

European Social Fund Plus

Taken from
*Children's Realities in Europe:
Progress & Gaps*
Eurochild 2024 flagship report
on children in need across Europe.



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

February 2025

European Social Fund Plus

On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. This sub-report presents insights from 21 EU Member States that contributed to the report on the use of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in their countries.¹ It focuses on the fund's allocation and accessibility, participation of civil society organisations in the ESF+ funded projects, the ESF+ Monitoring Committee and the areas of ESF+ support with an emphasis on the European Child Guarantee.

Introduction

The ESF+ serves as the primary instrument of the European Union for supporting the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. With a **budget of €95.8 billion for the period 2021–2027**, the ESF+ plays a pivotal role in advancing the EU's employment, education, social inclusion, and skills policies, including the facilitation of structural reforms in these areas.

The ESF+ funding encompasses a broad range of projects focusing on topics such as **employment, social inclusion, integration, material deprivation, inclusive education, work-life balance, and career development**. Its objective is to foster economic and social cohesion, reduce regional disparities, and enhance the quality of life for EU citizens.

A key focus of the ESF+ is **combating poverty, social exclusion, and inequality**. By funding initiatives that address the root causes of these challenges—including **child poverty and social exclusion**—the ESF+ supports vulnerable groups. The ESF+ is one of the main EU financing instruments to support **the European Child Guarantee**, an initiative by the European Commission to help ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to healthcare, education, early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition. **The ESF+ requires Member States most affected by child poverty** (over 23.4% child poverty rate, according to 2021 benchmark) **to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to implement measures to reduce it. All MS should allocate 'an appropriate amount' to this end. ESF+ budget for the ECG is 8,9 billion EUR over the 2021-2027 period.**

Within the framework of the Child Guarantee or as a separate initiative, it also invests in **early childhood education and care** by funding the development and improvement of

¹ It is necessary to point out that there are countries counted in the Flagship Report which do not make use of ESF+ funding, due to the fact they are no longer part of the European Union or are currently under the candidate status. Therefore, countries such as **England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine and Türkiye are not comprised in this sub-report**. It is worth noting that **Albania**, while holding candidate status, has already expressed its **interest in participating in the ESF+**. However, the country is still in the early stages of this process.

education and care providers. These efforts not only enhance children's developmental and educational outcomes but also support parents in rejoining the workforce, thereby promoting greater economic participation and work-life balance.

Findings from Eurochild Members

EU Member States included in the report cover Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain².

The ESF+ supports a variety of actions across Member States. For many, it serves as the primary funding source for national initiatives that positively impact children. For instance, in **Cyprus**, both the **ESF+ together with the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** have contributed to increasing participation in early childhood education and care. **Denmark** has its own **national ESF+ program** with the aim to promote inclusion of highly vulnerable groups in the workforce, many of whom have children.

Members are aware of ESF+ priorities in their country.

1. Areas of ESF+ support

- European Child Guarantee: Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain;
- Child and youth welfare: Finland, Germany;
- Inclusion: Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Romania;
- Workforce qualification: Denmark, Greece;
- Child poverty: Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Romania;
- IT system in child protection: Estonia;
- Social innovation: Finland;
- Employment of population at risk: Greece, Italy, Romania;
- Skill development for NETTs: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy;
- Inclusive education: Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Romania;
- Social services and Deinstitutionalisation of institutional care: Bulgaria;
- Access to basic rights and services: Spain;
- Early childhood education and care: Romania, Cyprus;
- Roma children and children with migrant background: Italy;
- Children with disabilities: Latvia, Italy;
- Child protection: Estonia, Finland;
- Social housing: Slovakia.

² Notably, country reports of Ireland, and Poland —whose ESF+ usage is not referenced by Eurochild members.

2. European Child Guarantee

A significant role of the ESF+ is its contribution to the **European Child Guarantee** implementation. In countries such as **Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania** and **Spain** ESF+ funds in combination with national funding and/or the Recovery and Resilience Facility have been assigned to support the **implementation of the Child Guarantee National Action Plans**.

In **Greece** the European Child Guarantee is a primary focus of its ESF+ initiatives. In **Spain** 10.5% of the ESF+ will be dedicated to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. In **Bulgaria** the ESF+ will support more than 760,000 children and students to improve educational outcomes and the inclusiveness of the educational system. The Child Guarantee National Action Plan in Malta will be implemented with significant financial commitments, including €145 million from a mix of national and EU funds (such as the ESF+). And in **Romania** it is expected with the ESF+ funding to benefit more than 700,000 vulnerable children and young people.

3. ESF plus areas of support that align with the objectives and activities of the European Child Guarantee

It is important to highlight that while the aforementioned countries have explicitly identified the European Child Guarantee as a priority for their ESF+ funding, **Eurochild members in other nations have also recognised areas of support that align with the objectives and activities of the European Child Guarantee**. For example, in Germany, **The Active for Families and their Children (Akti(F) Plus)** programme, funded by the ESF+ and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has been operating since 2023. The **55 projects** currently being funded are designed to meet the individual support **needs of families and children at risk of poverty and exclusion**. In Latvia, **the Society Integration Foundation is providing school kits for children aged 5-16** under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programme in Latvia. Families can receive support kits at distribution points throughout Latvia.

In Slovakia, members highlighted **Project Housing First**, which is a programme that provides affordable housing for families in crisis (homeless people, single-parent households, victims of domestic violence, etc.). Thanks to the European Social Fund plus, nonprofit organisations were able to receive funding to provide housing support and free counselling.

Regarding the thematic focus of ESF+, the Dutch members point out that under the ESF+, the Netherlands has not allocated money to fight child poverty via the ESF+ category “Secondary Theme code 06: addressing child poverty”. However, it does spend €2.5 million **combatting material deprivation among children**. This constitutes around 0.6% of the total ESF+ budget (€413 million).

Among the other issues, Members in Spain highlighted the positive impact of **decentralisation**, noting that the direct management of ESF+ funds by regions allows for a more tailored approach to addressing local needs.

4. Reality check of the Partnership principle

As stated in **Article 8** on Partnership and multilevel governance of the Common Provisions Regulation³, *the Member State shall involve partners in the preparation of the Partnership Agreement and throughout the preparation, implementation and evaluation of programmes, including through participation in monitoring committees ...*

Article 9 on Partnership of European Social Fund plus⁴ further states: *Member States shall ensure meaningful participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in the delivery of employment, education and social inclusion policies supported by the ESF+ strand under shared management.*

Since all Eurochild members, participating in the report, represent the national civil society organisations, we have assessed their experience concerning all aspects of the partnership principle which is cornerstone of EU Cohesion Policy⁵. Moreover, following the adoption of the European Child Guarantee in 2021 aimed at combating child poverty and social exclusion, children's rights organisations were hoping for meaningful cooperation.

A reality check on this principle involves critically evaluating how well it is being applied in practice following these principles:

- **Inclusivity:** Ensures that all relevant stakeholders are represented and have a voice.
- **Shared Responsibility:** Encourages collective ownership of policies and initiatives.
- **Transparency:** Promotes open communication and accountability among partners.
- **Effective Implementation:** Leverages diverse expertise and resources for practical outcomes.

4.1 Only three Eurochild members have benefited from ESF+ 2021-2017 resources at the national level.

The Central Union for Child Welfare Finland is a partner to the ESF+ funded programme **Social Innovations in Child Welfare**. This supports social innovation and the development of child welfare services throughout Finland, working together with child welfare actors, young people, families and others.

In 2024, **Fondazione L'Albero della Vita, Italy**, will implement a new ESF+ Social Innovation + initiative project to **foster the socio-economic inclusion of children and young people** who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). PRODIGY (PROmoting Digital and Green skills for Youth) aims to promote skills development of 240 NEETs in Italy, Greece and Bulgaria to facilitate their inclusion in the labour market and their active participation in

³ Regulation - 2021/1060 - EN - EUR-Lex

⁴ Regulation - 2021/1057 - EN - EUR-Lex

⁵ Importantly, shared management works under the **partnership principle**, where partners and stakeholders should be associated at all stages from programming to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This principle is key for ensuring that spending is as effective and efficient as possible.

civic life. There is a special **focus on Roma children and young people, migrants and those with disabilities**.

Centre Slniecko (Sun) Slovakia, participated in the ESF+ project on **social housing** and supported fifteen women and their children **fleeing domestic violence**, providing them with a place to live and start a new abuse-free life over the course of 24 months. However, the project was discontinued due to lack of funding.

Eurochild members have gained other EU funding through programmes: Erasmus plus, Horizon Europe, AMIF (shared management) and Interreg Europe.

4.2 Accessing ESF+ funding remains challenging, with information channels proving inadequate, and limited involvement of child rights organisations in Monitoring Committees.

In **Bulgaria**, civil society organisations have voiced concerns over **the government's primary control** of the funding, which limits accessibility for other stakeholders. Calls for proposals are also open to civil society organisations, but the administrative criteria and co-financing requirements make it difficult to access these resources. Under the **ESF+ 'Future for Children'** procedure within the **Human Resources Operational Programme 2021-2027**, despite NGOs being eligible to apply, they have not participated in the calls so far. This lack of participation is cited as one of the reasons why a significant portion of the programmed funds remains uncommitted due to an insufficient number of project proposals.

Similarly, in **Croatia**, non-governmental organisations face challenges due to **excessive administrative burdens**, hindering their ability to effectively utilise ESF+ resources.

In **Greece**, Eurochild members are not aware of funding programmes or specific calls for proposal for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. Funding for NGOs is not included in the implementation of the ECG. While other programmes, such as AMIF⁶, include funding opportunities for NGOs, there is currently no funding available for them under the ECG.

The **Slovenian** member was involved in the design and preparation of the Child Guarantee National Action Plan. Since then, they are not aware of any progress **nor ESF+ funded programmes or calls for proposals to implement the Guarantee**. However, they would welcome more information to allow CSOs to participate in the implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plan.

4.3 Absence of Child Rights Organisations in ESF+ Monitoring Committee

In order to design and examine the performance of programmes, Member States should set up **monitoring committees**, whose composition should include representatives of relevant partners, including civil society organisations. Member States may set up a single monitoring committee to cover more than one programme.

⁶ Asylum Migration and Integration Fund

None of Eurochild members: **Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Slovenia** who have reported on this inquiry are involved in the **Monitoring Committee of the ESF+.**

Policy-recommendations

- 1. Ensure that ESF+ funding calls including those for the implementation of the Child Guarantee are accessible to all suitable/relevant legal entities, including CSOs.**

In some countries, such as Greece, this funding is exclusively utilised by public authorities. Expanding eligibility to include national/regional/local civil society organisations and service providers would enhance contribution to ESF+ priorities, including the effective implementation of the Child Guarantee.

- 2. Remove or lower the administrative/financial burdens. Ensure capacity building of relevant stakeholders.**

For example, in Bulgaria, NGOs are eligible to participate in the calls on delivering the Child Guarantee but due to administrative and financial conditions they have not used this opportunity yet. To address this, it is crucial to revise the design and conditions of the calls to encourage greater participation from a broader range of applicants, particularly civil society organisations (CSOs), which could play a vital role in advancing the European Child Guarantee (ECG) objectives. By addressing these access barriers, the potential of the ESF+ to support vulnerable children and advance their rights across Europe could be further amplified.

Capacity building is essential to enhance the participation of relevant stakeholders. Providing targeted training in areas such as project management, as well as narrative and financial reporting, is highly recommended.

- 3. Improve transparency and information flow to allow CSOs to participate in the implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation of the programmes and projects.**

All Member States should make information about calls and specific requirements more accessible by informing civil society through transparent and user-friendly portals and information sessions. Disseminate information through civil society bodies such CSOs councils, the Government's Plenipotentiary Offices, their online platforms and actively reach to potential users. The information about the implementation including the realised programmes/projects should also be available.

- 4. Foster active engagement and dialogue with civil society organizations (CSOs).**

In line with the partnership principle for EU funding, Managing Authorities of ESF+ should place greater emphasis on collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

Involving stakeholders into the design, monitoring, and evaluation processes would ensure funding programmes and initiatives are better aligned with the actual needs of their target audience—children in need. Such inclusion would make the initiatives more responsive and impactful in achieving their objectives.

While the Partnership Agreement and key Operational Programmes have already been adopted, the development and implementation of initiatives and corresponding calls will continue throughout the 2021–2027 funding period.

The European Child Guarantee (ECG), supported by ESF+ allocations, presents a unique opportunity to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. Guided by the **National Action Plan to be implemented until 2030**, the ECG provides a comprehensive framework for designing funding programmes and corresponding calls.

The Monitoring Committee has the potential to play a pivotal role to foster this dialogue. However, the absence of relevant stakeholders within this body has resulted in missed opportunities to maximise the effectiveness of planned measures.

5. **Ensure the sustainability of national programmes beyond the conclusion of ESF+ funding** by allocating national, regional, and local resources to support the implementation of measures. The European Child Guarantee (ECG) targets children in need who have already faced significant hardships, making it essential to establish long-term, durable solutions to address their needs effectively.

Summary

This sub-report reviews the allocation and accessibility of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), civil society organizations' (CSOs) participation in ESF+-funded projects and the Monitoring Committee, and key areas of ESF+ support, with an emphasis on the European Child Guarantee (ECG). Contributions from 21 EU Member States provided insights into ESF+ usage.

A key role of **ESF+** is its support for the **European Child Guarantee** implementation. In countries such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain, ESF+ funds, often combined with national funding and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, have been allocated to Child Guarantee National Action Plans. However, only civil society organisations in Finland, Italy, and Slovakia have accessed ESF+ 2021–2027 resources at the national level. **Challenges** include **inadequate information channels, limited CSO involvement in design, monitoring, and evaluation**, and difficulties accessing funding.

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