

European Semester Country Reports and Recommendations

Taken from *Children's Rights:
Political will or won't?*
Eurochild 2023 report on children
in need across Europe.



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

Introduction

This sub-report gauges the **extent to which the European Semester 2023 country reports and country-specific recommendations are aligned with children's needs and experiences.**

The annual European Semester cycle is a crucial opportunity to reach policymakers at EU and national levels to ensure investing in children is prioritised within the broader macroeconomic and social policy agenda.

Following the findings of **19 EU Member States** included in the report, in general, the 2023 European Semester Spring Package Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations do not adequately address the needs of children in each country. The majority of the reports refer to child poverty and social exclusion, and education, especially in the early years. However, specific groups of vulnerable children, such as children in migration, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, homeless children and LGBTQI+ children, are seldom referenced. The reports do not reference children's rights to be heard and participate in the decisions affecting them.

The Country Specific Recommendations for nine countries provide several references, analyses, and suggestions for childcare, education systems and child poverty. However, there are only **five Country Specific Recommendations** that directly recommend countries implement measures for children (Austria, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and Sweden), as outlined in the [Eurochild Policy Paper 2023 Spring Package of the European Semester](#), July 2023. Otherwise, the reference is always **made to vulnerable households**. For the countries included in this report, **only two Country Specific Recommendations for 2023** directly recommend measures for children (Belgium and Sweden).

After adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights the European Semester Cycle had become more social. Out of main 20 principles, the principle 11 focuses on childcare and support to children. Since the European Semester has a key role in delivering holistic and transversal approach to social convergence, it should focus on all main aspects of social policy in line with EU Pillar of Social Rights. Children's rights and wellbeing are not detached from their parents, families, or household. **Therefore**, we welcome the monitoring process introduced in European Semester including the Joint Employment Report. Indeed, the traffic lights system identifying the critical situation, to watch, neutral, best performers is critical however in some cases, in general countries might doing well, but there are specific groups of most vulnerable children who fall through the net. For example:

- Employment is key in lifting people out of poverty however there are still **single-parent families, families with 2 and more children**, and in general **low-income families** whose children need special child benefits and other subsidies.

- **Although some children might live above the child poverty threshold they still** struggle to access all main services such the school trips, school stationary or extracurricular activities. These children must be identified and provided with targeted support.
- **The Social Convergence Framework being developed within the European Semester Cycle** has an ambition to bring social rights to the forefront and make them equal to economic, fiscal, employment areas. In other words, to systematise all social focused measures to make their monitoring and assessment more effective. We applause to this approach to mainstream and systematise EU monitoring and evaluation when it comes to social rights.

To conclude, the European Semester, as declared, should also provide thorough guidance in regard to **the implementation of the Child Guarantee**. Given that the **European Child Guarantee** is an overarching EU policy to tackle child poverty we were disappointed to see that **only three Country Reports** (BG, RO and ES) with highest child poverty rate refer to it. The analysis part of Hungary's Country Specific Recommendations contains a reference to severe material and social deprivation of children.

However, **the ECG must be implemented by all MS** since poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is transmitted throughout generations.

Moreover, the Social Scoreboard only partially indicates the situation of child poverty, access to early childhood education and school drop-outs. Given that the European Semester is an annual process, it can play a crucial role in delivering this important policy to reduce child poverty by the EU target of at least 5 million by 2030. To accomplish this goal, it is essential to advance Country Specific Recommendations focused on addressing child poverty and children's rights.

Country Reports

1. Belgium

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Belgium did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground because, while the report highlights a slight reduction in poverty in the country, the **situation of children is not specifically mentioned**.

The recommendations for Belgium highlight the excellent level early childhood education and care (ECEC) coverage compared with other European countries. Nevertheless, **social inequalities remain**, with more privileged families making greater use of ECEC than more disadvantaged ones.

While the high cost of education and its social inequality are highlighted. Early childhood is given very little attention in the report.

Overall, Eurochild members were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report **do not take children sufficiently into account**.

ONE highlights that only one single recommendation is focused on children, linking the **importance of quality childcare service (ECEC) to support the employment of mothers**.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Belgium, the European Commission failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. ONE points that, while the report highlights the appropriate measures taken by Belgium in response to the Covid-19 crisis and points to a slight reduction in poverty in Belgium, it does not specifically mention the situation of children.

2. Bulgaria

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Bulgaria **outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers**, namely children with disabilities, Roma children, children living in rural and remote areas, children impacted by the pandemic, and children with a migration background. On the other hand, the Country Report **failed to include** children in alternative care, child participation, and children's rights in the digital environment. Eurochild members underline that there is no specific mention of the topic of deinstitutionalisation.

Eurochild members in Bulgaria were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

The adoption of the National Strategy for Mental Health of Citizens is a **promising development**. It should enable **improvements in health services for children** by regulating minimum quality standards for the provision of social services. Eurochild members welcomed adopted measures to **address shortages of healthcare professionals and better geographical distribution** across Bulgaria.

Lastly, concerning the importance of investing in children, Eurochild members welcomed the inclusion of the amendment of the Pre-school and School Education Act, **to make pre-school education mandatory from the age of four**. Our members urge for quality, age-oriented, and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care practices to encompass the needs of children in bigger cities, where there is lack of some services, and better geographical distribution to address the needs of children in smaller, more remote settlements.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations on addressing the mitigation of energy poverty, quality of education and training included in the Country Report do correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Bulgaria. These **recommendations respect the right of children to decent quality of life and supports their future development in line with the changing labour market needs**.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria, the European Commission made social recommendations to allocate higher spending on social, health and educational

policy, as well as higher spending on public investment. These are necessary factors to support children's development. However, to ensure that all children reach their potential, **a more targeted approach for children in disadvantage is necessary.**

Spreading the measures equally across all groups of children will not solve the problem due to regional imbalances, vulnerabilities and inequality. Eurochild members recommend **more strategic and cross-sectoral reforms** concerning the protection of children's rights; only then can support and financial investment achieve the desired positive change in the well-being of children.

3. Croatia

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Croatia outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely young children, and children in alternative care. However, the Country Report refers to a reform mentioned within the National Recovery Resilience Plan to **develop family and community-based services to reduce poverty and support the integration of vulnerable groups. Social reform in Croatia should identify children as a priority.**

Political parties highly influence the deinstitutionalised programme in Croatia. While residential care was decreased, alternative care, foster care, and **support services to prevent children from going into care was not developed enough. The number of children requiring child protection is rising**, but places have decreased.

Overall, Coordination of Associations for Children (CAC) were not involved in the Semester Process 2023 and they are not aware of any other civil society organisation being involved in Croatia. Concerning the importance of investing in children, the CAC found no new developments within the country specific report or recommendations, as they are similar to those included in 2022.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

CAC highlight the **children in need who are missing from the Semester Report and Recommendations**: children in alternative care, children with developmental disabilities, and children with mental health problems.

4. Cyprus

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

According to the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC), overall, **children were overlooked** in the 2023 European Semester Country Report for Cyprus, as it **did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground**. The Country Report **failed to include the vulnerable groups** of children that national policymakers should target.

These include:

- **Children living in poverty and social exclusion**, as there is no real mention of children or any measures for them. The one-off allowance towards the energy cost increase has not made a real difference and has no real added value.
- The **early childhood** development scheme on tuition subsidy is currently only available for children aged four years and eight months. This scheme has been criticised for favouring private schooling and not enhancing public schools. The focus on early childhood education and care is **not about quality or accessibility** but to put mothers back into the labour market. The scheme is expected to be tested in the 2023-2024 school year. After then PCCPWC plans to assess and evaluate it.
- **Children in alternative care and deinstitutionalisation** are invisible in the report. Deinstitutionalisation has previously been a goal for the government of Cyprus, but due to the increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors, children with a migrant background are currently placed in institutions with no opportunity for a placement in family-based alternative care. This is not the case for Cypriot children, as numbers for them are very low and efforts are made to place these children in alternative care.
- An **emphasis on education performance rather than an education experience**. PCCPWC acknowledge that the PISA results (2018) for Cyprus are not good, and they believe there is a need for a radical change in the education system, which was promised by the government but has yet to be carried out. PCCPWC states that the changes made to the curricula for 2023-2024, such as the examinations system reform, are not enough. There needs to be a radical rethinking of what the people of Cyprus expect from the system, a radical change in teaching and examining methods and continuous teacher training to implement the changes. PCCPWC agree that there are huge disparities based on children's socioeconomic status, and in their opinion, this has never been given adequate attention. Therefore, they have been calling for linking education with social conditions.

Other pressing issues that the **government of Cyprus should prioritise** are children's **right to be heard**, the **need of children with a migrant background** - including child refugees - the need of **children impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic** and the inequalities that have been exacerbated, and children's **mental health and well-being**.

Overall, PCCPWC was not involved in the Semester Process 2023 and is continually looking for opportunities to work with the government of Cyprus on issues affecting children.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, PCCPWC welcomed the focus on housing in the Country Report. This is the **first time that housing has been included, and funds have been allocated**.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

One recommendation on housing, included in the Country Report, does **correspond sufficiently to reform needs in Cyprus**. However, the European Commission should have highlighted the need to support the holistic needs of children in poverty.

5. Denmark

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Denmark outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, particularly in the field of education. The Country Report suggests **improving the digital skills of individuals by increasing the use of digital tools throughout all levels of education**. Moreover, the **focus on young people not in education, employment, or training should be increased**.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report **to some extent do correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Denmark**. For instance, it is well reflected that in Denmark, while equity remains high generally, schools differ in teaching time, and quality, and pupils with a migrant background achieve significantly worse education outcomes.

The Country Specific Recommendations for Denmark **failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty**. Social inclusion targets and several social inclusion efforts are focused on employment and labour market. While this is tightly related to social marginalisation and poverty, **applying a single-focused labour market approach is questionably adequate**¹. In addition, the recommendations **do not respect the rights of children living in poverty as it foresees cuts in certain child benefits**.

6. Finland

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Finland did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. Sadly, the Country Report **does not include any reference to children's rights to be heard, children in migrations and refugees, children's mental health and well-being, children in the digital environment, children in alternative care**.

Central Union for Child Welfare (CUCW) recognises the problems caused by the teacher shortage described in the analysis of the Country Report and the need to invest in quality ECEC.

CUCW believes that providing the necessary support for a child in the early years requires sufficient resources and competent and trained staff. In addition, it believes that raising the participation rate should not be done at the expense of the quality of the childcare services.

Eurochild member emphasises the **importance of sustainable funding**. Projects and project funding are a good tool for strengthening the quality of services, but the implementation of the results requires permanent resources. Moreover, funding risk to be jeopardised for example by the cuts in central government's transfers to local governments in Finland.

Overall, CUCW regrets that the Country Report for Finland **failed to include a focus on the importance of investing in children**.

¹ Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage, EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, Denmark.

CUCW was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report **do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Finland and neglect the child-rights perspective.**

There is a recommendation about Finland pursuing the reform of the social security system. However, this is framed with the aim of increasing incentives to work and also supporting the long-term sustainability of public finances.

CUCW pointed out that the recommendations made for Finland do not respect the rights of children and that the European Commission failed to highlight the need to support children in poverty. According to Eurochild member, **child poverty reduction must be set as a target in the reform of the social security system.**

7. Germany

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Germany outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, **particularly in the field of early childhood development and education.** This also becomes apparent in the low participation numbers in early childhood education and care (ECEC), as around 30% of children under three are enrolled therein and 90.9% of children above three which is considerably below the EU average (93%) and the EU-level target (96%). The Country Report **failed to include specific measures on children in alternative care and children's right to be heard.**

Unfortunately, there was also **no mention of children's mental health and children's rights in the digital environment,** despite their growing importance.

Overall, AGJ and the National Coalition Germany were not involved in the Semester Process 2023. To their knowledge no civil society organisations were consulted. However, some have been approached by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to comment on the German National Reform Programme.

The country report **does not particularly mention investment in children,** so there is no promising comment that refers to children and their rights.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations aim at investments in the green and digital transition, and high-capacity digital communications networks. Moreover, energy security should be safeguarded and reliance on fossil fuels reduced. While all this is important for the lives of all people, **none of the recommendations are specifically aimed at children, young adults, or families.** Given that the Country Report finds that Germany, among other things, needs to take measures to reduce inequality and address poverty as mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals, these aspects should have been included in the Country Specific Recommendations. AGJ published a [position paper in 2022](#) recommending improvements to the process of the European Semester to focus more on children, youth and families.

8. Greece

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

The 2023 Country Report for Greece includes an **accurate overview of early childhood development**. Of note is that for children aged 3+ and 4+, Greece recorded one of the best improvements in participation in early years' services in the EU.

However, there are a **lot of gaps in its depiction of the situation for children living in poverty and/ or social exclusion** in Greece. The Country Report does not mention deinstitutionalisation. Education receives partial coverage. For children with a migrant background, including child refugees, the report notes concern for their limited access to post-secondary and tertiary education. Other key concerns, such as the lack of legal documentation proving the application for international protection, lack of access to health and social services, child participation, impact of the pandemic on children's well-being are not included.

There is a reference to the digital skills without linking them to children's rights or safety in the digital environment.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The Country Specific Recommendations document corresponds to the general reform needs in Greece but unfortunately it **fails to identify reforms regarding the children**.

9. Hungary

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Hungary outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, **namely children facing poverty and social exclusion, and children who drop out of school early**. On the former, the material and social deprivation rate is specifically high for Roma children.

To **promote social inclusion**, the Catching up municipalities initiative aims to improve access to social services, healthcare, employment, and housing across 300 of the poorest municipalities in Hungary. In addition, the report reflects that further efforts are required to support children with a disadvantaged background (including Roma children and children who live in rural areas) that continue to face challenges in terms of accessing inclusive and quality education.

The **report fails to include several important areas of children's rights**. For instance, there is no relevant information about children in alternative care or the current situation of deinstitutionalisation, no information on children's right to be heard, children with migration background, nor children impacted by the pandemic, nor children's right in the digital environment. Due to the lack of official data on children's mental health, which Hinalovon Child Rights Foundation considers a reflection of the low prioritisation of the topic in Hungary, the report does not mention this subject.

The HCR and their counterparts in Civil Child Rights Coalition were not involved in the Semester Process 2023. In their view, civil society organisations can be involved through holding consultations with the existing working groups.

However, HCR found that **the report highlighted well the structural challenges**, namely the sustainability of project-based funded initiatives.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

HRC pointed out that the Country specific recommendations indirectly made respect to children's rights, as **they address structural reforms required to support children and their families**. However, there is **no explicit mention of children** in the Country Specific Recommendation for Hungary.

10. Ireland

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

While this year's European Semester Country Report for Ireland **references poverty, there is no specific focus on children**. The report captures some of the key areas of reform over the past number of years (such as those noted in the Children's Rights Alliance [Report Card](#)). However, there is **little focus on the need to develop a new model of early years for children experiencing disadvantage**. The focus on early childhood education and care is promising, but there is a **need to shift the focus away from the perspective of labour force activation and participation towards a child-centred approach**.

There is **no substantial consideration of educational disadvantage**. The Country Report failed to include children in alternative care, children's rights to be heard, children with a migrant background, children's mental health and well-being. There is a strong focus on digital in terms of economic/employment and business but no focus on children's rights.

Children's Rights Alliance were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

There is a **lack of specific focus on children's rights and the key areas in need of reform for children** such as: child protection and welfare, mental health, housing and early childhood education and care from a children's rights perspective.

11. Latvia

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

The 2023 European Semester Country Report for Latvia outlines the needs of young children. However, it does not include a policy on early childhood development planning, guidance on the need for such planning, or targets for support. The report includes goals to improve access to education for all children. However, it does not have targets to promote inclusive education and the need to increase the availability of special education programmes in mainstream schools, to end the practice of residential schools, and to reduce the very widespread problem of bullying in school systems. **Overall, the European Semester Country report did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground**. The Country Report failed to include the needs of families with children (especially single-parent families), families with children with disabilities, young people after leaving alternative care, families with children at social risk, street children, Roma children, refugee children

including Ukrainian children, under-age parents-to-be/young parents, children of parents with mental disabilities/severely ill parents among the groups at social risk.

The report **does not address the current problems of alternative care**, including insufficient numbers of foster families, quality of care provided by foster families, unavailability of care for young people with behavioural and addiction problems, and aftercare support systems for care leavers. In addition, the support system for children and after out-of-family care is formal and inadequate, leaving them unable to continue their education and at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The report does not mention the situation and the country's plans for children's mental health and well-being. In addition, there needs to be recognition of the much-needed attention to children's rights in the digital world, including protecting children from age-inappropriate content on the Internet.

There are more than 4,000 Ukrainian children enrolled in Latvian schools. It is particularly worrying that **the report does not draw attention to the State's planned solutions to provide support measures for Ukrainian children in the education process**, given that in Latvia, these children can only receive education in Latvian.

Overall, the Association Latvian Child Welfare Network was not involved in the Semester Process 2023, and they are unaware of the involvement of any other civil society organisation.

Overall, there is a **lack of focus on investing in children**, and the **Recommendations** issued by this year's European Semester **do not reflect the situation of children in Latvia**. Therefore, they do not meet the needs of national reforms needed for children

12. Lithuania

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

This year's European Semester Country report for Lithuania **only partially reflects the reality on the ground** because it focuses on early childhood education, education, and healthcare mainly.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group agrees with the Country Report analysis stating that **social indicators in Lithuania have improved, but the energy crisis and soaring inflation may reverse the positive trend** and compared to 2019-2020. For example, the situation has deteriorated for single parents with dependent children.

Furthermore, the **report provides an adequate analysis of early childhood education and care in Lithuania**. It is only 21.4% of children aged under 3 in formal childcare, which is well below the 2021 EU average of 36.2%. The arrival of Ukrainian displaced children has exacerbated the problem of limited early childhood education and care provision in urban areas.

Therefore, VŠĮ Auto Moto group particularly welcomes Lithuania's commitment to increase the participation of all children from 2 years of age in pre-primary education as from 2025.

Similarly, **inequalities in school education remain a key challenge that is observed by the Country Report**. It further explains that academic performance is closely related to socio-

economic background where learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be attending the same schools.

Grouping learners by ability is also a common practice in lower secondary schools, but one that risks increasing the performance gap between learners from disadvantaged and more affluent backgrounds. Another issue is the overcrowding of public schools in the bigger cities.

The country analysis further summarises that Lithuania would benefit from tackling teacher shortages, increasing the relevance of higher education to the needs of employers, and promoting the skills needed for the green transition.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group identified an absence of engagement with stakeholders, including CSOs, in the Semester Process 2023.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

According to the VŠĮ Auto Moto group, the **recommendations are positive**, but they only marginally address the needs of children in Lithuania.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Lithuania, the European Commission made a relevant social recommendation to: ‘Strengthen primary care and expand preventive care, including to make the healthcare system more resilient. Improve the planning and delivery of social services. Improve access to and quality of social housing’.

VŠĮ Auto Moto group welcomes this recommendation to solve the situation of vulnerable families when it comes to their **access to social services as well as the provision of social housing**. Social housing is a key component of support for disadvantaged families with children. This should be further developed and deployed across the country. Making the link between child poverty and social housing should be a priority for decision-makers.

13. Malta

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

According to the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS), the 2023 European Semester Country Report for Malta **did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground**. The Country Report **failed to include groups of vulnerable children** such as children with disabilities, children in alternative care, migrants, and asylum seekers, LGBTQI+ children, and children coming from armed conflict zones.

From an early child development perspective, there were minor gaps in the information provided. Again, there is no focus on children with disabilities, who are often excluded from the childcare system in Malta. Moreover, childcare services have become increasingly complex regarding parental consent when considering parents experiencing difficulties in their relationship.

The education data in Malta does not reflect reality. MFWS states a gap exists between how things are on paper and in practice. As it is evident by the low performance in MATSEC examinations, the education system has flaws which hinder children’s performances. The system needs to be inclusive and, as studies by MFWS show, education is still academically oriented and exam-based rather than focused on different skills and/or diversity.

The Semester Report should mention the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued exacerbated inequalities. A significant digital divide developed between children who could afford technology and those who could not. The [Covid & You project](#) by MFWS draws attention to the mental health problems/ difficulties, the increase in child poverty, and the many challenges children had in accessing education. To address this gap, the Malta Trust Foundation, in collaboration with MFWS, designed the project [Your Device Your Right](#) to provide equipment such as computers to families in Malta and Gozo.

Children with a migration background, including child refugees, are not mentioned in the Country Report, but should be a priority for the government of Malta.

Other concerns that continue to impact children in Malta are cyberbullying, abuse, sexual abuse, safety online and privacy and data protection. To address this huge gap, MFWS designed and created the [Promote Online Protection Project — P.O.P-Up](#).

Children's mental health and wellbeing was not a priority in the Semester Report. This should be a priority for the government of Malta, as evident from the [Blossom project](#) by the Malta Trust Foundation which focuses on the provision of counselling in schools.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report must correspond to the needs on the ground in Malta. The education system must provide children with the skills needed for a successful future. There are few opportunities to be creative as a child in school, and the system reproduces and amplifies inequalities.

Recommendations

- Classes in school should be mixed and not divided according to marks; this would **empower all children and create more innovative, inclusive, and accessible approaches to teaching.**
- Tackling bullying must be a priority for all schools.
- **All children must have access to quality, inclusive education, and healthcare.**

14. Netherlands

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for the Netherlands outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, **namely children with parents with a migrant background, and children with disabilities.** However, **clear recommendations are lacking.**

This year's European Semester Country report for the Netherlands failed to include children in alternative care; children's right to be heard; children with a migrant background, including refugees; children impacted by the pandemic; children's mental health and well-being; children's rights in the digital environment.

The Dutch Coalition on Children's Rights recommends that the Dutch government invests more in monitoring and evaluating the well-being of Dutch children. In the Netherlands, **youth wellbeing in the broader context is not systematically assessed and the**

measurements that exist are scattered. Utrecht University's Better Well-Being Index is currently being explored as a structured way to measure the development, prosperity, and well-being of children and adolescents.

Extending this Index, which captures eleven dimensions of well-being, to children and adolescents would provide a more complete 'picture' of their well-being, material living conditions, and quality of life in the Netherlands. It would also provide a framework to measure and track youth well-being and prosperity at local and national level, which is sorely lacking currently.

Overall, the Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, the Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights welcomed the **extra investment in quality education**. However, monitoring of effective policy and investment in education (and child well-being in general) remains a great challenge.

During the last three years, the Gelijke Kansen Alliantie (Equal Opportunity Alliance) launched the School and its neighbourhood project in which schools, municipalities and civil society have cooperated to increase equal opportunities for children within their communities, villages, cities and regions. Giving every child an equal chance is a task for everyone, not just education. **The project aims to strengthen the connection between the home situation, the institutions, and the school, thus facilitating the cooperation between municipalities, education, social organisations, and the national government.**

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report **do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground** in the Netherlands. The social benefits system requires reform, as households with children living on the social minimum will be structurally short of finances as of 2024. It is therefore **recommended that the government moves away from temporary measures towards more permanent ones.**

The Dutch NGO Coalition on Children's Rights pointed out that the Country Specific Recommendation **only refers to improving access to high-quality and affordable childcare to tackle labour and skills shortages.** No further references to children's rights are included.

15. Portugal

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Portugal did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground because it **failed to include most issues related to children's rights**, including the rights of children in alternative care, children's mental health and well-being and children with a migration background.

Child poverty and social exclusion are only mentioned on the Social Scoreboard, as a headline indicator, and the impact of the pandemic on children **is only mentioned briefly in relation to education** - because the pandemic may have increased inequalities among students.

The **main challenges of the education system are identified**, and include the quality and equity of education, (low) participation in early childhood education, ageing teacher population, and teacher shortages.

However, **solutions are only presented as plans and intentions**. For instance, the intention to expand the pre-school network aimed to provide free access to all 3-years-olds is dependent on funding or on new legislation to recruit teachers.

Overall, Eurochild members in Portugal were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, members assessed that the only issue slightly related that was incorporated is the plan to expand the pre-school network. The aim is to provide free access to all children aged three. Currently, universal access is to four years old. **Children below the age of three are out of the education system and without educational guidelines** - because ECEC for those ages is only aimed at allowing parents to work.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

Members feel that the Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) **correspond to reform needs** in Portugal, but strictly from an economic point of view. There are **no recommendations, directly or indirectly, related to children**.

While the first years of life are crucial for health and well-being throughout the life course, the country report, and thus the CSR, is not at all framed within a vision in which investment in the early years of life is essential to the development, balance, or sustainability of a society.

16. Romania

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

This year's European Semester Country Report for Romania outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely **children living in poverty and social exclusion, children in their early years of development, and children abandoning school**.

Hope and Homes for Children – Romania was not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

Regarding the importance of investing in children, HHC – Romania **welcomed inclusion of the call for 150-day centres for children** as part of wider investments made to help prevent family separation and support children from vulnerable communities. The snapshot that the report presents in terms of poverty rate in Romania has **accurately captured the situation for children**. HHC – Romania are concerned that the measures listed in the country report will take time to be implemented and make a real impact for children.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations do not mention children in particular, but they do mention vulnerable households, presumably including children, which need to be protected from further increases in energy prices.

As there is no explicit mention of children, HHC – Romania **cannot determine whether the recommendations respect children’s rights**. However, the recommendations do aim to ensure an adequate standard of living for families, in line with Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that: ‘States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’.

17. Slovenia

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

This year’s European Semester Country report for Slovenia **only partially reflects the reality on the ground** because it focuses on early childhood education and education mainly. It fails to mention the difficult situation of children growing up in poverty and social exclusion – regardless of the fact Slovenia has one of the lowest rates of child poverty.

The analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care covers well the situation in Slovenia. In general, the kindergartens are well organised with professionals working with young children. What was overlooked and is missing for young children is the **lack of infrastructure**, such as the playgrounds and community-based centres, for extra-curricular activities in many cities in Slovenia.

According to the Country Report the education system is performing well, which does not show the full picture because Slovenia faces a significant shortage of teachers on all levels.

The Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (SAFY) supports the Country Report’s analysis and recommendation to increase language support for children with a migrant background. However, SAFY outline the **Report’s failures to feature children’s mental health despite its prominence after the Covid-19 pandemic**. Slovenia has launched an initiative to establish centres providing mental-health care for children and adolescents. Some centres are already working, but due to a shortage of specialists, there are still long waiting times for many children to get treatment.

SAFY calls on decision-makers, including the European Commission, to prioritise children’s rights in the digital environment, including their protection from online abuse. Awareness raising initiatives about the **harmful effects of digital devices and services must be translated into policies and interventions reaching children**.

Slovenia’s Country Report is well aligned with decision-makers’ general perception of the situation of children in Slovenia as being satisfactory, with no major challenges to address. However, this is in contrast with what SAFY and other CSOs active in children’s rights witness.

The most promising comment is on the green and digital transformations in education explaining that “Slovenia aims to train 20,000 education professionals and managers – close to half of the teaching population – in digital and green skills, and in skills for environmental sustainability and financial literacy.”

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

Country Specific Recommendations for Slovenia depict well the overall reform process needed in Slovenia including the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience plan as well

as acceleration of the deployment of renewables to increase the implementation of energy efficiency measures.

However, Slovenia has ongoing school and health reforms that deserve adequate attention to ensure children's rights are respected in the proposed policies.

18. Spain

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

This year's European Semester Country report for Spain did not accurately reflect the reality on the ground. The Country Report **failed to include children in alternative care**. The only reference to deinstitutionalisation is that ESF+ will also support housing for deinstitutionalised children.

The European Semester **does not provide much information on education in Spain**. Although programmes such as the *Programme for Educational Guidance, Advancement and Enrichment* (PROA+) has led to greater investment in education, there is still little investment in infrastructures, scholarships and grants, school services, training, or programmes to improve and support the quality of education.

With regard to early school leaving, the early school dropout rate in Spain in 2022 stood at 13.9%, still far from the 9.7% average rate in the EU. Another important educational issue in Spain is segregation, which affects the quality, equity, and accessibility of education. The lack of free and accessible places for 0-3 years, the lack of inclusive education for children with developmental disorders, or the administrative obstacles that some children face to attend school, especially migrant children, are other educational challenges that Spain must face.

Although there have been improvements in defining ways to listen to children and ensure they exercise their right to participate, there are still **major gaps** especially when it comes to the participation of children from the most vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and children in alternative care. Children on the move are still in many situations treated as foreigners rather than as children first.

Although Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA have not been involved in the Semester Process 2023, they have met with the European Commission to monitor the development of Spain's policies based on past recommendations.

Plataforma de Infancia and FEDAIA regretted that in the Country Report for Spain there are **not many specific commitments related to investing in children**. They found useful, however, that the report mentions the government's commitment to improve access to early childhood education and care in all autonomous communities. However, **it fails to include a comprehensive and holistic reference to the importance of early childhood development**.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the Country Report **do not mention the reforms that Spain needs to have a clear child-rights focus**. For example, in the report, education is considered only to achieve better qualifications in the labour market, not as a right of children and adolescents.

19. Sweden

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

This year's European Semester Country Report and Recommendations for Sweden **reflected some of the realities on the ground** in Sweden. Barnens rätt i samhället welcomed the inclusion of the inequalities of education in Sweden and the need for better training for early years staff.

However, BRIS identified **many priorities not included** in the Report or Recommendations. Some of these were included in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Sweden (March 2023), namely:

- **Children's rights in alternative care**, especially children in SiS. SiS requires reform, and the government needs to promptly revise the law that still permits the isolation of children in these care facilities.
- **Concerns about** the current development within the Swedish **school system**. Equal access to high-quality education within the education system is crucial and BRIS is worried that disadvantaged groups are being marginalised.

Overall, BRIS was not involved in the Semester Process in 2023 and the recommendations in the Country Report **do not correspond sufficiently to reform needs in Sweden**.

Policy recommendations

Based on the information provided by Eurochild members in Children's Rights: Political will or won't? Eurochild 2023 report, here are some practical, rights-based recommendations for addressing the needs and challenges faced by children and their families across European countries. Eurochild members urge political leaders and decision-makers to:

1. Put children's rights at the heart of the political agenda

We observe the **compartmentalisation of child-related policies** even though child poverty and social inclusion and a broader child related agenda **requires a comprehensive solution**. There is a clear need for a central body at national level to coordinate the child-rights agenda. At the same time, solutions need to be developed to interconnected problems by cross-sectoral cooperation and consultation.

2. Invest in efficient data collection

To address the needs of children, understanding the problem is critical. Problems and needs that children face must be well analysed to uncover the underlying roots of the problem. National government responses should be **based on data and evidence** as well as **consultation with the stakeholders**, including children themselves. Upgrading data collection is crucial because we need to know where we are starting from to identify success or what is not working. We call for disaggregated and longitudinal data collection on children and more indicators for children. With clear, cross-sectoral, and comparable metrics, policymakers can be better equipped to implement better policies to improve children's lives.

3. Protect and support vulnerable children

It is vital to identify the specific target groups of children most in need, what key services they need access to, and how we can ensure the children and their families will get support from these essential services. **Governments must prioritise and ensure targeted support to children from families in need.** By providing universal child benefits and free access to key services, this group of children's needs are not often identified or met. Too often, their families cannot afford the hidden costs of education, such as attendance of compulsory extracurricular activities or transportation to and from school.

Additionally, vulnerable groups, such as children in migration, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, LGBTQI+ children, and Roma children, also face segregation, exclusion, and discrimination. Integrated, cross-sectoral cooperation that leads to an integrated whole school and community approach is needed to effectively address the needs of these children.

4. Invest in prevention

The family is the best place for each child to thrive, and all interventions **must prioritise keeping families together** by targeted social benefits, targeted subsidies such as housing subsidies, disability subsidies and the development of community-based services for children with special needs. Investing in prevention is crucial in supporting families in need, and it is proven to be more cost-effective than subsequent interventions such as alternative care for children.

Poor housing conditions, lack of other necessities, or undeveloped inclusive education should not be factors leading to children's separation from their families.

To deliver change for the most vulnerable families, the social intervention must be demand driven. Support preventative measures should start from the prenatal and early years of children. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development and are highly influenced by the child's environment, early experiences, and interactions. Increased support and public investment in nurturing care and quality early years services are essential for tackling child poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

5. Promote children's well-being online and offline

Children's experiences in the digital environment, mental health of children and children facing climate change should be everyone's priority. Eurochild members report that children are increasingly at risk online. However, the safety of children online today still heavily relies on the digital skills of children, their parents, and educators. Although many initiatives exist at national level to promote their digital literacy and support (for example, helplines and hotlines), EU Member States still lag behind in holding online service providers accountable to keep children safe on their platforms and uphold children's rights online through comprehensive legislation, as indicated by the **UN General Comment No. 25**.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of children's mental health. Policymakers have taken measures, such as increasing the affordability and availability of psychological support. However, waiting lists for mental health services remain very long, particularly for children. Eurochild members also identify that stigma is a barrier to addressing the mental health needs of children. Positive mental health is crucial for healthy development; therefore, Member States should develop concrete measures and plans to

adequately support children's mental health, including preventative measures. It is crucial that the situation of children and young people must be recognised and tackled with a unique awareness of their lived experiences and needs.

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups affected by climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss in terms of health, food, and living environment. In line with the **UN General Comment No 26** that introduces a child rights approach to environmental policies, we call for all children to have the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment without discrimination.

6. Implement the Child Guarantee at national level

The European Child Guarantee should be expanded to Countries in Accession. Members believe that this would lead to an increase in access to key services and support for all children's well-being. Child-related interventions, including the Child Guarantee NAPs must have enough resources to make a long-term impact. To ensure the sustainability of funded measures, there must be a mix of EU funding and national and sub-national resources. For EU Member States, Eurochild calls for upscaling of the Child Guarantee budget by an additional 20 billion Euro as part of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework revision aligned with the European Parliament Resolution Children first – beyond the Child Guarantee, two years on from its adoption. Given that the European Child Guarantee is a new instrument, to adequately manage different funding streams of the Child Guarantee NAP, more guidance and capacity building of national authorities is required.

7. Put children's rights at the core of the European Semester Cycle

The European Semester Cycle has yet to **prioritise children's rights**. To learn from the failures and ensure the scalability of working measures to lift children out of poverty, it is crucial to establish a sound system for monitoring and evaluation. This should feed into the EU monitoring and evaluation framework of the Child Guarantee being developed by the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee. The European Semester, as declared, should also **provide thorough guidance in regard to the implementation of the Child Guarantee**. Currently, the Social Scoreboard only partially indicates the situation of child poverty, access to early childhood education and school drop-outs. Given that the European Semester is an annual process, it can play a crucial role in delivering this important policy to reduce child poverty by the EU target of at least 5 million by 2030. However, we call on Member States to demonstrate political will and aim to far exceed this target.

8. Recognise children as agents of change in their own right

It is crucial to raise awareness and **enable meaningful participation of civil society organisations and children themselves**. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, respect the views of children, and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, Thematic Area One, 'Participation in political and democratic life', clearly states that children have a right to be heard and listen to. The European Child Guarantee outlines the need to cooperate with stakeholders, children and civil society organisations. Currently, there is little evidence of such cooperation in countries. However, this report draws attention to some good and promising practices, making recommendations on improving national, regional, and local cooperation with children and child rights organisations. Such

meaningful and inclusive cooperation practices must be developed and shared across Europe to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of all children.

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