lockdowns.**

Promisingly, our members identified that Portugal intends to expand its pre-school network to provide free access to all 3 year olds (the current system is from age 4) but unfortunately, these proposals are solely discussed from the perspective of

supporting parental employment. **Children aged 0-3 therefore continue to be left outside of the formal education system** and without formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) guidelines or standards on quality. Members also identified that proposals are (overly) dependent on funding from Portugal's National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

The regional dimension of child poverty in Portugal

Annex 15 of Portugal's country report acknowledges that there is a lot to be done concerning **regional disparities in Portugal. Eurochild members support and stress that regional location is one of the main determinants of higher child poverty rates in Portugal**, citing information from the new report *Poverty Watch: Portugal 2022* by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Portugal.

The report demonstrates the 'strong regional asymmetries' of poverty in Portugal. The autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira have the highest risk of poverty rates, with 24.2% and 21.9% respectively, followed by the Algarve in the South (21.6%), and the North region (21.1%). The territory with the lowest risk of poverty remains the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) with 12.8%. However, as the capital region, this lower rate still amounts to a significant number of people living below the poverty line.²

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the country report do address sufficiently the needs on the ground, but strictly from an economic point of view. There is **no country specific recommendation, directly or indirectly, related to children.**

1 Observatório Nacional de Luta contra a Pobreza, *Pobreza e Exclusão Social em Portugal – Relatório 2022*, p.2, 2022.

2 EAPN Portugal, *Poverty Watch: Portugal 2022*, 2022.

This may be due to competing demands related to the ageing of Portugal's population and subsequent pressure on the allocation of public resources.

The result is that **children are left behind and forgotten**, even though 22.9% of children, approximately 388,000, are at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021. The lack of focus on child poverty is not, unfortunately, due to a reduction in children's vulnerability in Portugal. In the [*Country Specific Recommendations for Portugal*](#), the European Commission did not include any social recommendations. For example, the recommendations are not at all framed within a vision in which investment in children's early years makes a significant difference to their development and wellbeing. This is despite evidence showing that investing in children – through intervention programmes in early childhood

– also has positive economic returns to society, which will be greater the earlier the intervention begins.³

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

Child poverty in Portugal

Portugal has a total [child population of 1.70 million, 22.9% \(approximately 388,000\) of which lived at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021](#). Although the increase in rates of poverty have been higher for adult and senior population groups, there were still **10,000 more children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021 than the previous year**. Eurochild members identified Roma children, children up to 3 years old, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children in vulnerable families, as the children most

in need and who continue to be forgotten by policymaking in the country.

An **additional cash benefit for families** called the 'child guarantee' has also been introduced in Portugal since last August to provide a top up to Portugal's existing family benefit cash assistance. Dedicated resources are also required to adequately address the regional dimension of child poverty, as outlined earlier.

The services all of these children need are access to high quality health, early childhood education and care, social services, more effective social protection, and parenting support. Members stressed that children in alternative care and the deinstitutionalisation of **children in alternative care requires serious attention**.

With these groups of children in mind, Eurochild's Portuguese members calls for the Portuguese government to implement policies on:

- **Healthcare** – take action to reduce inequalities in access to healthcare, by improving the timely access to high quality health services for all, with special attention to children. One way to achieve this is to subsidise private and third sector healthcare providers that complement the national health system to satisfy unmet healthcare needs, with community-based integrated health services. Portugal has one of the highest out-of-pocket health expenditure in the EU (30% of health expenses are paid directly by families), and the waiting times for a specialised medical appointment (only available in hospitals) are too long, especially for children.

³ For example, see Fundação Nossa Senhora o Bom Sucesso, [*Intervir na Infância: Quais os resultados nos domínios da saúde, escolaridade, social e económico?*](#), 2018.

- **Early learning** – to reframe how early childhood education and care is perceived. Early childhood education and care is not only a way to allow parents to go to work but it needs to take into account early child development and to be intentionally educational. There needs to be investment in professionals who are responsive to the specific needs of children and their families. In Portugal, ECEC professionals are only considered for career progression if they work with children above 3 years old, this should be extended to professionals working with children under 3.
- **Family support** – social transfers are failing to break the cycle of poverty for children and families in Portugal. Accessing key services, such as community-based early intervention and prevention support, is crucial. More priority

should be placed on supporting parents and preventing family separation, so that all children grow up in nurturing family environments.

European Child Guarantee

Portugal 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. However, some countries have still not published their NAP. This is the case for Portugal.

Eurochild members in Portugal, Instituto de Apoio à Criança and Sérgio Costa Araújo, have engaged with the Portuguese authorities to **inform the drafting of the NAP**. However, they cannot say whether their

positions are reflected in the current draft.

IAC was invited to be part of the technical commission that would be involved throughout the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of the Child Guarantee, but so far they are waiting for this involvement to commence.

Sérgio Costa Araújo, together with other national experts as part of Eurochild's *DataCare project*, have met with Portugal's National Coordinator, the Central Services of Instituto de Segurança Social and the National Commission of Protection of Children and Young People. They have engaged with the drafting process particularly on deinstitutionalisation and how the DataCare indicators can be included in national statistics to monitor the situation of children in alternative care in Portugal.

Fundação Nossa Senhora o Bom Sucesso (FNSBS) expressed

their interest to be involved in the drafting process to the Portuguese National Coordinator, and they have proposed a meeting and visit to the Foundation, but this has not yet been scheduled. The possibility of participating in the **NAP public consultation** process was promised, but information on this is still not publicly available.

Representatives from the Portuguese government informed Eurochild members that **two groups of children were involved in the drafting of the NAP**. However, members are concerned that the children involved did not represent a diverse group of children, including those with lived experiences of poverty.

IAC have prepared a brochure with testimonies of vulnerable children from Lisbon on their feelings about poverty and social exclusion. This was presented in October 2022 to the National Coordinator.⁴

⁴ Instituto do Apoio à Criança and EAPN Portugal, *A Tua Voz Importa: o que sentem as crianças e jovens sobre a pobreza e exclusão social*, 2022.

EU Funding

Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Portugal for actions that invest in children. At national level, information about funds can be found on [this website](#). Eurochild members in Portugal are aware of EU funding that can be used at national, regional, and local levels to invest in children. However, this **funding is not easily accessible for civil society organisations in general**, as it requires expertise and time to identify information about EU financial programmes at a national level.

While Eurochild members are not aware of any EU funding for civil society organisations working with children fleeing Ukraine, there is an annual 'Childhood Prize (the Prêmio Infância), awarded by the BPI Fundação "la Caixa". Created in 2019, the

award supports projects to break the cycle of poverty, facilitate development and empowerment in childhood and adolescence, and strengthen support for families.⁵

One of the main principles of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) regulation is social dialogue and civil society engagement. However, our members could not provide a good practice example of civil society involvement in the monitoring, implementation, and evaluation of EU funds.

Projects funded by the EU in Portugal

In Portugal, Instituto de Apoio à Criança has been involved in several EU-funded projects:

- **The RADAR (*Running Away: Drivers, Awareness, and Responses*) project** is coordinated by Missing Children Europe and was launched in March 2020.

The project aims to achieve genuine progress in the awareness, understanding, and responses for children running away, and to provide them with better protection and care across the EU. IAC is one of six European partners. The project is supported by a Board of Professional Experts from different fields of work, and a Young People's Board with 8 young people who have experience of running away.

- **The *Conscious Parent Academy: Replacement Parent Urgently Needed* project** aims to support children who cannot live with their parents and are cared for by adults other than their biological family. These children are sent to foster families, and the goal is for them to feel integrated in the family environment and the provision of adequate care to their needs and wellbeing, providing them with an affective relationship and the necessary education for their

full development. The task and responsibility of caregivers is a large and complex issue, requiring legal, social, emotional, and educational support.

- IAC have also been involved in **child friendly justice projects**. These projects aimed to address the weaknesses of the justice system in ensuring children's access and effective participation in legal proceedings. Through participatory workshops, small group discussions, and individual legal counselling, children felt better informed about the decisions affecting their live.

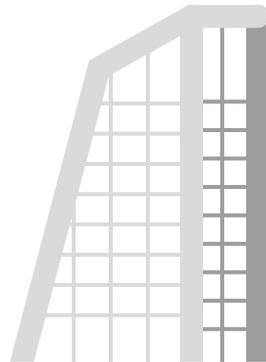
Priorities for EU funding in Portugal

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% -

⁵ A total of €2.3 million have been awarded since the award's inception. For more information, see [here](#).

ARPE 2017 – 2019) to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty.⁶ Other Member States, including Portugal, should allocate an ‘appropriate’ amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty.

Considering that 10,000 more children are living in poverty than last year, Eurochild and our members in Portugal urge the Portuguese authorities to **prioritise investment in maternal and child health, including mental health; deinstitutionalisation and effective social protection; and early learning.**



⁶ 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.