



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Investing in children in the era of social rights

2017 Eurochild Report
on the European Semester

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policy making. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



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Eurochild AISBL Hallepoortlaan 27, 1060 Brussels, Belgium.
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83

info@eurochild.org - www.eurochild.org

For more information, contact:
Réka Tunyogi
Head of Advocacy, Eurochild
reka.tunyogi@eurochild.org





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Purpose of the report

This report aims to:

- 1 Assess the extent to which the European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' has been implemented in EU Member States;
- 2 Assess whether the European Semester contributes to promoting the well-being of children;
- 3 Empower Eurochild members to advocate for the reduction of child poverty and to promote children's well-being at EU and national level within the process of the European Semester; and
- 4 Provide Eurochild's perspective on relevant EU policies.

Acknowledgements

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1 Key recommendations

1.1 European Semester – the process

1. Use the Social Scoreboard to strengthen the social dimension

The new Social Scoreboard associated with the European Pillar of Social Rights offers a practical tool to strengthen the social dimension of the European Semester. Even though it does not cover all aspects relevant for preventing and tackling child poverty, it can increase EU Member States' political commitment to social inclusion.

Regular reporting and comparative data on issues such as childcare, minimum income, access to services, work-life balance, and housing can have a welcome impact on incentivising Member States to prioritise investment in these areas.

It is essential that the Social Scoreboard is given equal weight to the Macroeconomic Scoreboard to ensure the European Semester process is balanced in its analysis and recommendations.

2. Promote investment in children

The European Semester process must promote the accepted logic of the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children, i.e. spending on protecting child rights is not simply a short-term cost, but a long-term investment in 'breaking the cycle of disadvantage' facing many young people in our societies.

There were very few country specific recommendations (CSRs) on investing in children in 2017. This is attributed to the fact that the European Commission is prioritising short-term economic gains over medium and long-term social issues.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children should be followed up by an implementation roadmap including monitoring and evaluation of progress at national level. This would be helped if the European Commission completed and used the proposed portfolio of indicators included in the Recommendation. These indicators should then be more widely known and applied at national level, and serve as auxiliary indicators to the Social Scoreboard.

3. Avoid counter-productive country specific recommendations

Currently, many Eurochild members feel that an excessive focus in the European Semester process on budgetary concerns and cutting costs is exacerbating the risks experienced by families and children. Fiscal discipline programmes have tended to disproportionately impact those in the most vulnerable situations.

A more balanced European Semester process requires much greater consideration of the likely social impact of proposed economic and financial reforms. Recommendations promoting economic austerity contradict those recommendations on social issues that require public investments. CSRs must be clear in stating that macroeconomic stability must not undermine investment in health, education and welfare.

4. Ensure more effective civil society dialogue

Member States should stimulate meaningful and ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations during each step of the European Semester process. The European Commission can support this effort by better tracking national processes and exchanging good practice.

Although these are the exceptions, some positive examples of stakeholder engagement are highlighted by Eurochild members. Truly effective consultation requires clear information, open processes, effective capacity building and listening to a wide range of expertise.

5. Ensure consistency between the European Semester and the next European funding cycle

The future of Europe depends on investing in children. The European Commission's Reflection Paper on the Future of EU Finances has recognised that investing in people through education, health and social inclusion, is an overarching priority for the European Union (EU).

The European Commission will publish proposals for the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in 2018 and it will need to ensure consistency between the policy guidance (UN Agenda 2030, European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children, and European Pillar of Social Rights), the funding priorities, and the monitoring mechanism (European Semester). Eurochild recommends to focus considerably more attention in the next MFF on social investment, poverty reduction and social inclusion, of children in particular.

1.2 European Semester – the content

6. Restore a focus on tackling child poverty

Tackling child poverty and supporting children's well-being need to be urgently re-prioritised in the European Semester as central to investing in Europe's future. Current political choices tend to favour short-termism, meaning that child poverty is falling off the political agenda and Member States are therefore failing to deliver the integrated strategies necessary to prevent and tackle child poverty.

The number of CSRs addressing child poverty specifically has been reduced to zero in 2017, whilst in 2014 there were still seven. The Pillar of Social Rights is an opportunity for the European Commission to change this lack of attention in the 2018 European Semester, promote its own Recommendation on Investing in Children, and remind its Member States of their commitments.

7. Emphasise the quality of child-focused services

The European Semester process needs to do more to highlight and stress the importance of the quality of child-focused services for overcoming disadvantage. Even those CSRs which talk about the availability of essential services, typically fail to stress the importance of the quality of these services for children's lives.

Eurochild members insist on the fact that reforming the education system and strengthening the availability of childcare should not only be seen in relation to the associated labour market benefits, but should also promote children's well-being and development, playing a key role in breaking cycles of disadvantage. The importance of housing and health services for children's well-being must also be highlighted.

8. Focus on children in the most vulnerable situations

Across all policy areas, children in particularly vulnerable situations face additional risks of a lifetime of disadvantage and require further attention. The most successful strategies in addressing child poverty have proved to be those underpinned by policies improving the well-being of all children, whilst giving careful consideration to children in particularly vulnerable situations.

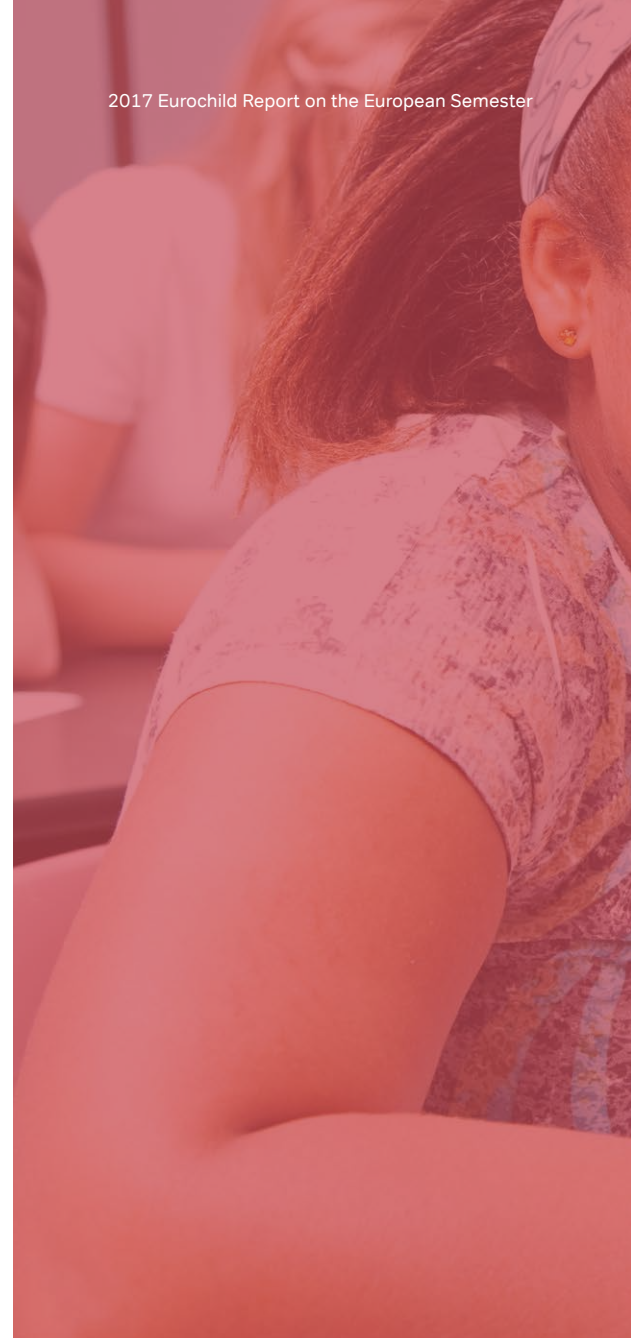
Eurochild members highlight the needs of: children in care, in the child protection system and child services; migrant children and particularly unaccompanied migrant children; Roma children; and children with disabilities. Although several Country Reports recognise some of the needs of these groups – notably in terms of access to education – this rarely translates into specific recommendations.

9. Promote the participation of children in decision-making

The European Semester could usefully reinforce and encourage the participation of children in decisions affecting their lives - one of the three pillars of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and also recognised in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Where the European Semester deals with policies affecting the lives of children, it should remember to promote the key principle of child participation. The European Semester officers, in their capacity to consult on the Semester could gather the views of children through a coordinated approach with civil society. Positive examples of how children can engage meaningfully in policy-making processes should also be more widely promoted.

In 2018, Eurochild and its members will work to engage children and young people in dialogue on 'the Europe we want'. We will help children across Europe to understand the EU's coordination role with respect to economic and social policy, and will gather their ideas on what the EU can do more or differently to help reduce child poverty and social exclusion where they live.



2 Background and context

2.1 The European Commission Recommendation on ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’

The European Commission Recommendation on ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’ (2013) is a non-binding instrument laying down the ground for a comprehensive approach to ending child poverty and improving child well-being.

The Recommendation is based on the recognition that *“preventing the transmission of disadvantage across generations is a crucial investment in Europe’s future, as well as a direct contribution to the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, with long-term*

benefits for children, the economy and society as a whole”.

In the Recommendation, child poverty is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing income and other forms of deprivation. Strategies to address child poverty must be

based on the recognition of children as rights holders, the best interest of the child, equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged while ensuring quality universal provisions for all.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children calls on EU Member States to develop integrated strategies based on three pillars:

1) Access to adequate resources and reconciling work and family life

- support parents' participation in the labour market
- provide for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits

2) Access to good quality services

- reduce inequality at a young age by investing in early childhood education and care
- improve education systems' impact on equal opportunities
- improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children
- provide children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment
- enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings

3) Children's participation in decisions that affect them, and in cultural, leisure and sport activities

- support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities
- put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision making that affects their lives

In addition, the Recommendation encourages Member States to develop necessary implementation and monitoring mechanisms, and to make use of relevant EU instruments such as the Europe 2020 strategy or EU financial instruments to achieve the Recommendation's objectives.

Eurochild believes that investing in children and their well-being is not only a moral obligation but also an economic priority for the future of the European Union. Spending on breaking cycles of disadvantage must be seen and understood as long-term investments that will deliver a return on investment to the benefit of societies, economies and individuals - rather than simply in terms of their short-term costs.

2.2 The European Semester Process

The 'European Semester' is a process that was put in place in 2010 to provide some coordination to national efforts to achieve the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the Stability and Growth Pact (budgetary surveillance).

The European Commission highlights the following four goals of the European Semester¹:

1. ensuring sound public finances (avoiding excessive government debt);
2. preventing excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the EU;
3. supporting structural reforms, to create more jobs and growth; and
4. boosting investment.

Whilst the European Semester has a necessarily strong economic focus, it is important to remember that the Europe 2020 targets were designed to reflect the fact that economic growth needs to be 'smart, sustainable and inclusive'. **It includes important targets on reducing school dropout rates to less than 10% and lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion.**

As an important process for monitoring the Europe 2020 targets and closely linked to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester is an important process for organisations working with children to follow and engage with. It provides them with an opportunity to reach out to policy-makers at EU and national levels with insights on child poverty and children's rights, and promote the importance of investing in children within the broader macroeconomic agenda.

Calendar of the European Semester

November: The European Semester process starts with the publication of the Annual Growth Survey, Alert Mechanism Report and Joint Employment Report in which the European Commission sets the policy priorities for the coming year and identifies, based on a scoreboard of indicators, gaps that need addressing in each EU Member State.

February: The European Commission publishes Country Reports with an analysis of the economic and social situation in each Member State.

April: Member States submit their National Reform Programmes (NRPs) for implementing the Europe 2020 strategy and their National Stability and Convergence Programmes setting out their commitments on budgetary policy.

July to November: This is the 'National Semester' phase. Member States should integrate the CSRs into national policies and budgets for the next year. They can be sanctioned for failing to implement deficit rules and macroeconomic priorities.

May: The European Commission reviews the NRPs and proposes country specific recommendations (CSRs) for each Member State (and for the Euro area), which are adopted by the European Council.

¹ "The European Semester, Why and How", European Commission, n.d., https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/european-semester-why-and-how_en.

2.3 The European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights (the Pillar) was presented by the European Commission in April 2017. It is a set of 20 key rights and principles that support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in EU Member States.

Delivering on these principles and rights aims to enable greater upward economic and social convergence, and more resilient societies. Several principles are relevant to the rights and well-being of children, notably those addressing: childcare and support to children; minimum income; access to essential services; work-life balance; education; and housing and assistance for homeless people.

**“ Principle 11.
Childcare and support to children**

.....

Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.

Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.”

Delivery is a joint responsibility of Member States, EU institutions, social partners and other stakeholders. European funds, in particular the European Social Fund, will provide financial support to implement the Pillar. Further EU legislative or non-legislative initiatives may also follow (in full respect of Member States' competences). The Pillar also aims to inspire the work of the European Semester process.

The Social Scoreboard

Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is monitored through the Social Scoreboard, which includes a number of indicators structured around three 'people-centred' dimensions:

1. Equal opportunities and access to the labour market;
2. Dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions; and
3. Public support / Social protection and inclusion.

Although not covering all 20 principles of the Pillar, the Social Scoreboard can be a key tool for informing and reinforcing the social dimension of the European Semester process, by providing clear social indicators and data.

Crucially for children, the Social Scoreboard includes important indicators such as risk of poverty or social exclusion; children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare; early school-leavers; income inequality; and the impact of social transfers. The Social Scoreboard is therefore also a useful tool for monitoring Member States' progress in implementing several dimensions of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and for making effective links between the Recommendation, the European Semester process and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Social Policy Network

The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in 2014 to provide the European Commission with independent information, analysis and expertise. Consisting of social policy experts, it supports the monitoring of progress on the Europe 2020 strategy objectives on social protection and social inclusion.

One of the key tasks of the ESPN is to produce national reports and a European synthesis report on progress in implementing the Recommendation on Investing in Children. The latest series of national reports were published in 2017.

The 2017 European Social Policy Network (ESPN) Synthesis Report on the Recommendation on Investing in Children

Key findings of the 2017 synthesis report include:

1. Modest progress on implementing the Recommendation has been insufficient to address the scale of child poverty and social exclusion in many countries.
2. Particularly worrying is the very limited progress that has been made in many of the countries with (very) high levels of child poverty or social exclusion.
3. Improvements are most evident in the areas of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and encouraging parents' participation in the labour market.
4. A significant intensification of effort is required to achieve the aims of the Recommendation – this can be linked with implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights put forward by the European Commission.

The ESPN Synthesis Report concludes with a series of detailed overall recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and links them to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights put forward by the European Commission².

² "Intensification of efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion are needed", European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 4 September 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1135&newsId=2861&furtherNews=yes>.

Progress on Investing in Children

A mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy conducted by the European Commission in 2014 confirmed that the EU is far from reaching the target on poverty reduction. In 2016, Eurostat figures estimate that there are still 117.9 million people at risk of poverty or social inclusion in the EU28 - among them 24.8 million are children.



In 2016, 24.8 million children were at risk of poverty or social inclusion

The European Pillar of Social Rights is an opportunity to give more visibility to policies directly affecting children. Eurochild welcomes that child poverty is recognised as one of its 20 principles. Nonetheless, social policies overall have an impact on children and if they are to be effective they should be sensitive to the needs of the youngest in our societies. The challenge will be to ensure that the rights-based approach of the Recommendation on Investing in Children is echoed by the next initiatives, and that the Pillar is used to encourage Member States to do more for children's well-being.

The future of Europe and the post-2020 MFF

The EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) sets the maximum annual budget that the EU can spend in different policy areas over a period of several years. By prioritising the policy areas in which the EU will invest, it also drives policy-making in the EU.

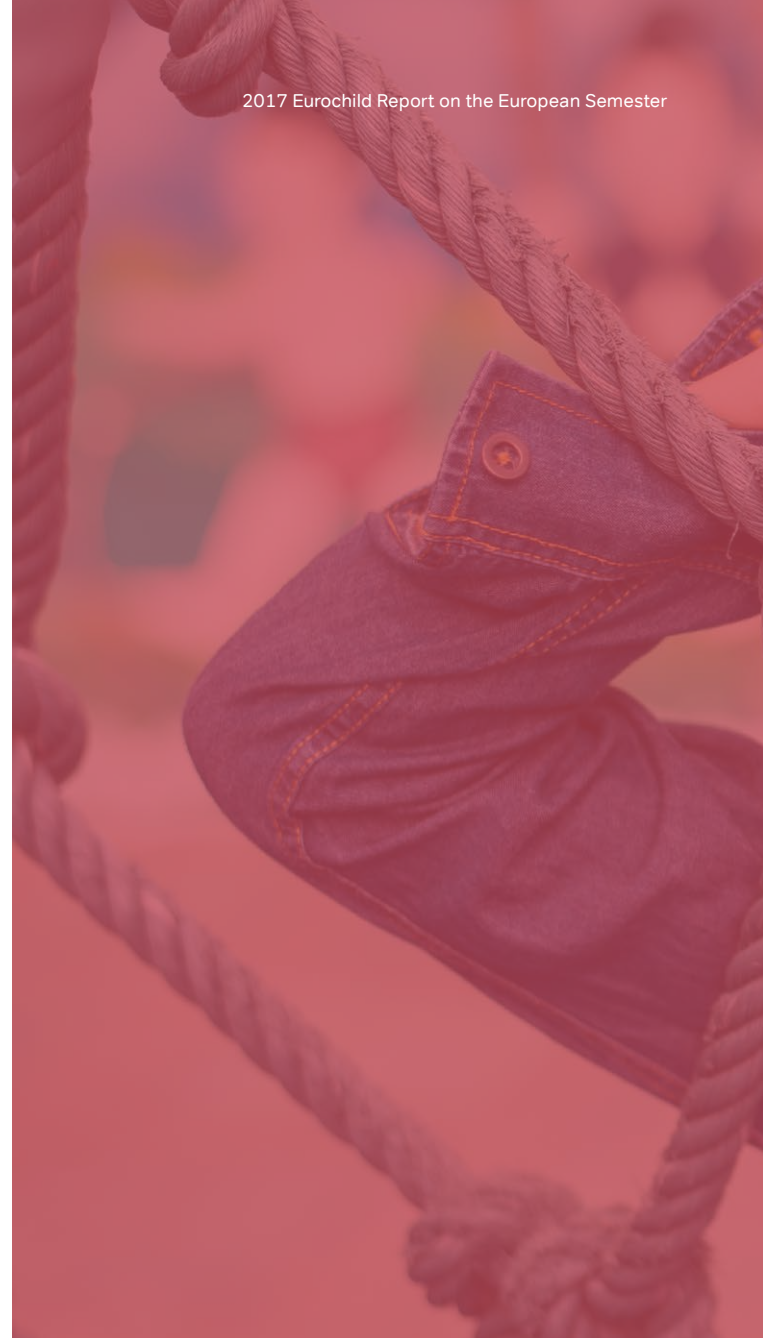
Through its multiannual perspective, the MFF allows the EU to carry out policies with a long-term vision, while ensuring predictability through financial programming, and budgetary discipline. The current MFF runs until 2020 and the post-2020 MFF is currently under discussion in EU institutions.

To ensure that the next MFF invests in children, ending child poverty and

social exclusion in Europe should be a clear and visible priority in the next MFF, under the thematic objective of social inclusion. In particular cohesion policy will have an important role to play.

There is a minimum allocation earmarked for social inclusion under the European Social Fund, which has proven to be a useful way to guarantee attention is paid in all countries to the issue of social inclusion. By increasing the minimum allocation earmarked and making sure child poverty is one of the top priorities, concrete projects could contribute to translating EU commitments on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the Recommendation on Investing in Children into realities.³

³ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 non-binding principles aiming to mobilise States' efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and address climate change. They are part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by the United Nations, which provides a shared vision towards sustainable development and eradicating poverty by 2030 world-wide. It is therefore applicable to all EU Member States.



3 Cross-country analysis

Abbreviation	Country
AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria
HR	Croatia
CY	Cyprus
EE	Estonia
FI	Finland
FR	France
DE	Germany
IE	Ireland
LV	Latvia
NL	The Netherlands
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SK	Slovakia
SI	Slovenia
ES	Spain
UK-W	Wales
UK-NI	Northern Ireland
UK-EN	England
UK-SC	Scotland

3.1 How is the Recommendation on Investing in Children reflected in the 2016-2017 European Semester process?

Influence of the Recommendation on national policy-making

Most respondents do not believe that the European Commission Recommendation on *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* has had a direct impact on child policy developments in their respective country. In any case, the lack of reference to the Recommendation in the European Semester process decreases the possibility of identifying and demonstrating impact.

Some respondents noted that there had been no notable development in child policies in their country and that therefore the Recommendation on Investing in Children had clearly not had any impact on policy-making (e.g. AT, ES, CY, DE).

In those countries where there were positive developments in child-focused policies, most

respondents felt unable to claim that the Recommendation had had any impact (e.g. BE, BG, EE). Some noted that the Recommendation is not well-known, which limits its chances of influencing policies.

Even in cases where respondents felt that the Recommendation might have had an impact, it is difficult for them to be certain (e.g. SI, LV, UK-W). The best they are able to do is to identify complementarity or concordance between aspects of the Recommendation and policy commitments.

For example, the Slovenian government is currently preparing a proposal for a Resolution on Family Policy, which partly focuses on work-life balance and related measures of family and child support and childcare; Eurochild's member believes the Recommendation has positively influenced policy in this case, however the Recommendation has not been referenced directly, so the link is not proven.



of respondents felt that little progress has been made at national level on implementing key EU social investment priorities – particularly investing in children.

The 2017 Country Reports and investing in children

The Country Reports give some visibility to children's well-being and the importance of investing in children, however their main content and thrust remains overwhelmingly on shorter-term budgetary and financial issues.

The Country Reports give some visibility to children's well-being and the importance of investing in children – certainly more than any other stage of the European Semester process.

For example, several Country Reports provided data on child poverty and children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (e.g. BG, IE, CY, LV), education (e.g. RO, SI, EE, IE, HR), and early childhood (e.g. LV, UK, SK, AT).

Nevertheless, these references were considered insufficient to provide a good account of the overall reality of the situation facing many children in EU Member States. Only 5% of respondents found that the Country Reports accurately described the situation of children in their country.

Eurochild members feel that – despite some positive references – overall, the Country Reports have an overwhelming focus on the economy, growth and stability. It must be acknowledged though, that Country Reports have more detailed information about social policies than country specific recommendations (CSRs) do, and are therefore useful vehicles for raising awareness about investing in people, in particular children.



of respondents believe that the 2017 Country Report failed to describe the situation of children in their country.



of respondents found that macroeconomic policies are still the dominant focus in the 2017 Country Reports.

2017 Country Specific Recommendations on investing in children

The lack of CSRs directly targeting children is perhaps the clearest example of the lack of political focus on both children's well-being and the importance of investing in children within the European Semester process.

Several child-focused issues presented in the European Semester documents are not followed up by concrete CSRs. For example, although several Country Reports and the introduction texts of the CSRs for six Member States mention child poverty, the number of actual CSRs addressing child poverty in 2017 was zero, which represents an alarming decline given that there were seven such CSRs in 2014.

The prioritisation of short-term economic over medium and long-

term social issues is the main reason identified for the very few CSRs on investing in children in 2017. Even worse, many Eurochild members feel that an excessive focus on budgetary concerns and cutting costs in the European Semester process risks exacerbating the risks experienced by vulnerable families and children. For example, members in Cyprus observed a decline in spending on family and child policy, while their CSRs focused on economic and fiscal reforms.

The contradiction between strong CSRs promoting economic austerity and cutting costs and recommendations on social measures requiring public investments is a crucial issue highlighted by some Eurochild members. For example, Eurochild's English member noted that the UK's fiscal austerity programme had disproportionately impacted on children, and new CSRs on economic recovery and public finances

may lead to further negative consequences for children.

Even those CSRs which can have a positive indirect impact on the lives of children in a vulnerable situation – such as those supporting parents' labour market participation, access to childcare, housing, healthcare and social services – fail to adequately reference the increasing number of children living in poverty within working households and the importance of the quality of services for children's lives.

Long-term objectives around children's well-being and breaking cycles of disadvantage do not emerge as priorities of the European Semester process. This approach not only fails to implement the detail of the Recommendation on Investing in Children – it also fails to implement its key principles. It still fails to see spending on children's well-being as an investment in our young people and in our societies that can break cycles of disadvantage and deliver positive long-term returns for society.



criticise that in the European Semester process, social protection policies are seen as a cost rather than a social investment.

Child poverty and the European Semester

Several Country Reports raised issues related to child poverty. However, these failed to be translated into pertinent country specific recommendations on this crucial issue for breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

Various Country Reports contained references to: data on child poverty and children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (e.g. BG, IE, CY, LV); the increasing issue of in-work poverty, especially for single-parents (e.g. RO, DE, ES, FR); lack of access to adequate and affordable housing (e.g. UK, FR, SK, HR); and weak or inadequate family support/benefits (e.g. ES, DE).

Some CSRs on taxation, minimum income, employment, housing and family support can have a positive indirect impact on children. However, respondents regretted that references to the importance of using these tools as part of a strategy to tackle child poverty was missing.

The number of CSRs to Member States addressing child poverty specifically has been reduced to zero. The tendency is alarming. In 2014 there were still seven, in 2015 two, in 2016 one and by 2017 none. It is no wonder that Eurochild's members overwhelmingly feel that child poverty and children's well-being are no longer priorities in the European Semester process.

The political choice of focusing less on child poverty is worrying as it prevents recommendations to design integrated strategies on preventing and tackling child poverty. Such policies are still affected by austerity and budget efficiency measures which have negative consequences on social investments as a whole.



of respondents agree - strongly or partly - that child poverty and children's well-being are not clear priorities in the European Semester process.

Housing and homelessness and the European Semester

While all Country Reports provide an overview of the housing situation in Member States, very few make the important link between access to housing, homelessness and child poverty. None of the CSRs mention homelessness or recommend any action on the issue.

All Country Reports provide an overview of the housing situation in Member States. However, the majority of these comments concern the housing market, prices, household consumption, supply and demand, without analysing repercussions on families and children living in poverty, and homelessness.

More than half of all Country Reports link housing issues with risks of poverty or social exclusion but few make the specific link between access to housing, homelessness and children. The Hungarian, Latvian,

and Spanish Country Reports specifically highlight that difficult access to housing specifically impacts children living in poverty. Ireland and Denmark mention homelessness among children and youth.

Some members have highlighted positive developments in relation to housing and homelessness at national level: Ireland has included several child-specific actions in its Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, 'Rebuilding Ireland', and Wales has a programme of work to improve the availability and affordability of housing which will benefit low-income families.

However, there are only four country specific recommendations on housing and all with a clear emphasis on the housing market, even where some recognition of the social perspective is included (e.g. IE, SE and UK). None of the CSRs mention homelessness or recommend any action on the issue.

Child protection and the European Semester

Issues around child protection are almost entirely absent from the European Semester process. This is despite significant reforms still being underway in several Member States.

Reforms of the child protection system, including deinstitutionalisation and the creation of quality alternative care services are ongoing in several Member States. However, these important issues are not being picked up in either the Country Reports or the CSRs. This is despite Eurochild's members expressing concern about the deinstitutionalisation transition, which needs to be better monitored in some Member States (e.g. BG, RO, LV).

Eurochild members also mentioned the need to increase support for parents or legal guardians - both in terms of financial help and encouraging positive parenthood

- creating or improving access to services for children, such as crisis and mental healthcare support, and support for children with disabilities and their families.

Early childhood education and care and the European Semester

Whilst the issue of childcare is present in the European Semester process, Eurochild is concerned that the focus is mainly labour-market driven, and fails to adequately reflect the important role of quality early childhood education and care services in benefitting children and overcoming disadvantage.

At least eleven Country Reports dedicate specific paragraphs to the issue of childcare, whether focused on the availability, accessibility, quality and affordability of full-time childcare for children, or on the issue of women's participation in the labour market, linked to accessible and affordable childcare or the parental leave system. Several Country Reports refer to both aspects (e.g. IE, SK, AT, EE).

The introduction texts of several CSRs refer to the importance of childcare. However, it is striking that the reasons given for its importance are centred almost exclusively

around being crucial for increasing female participation in the labour market. Only the introduction text of the CSRs for Ireland correlates access to childcare, female labour market participation, and the reduction of child poverty.

Three Member States received CSRs explicitly referring to childcare mostly in the context of improving women's participation in the labour market but also adding: 'the affordability and quality of childcare' in Slovakia, 'enhancing social infrastructure including childcare' in Ireland and 'increasing access to quality childcare as part of family support measures' in Spain.

Whilst these CSRs are welcome, increased investment in accessible, affordable and quality early childhood education and care is needed in many Member States. Worryingly the number of CSRs addressing early childhood education and care has more than halved since 2014. In 2014, there were nine on childcare, in 2015 eight, in 2016 four and in 2017 three.

Education and the European Semester

Education is the most recurrent theme related to children addressed in the European Semester process. This has included some positive references to the need to improve basic skills and address inequalities in access to education. However, in many cases, the approach is limited to reforms focused on labour market implications.

The European Semester process has included many positive references to important education issues affecting the life chances of children. In the 2017 Country Reports this included: low educational outcomes and achievements (e.g. FI, UK, CY, RO); basic skills performance (e.g. SI, EE, IE, HR); educational inequalities (e.g. IE, BE, NL, SK); the impact of socioeconomic and migrant status on school performance (e.g. AT, SK, DE, FR) and early school leaving (e.g. BG, EE, ES, RO). Some of these are highlighted as being particularly positive – for example the focus on basic skills in Slovenia and Estonia

and the reference to basic skills and inequalities in Ireland.

There were 14 CSRs focused on education in 2017, a number that has remained relatively stable (between 10 and 14 CSRs) since 2014. Some of these 2017 CSRs were particularly welcome in focusing on equal access to mainstream quality education for children in vulnerable situations, in particular Roma (BG, RO, SK) or migrant children (BE). Some CSRs focused their attention on disparities in education outcomes, with Spain highlighting regional differences and Austria pointing out the situation of disadvantaged young people, in particular with a migrant background.

However, in many cases, Eurochild members highlighted concerns that the more progressive issues related to overcoming educational inequalities tend to disappear as the process moves from the Country Reports, through the introduction texts of the CSRs and the recommendations themselves.

Issues mentioned in the introduction texts of the CSRs, which were not addressed in the actual recommendations include: early school leaving (e.g. ES, FR, RO); access to education for children in a vulnerable situation especially migrant children (e.g. FR, DE); access to mainstream education for children with disabilities (e.g. NL, LV, RO); low education outcomes and inequalities for children with low socioeconomic background (e.g. DE, SK, UK, BE); and the costs of schooling (e.g. UK, IE, ES).

Many education-focused CSRs are limited to calling for reforms of the vocational training system and higher education to adapt to the labour market (e.g. ES, FR, CY, LV). While such reforms can be important for tackling youth unemployment, Eurochild members insist on the fact that reforming the education system should not only be seen in relation to the labour market benefits, but should also promote the education and development of children in a broader sense for their well-being, taking into account groups of children in a vulnerable situation.



agree - strongly or partly - that in the European Semester process, education and training measures are primarily aimed at increasing skills, not at ensuring a comprehensive quality education system.

Healthcare services and the European Semester

Access to essential quality services, such as healthcare, is a key part of the Recommendation on Investing in Children, but where it is referenced in the European Semester, it is insufficiently focused on ensuring equality of access and outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

Several Country Reports addressed the need for reforms in the healthcare system (e.g. UK, RO, CY, EE), although children are not usually mentioned as a beneficiary of such reforms. This translated into a small selection of 2017 CSRs focused on the issue of access to healthcare and reform of the health sector (e.g. LV, SK, FI, BG).

The most positive health-related CSRs include references which can have an impact on improving equal access to healthcare services. This included recommendations to reduce informal or out-of-pocket payments (e.g. LV, RO), and to ensure universal or extended access to healthcare coverage (e.g. BG, CY).

Children in vulnerable situations and the European Semester

Across all policy areas, children in particularly vulnerable situations face additional risks and require further attention. However, the European Semester process rarely takes these groups into account.

A focus on children in vulnerable situations is largely absent from Country Reports and CSRs. The most common exception where the situation of children at risk of exclusion is addressed is with regards to education. Equality of access is raised for groups including Roma children, migrant children and children with disabilities.

Eurochild members stress that much more attention is needed for those groups of children most at risk of a lifetime of disadvantage - as acknowledged by the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children. They highlight the needs of: children in care, in the child protection system and child services; migrant children and particularly unaccompanied migrant

children; Roma children; and children with disabilities.

The most recognition that these groups of children receive in the European Semester process is in the Country Reports. For example, the Country Reports of Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria mention severe issues with regards to educational inequalities, school segregation, and participation in early education for Roma children. The inclusion of asylum-seeking and refugee children into the educational system is mentioned in the Country Reports of Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Other Country Reports mention the difficulties that children with a migrant background face at school, including Belgium and France.

However, these references in the Country Reports do not often translate into recommendations focused on the needs of children in vulnerable situations.

Stakeholder engagement in the European Semester

Positive examples

Although they are the exceptions, some positive examples of stakeholder engagement are highlighted by Eurochild members. However, even positive examples tend to rely on the capacity of child rights organisations to take the initiative to actively engage with the process rather than being enabled by an effective consultation process. Equally, where they take place, consultations are often via larger platforms of civil society representatives, which can provide varying levels of satisfaction for organisations specifically focused on child rights.

In the Netherlands, Defence for Children NL has been able to engage productively in the European Semester process through its own initiative. By contacting and establishing a positive and enduring working relationship with the European Semester officers in the country, the child rights organisation

has been able to contribute to consultations, fact-finding missions, and to use aspects of the process in its ongoing advocacy work with central and local governments. It has also been active in communicating about, and making the European Semester process more understandable to its members.

In Spain, Plataforma de Infancia is part of a Third Sector Platform which is recognised as representative of civil society to the government. Through this platform, Plataforma de Infancia is able to participate in the European Semester process through internal consultations, and to follow the reporting on the implementation of the CSRs.

In Bulgaria, the National Network for Children participates in various national working groups and sits in the Operational Programmes Monitoring Committees for “Human resources development”, “Science, education, intelligent growth” and “Good governance”. It has also been invited to meetings organised by the European Commission and will continue to monitor and report on the implementation of the CSRs through its own Report Card.

In Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance feels well-informed on the process through its membership of Eurochild and has contacted and worked with the national European Semester officer, including by organising a national child poverty conference. It is invited to comment on the Country Report and make recommendations for the CSRs every year through the Community and Voluntary Pillar, a 17-member organisation. However, the time to respond to the Country Report is very short.

Some Eurochild members will continue to monitor and report on implementation of CSRs despite the lack of a specific process to enable them to do this (e.g. IE, NL, FI).



.....
of respondents even partly agreed that child rights NGOs were consulted in the European Semester process.

Barriers to participation

Despite the above examples, most respondents were not involved in the European Semester process at EU or national level, and will not be involved in reporting or monitoring the implementation of country specific recommendations.

Eurochild members highlight that there are three main reasons for the low level of engagement:

1. **Governments' failure to reach out to civil society** – several respondents highlighted that they had not been invited by the government to contribute to the process at national level;
2. **Members' lack of capacity and resources to engage** – this includes a lack of knowledge, information or time to find out how and when to engage effectively in this process;
3. **Excessive emphasis on economic and fiscal policy** – which tends to exclude organisations which are trying to raise issues of child rights and the importance of investing in children.

Unfortunately, various combinations of these factors tend to hamper meaningful contribution of Eurochild members to the European Semester process and a comparison with the findings of Eurochild's European Semester reports 2015 and 2016 shows that the situation has not improved.

Additional specific challenges raised include concerns in Cyprus with new online consultation processes which are not seen as being as valuable as direct, face-to-face dialogue. There is disappointment in Germany that the consultation process with civil society on the National Social Report was ended.

Members in Spain and France flag that consultation involving civil society platforms should not replace the need to conduct broader consultations directly involving more stakeholders, including more child rights organisations.



.....
of respondents strongly disagree that the quality of stakeholder involvement during the Semester was good and the engagement process transparent.

4 Country profiles

CSRs country specific recommendations
ECEC early childhood education and care
ESPN European Social Policy Network

Austria

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to change the highly selective schooling system in Austria, as a way to address child poverty and low social mobility and to ensure that all children have the same rights.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

The Austrian National Coalition noted no positive policy developments focusing on and promoting children’s rights in this period. The European Social

Respondent organisation: The Austrian Coalition for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Austrian National Coalition for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (or Austrian National Coalition) was not involved in the European Semester process either at local, national or European level, and it will not be involved in reporting or monitoring the implementation of country specific recommendations (CSRs). The Austrian National Coalition is only aware of the European Semester process thanks to its Eurochild membership. On national level, there has never been any information communicated to civil society about this process, nor any invitation from state institutions to contribute.

Policy Network report is accurate in stating that: “It is fair to say that child poverty and children’s well-being remain almost unaddressed by Austrian politics as a specific and distinct problem.”

Child poverty

In order to combat child poverty in Austria, first and foremost, measures must be taken to promote social mobility and to deal with the challenges of migration in a positive way.



8.69 millions total
19.6% under 19 yrs
4.8% under 4 yrs

Population

6.9%

Early school-leavers rate

20%

Child poverty rate

Sufficient financial resources should be allocated to youth welfare. Austria should set country-wide quality standards for care, standardised statistics at the federal level, and basic legal conditions which are oriented around the best interests of the child and not according to federalist or budgetary considerations.

Education

The 2017 CSRs include the recommendation “to improve the educational achievements of disadvantaged young people, in particular those from a migrant background”. The introduction text notes that “education outcomes depend considerably on the socioeconomic background” of students, and that students with a migrant background are particularly worse off.

Austria struggles to integrate students with a migrant background and asylum seekers and refugee children into its education system. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has pointed out in its last Concluding Observation

for Austria (2012) that “the parallel schooling system, which divides education after primary school into separate tracks of vocational education and general education, disadvantages migrant children”. The UNCRC thus recommended Austria to “strengthen its efforts to provide migrant children with equal opportunities in the education system, including through special support to reduce language barriers, and consider adopting an integrated system for compulsory public schools”.

The Austrian National Coalition highlights the importance of non-discrimination in education and notes for example that the new Law on Compulsory Training (Ausbildungspflichtgesetz/APFIG) adopted in June 2016 does not apply to asylum seekers, which further excludes them. It also recommends Austria to take measures to include children’s rights in the curricula of primary and secondary education, and to guarantee equal access to education, pedagogical services and institutions for children and youth in order to combat social selection mechanisms.

Early childhood

The 2017 CSRs introduction text mentions that “the number of early childcare places for children under 3 years of age was at 25.5% in 2015, still significantly below the Barcelona target of 33%”. However, the CSRs fail to focus on improving the quality of childcare services.

The CSRs recommend to provide full-time care services, but focus on the benefit of such services for women’s involvement in the labour market rather than for children’s well-being. Quality childcare is key to children’s development at an early age. Equal access to quality childcare needs to be ensured across the country, however there are still big differences for example in terms of the number of qualified personnel, the number of children in a group, or opening hours.

Child participation

The right of Austrian children to be heard and to participate is not taken into consideration in the European Semester. In recent years, the Austrian National Coalition and

the UNCRC have issued reports on this point. In its periodic report on Austria (2012), to which the Austrian National Coalition contributed, the UNCRC highlighted the exclusion of children with disabilities from public life. It also encouraged Austria to monitor the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 and educating children on the right to vote, and to take measures to implement its General Comment No. 12 on the right of the child to be heard.

Belgium

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by ensuring that every family has an income above the poverty rate.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

Due to the ongoing state reform and increasing regionalisation, policies on child poverty, childcare, education, free time and leisure, unemployment, and vocational training are now managed at the

Respondent organisation: Child Rights Coalition Flanders (CRCF)

The CRCF shares data based on the Alternative Report for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and inputs from Flemish NGOs. However, it was not consulted during the European Semester process and was not involved in monitoring the implementation of CSRs in Flanders. (Note: the same applies for the Walloon coalition.)

regional or local level. This creates a more unequal situation for children across the country, makes it more difficult to get a national overview and makes it harder to guarantee child rights at national level.

The 2017 Country Report has a purely economic reasoning with an overwhelming focus on growth and stability. However, the conditions for



11.3 millions total
22.6% under 19 yrs
5.6% under 4 yrs

Population

8.8%

Early school-leavers rate

21.6%

Child poverty rate

economic growth are not necessarily equivalent to the conditions that ensure the well-being of children; they may even be in contradiction. The few points of the report possibly affecting the situation of children, such as employment or education, are formulated in terms of supporting the interests of an economic and competitive state,

and not in terms of the interest of children.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children has not had a major impact on the protection of child rights in Belgium. However, some progress has been achieved thanks to EU-funded programmes and projects fighting child poverty.

Child poverty

While the 2017 ESPN report refers to federal and Flemish Action Plans Against Poverty as good policy examples, these documents are not binding and there is no responsible body or budget allocated to reach the goals set within. These Action Plans fail to have a significant positive impact on the lives of children. For example, the federal government promise to lift minimum incomes over the European poverty line will not be kept.

Child allowances in Belgium fail to lift families out of poverty, especially families in a vulnerable situation such as single parents, families with children with disabilities and large families.

Despite efforts to expand capacity in the child and youth care services in Flanders, access remains difficult due to a lack of places, lack of crisis support, resulting in long waiting lists. There is also a housing and debt crisis for families in the most vulnerable situations, due to a shortage of social housing and significant increases in energy costs. The government promise to build additional social houses has not yet been met.

Children poverty rates remain high in Belgium. The most recent child poverty figures show the rates to be around 13% in Flanders; 20% in Wallonia; and nearly 40% in Brussels. Federal social security allowances are below the poverty rate and therefore remain a special area of concern regarding child poverty in Belgium. Families with a migrant background face particular risks, being more regularly confronted with poverty, discrimination and unemployment.

Education

Although country specific recommendations for Belgium in

2017 are largely framed in terms of economic growth and the labour market, there is a recommendation which, while failing to mention children directly, indirectly affects them: “Ensure that the most disadvantaged groups, including people with migrant background, have equal access to quality education, vocational training and the labour market.” This is similar to the 2016 CSRs which recommended Belgium to “move forward with education and vocational training reforms and provide training support for disadvantaged groups, in particular people from a migrant background”.

Belgium has invested in language classes for refugee children and children who speak a foreign language at home. It has taken steps to provide free or cheaper education. Flanders has adopted the M-decree for inclusive education, and aims to increase pre-school participation of children between 3 and 6 years old.

Still, Belgium fails to eliminate social and economic inequality at school. The European Commission has been constantly drawing attention to educational inequalities linked

to socioeconomic background in Belgium that are above the EU and OECD averages, as in the 2017 CSRs introduction text. Children of migrant families, poor families or children with disabilities are at risk of falling behind in school. One out of five children leaves school without the basic skills to function in society, and many leave school without qualifications or with a low level of education. This has consequences for their economic opportunities in the future, and creates a growing group of low-educated and unemployed youth in Belgium.

The CRCF recommends to move away from an economic reasoning, “whereby the labour market and the inefficient outcome of education are more important than the well-being of the child”. Schools should be places where children are informed, supported and stimulated, and where they learn to speak up for themselves in order to grow up happy, independent and feeling solidarity with their fellow citizens. The CRCF promotes a more holistic approach to education, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Health

The mental health of young people in Belgium is a major concern with the country experiencing a very high youth suicide rate. Research on the mental health of youngsters shows that 30% feel under pressure and bad about themselves.

Belgium needs accessible first-line mental health services, which are customised and affordable for young people. Currently, 10% of the population cannot pay for their healthcare. Basic mental, dental and physical healthcare should be free until children reach the age of 18.

Child participation

There are increasing examples of organisations at the local level trying to involve children in their work on participation. Likewise, the 'What do you think' report of UNICEF and the Flemish Youth Council and Pupil Association serve as good examples of child participation.

Furthermore, some efforts that have been made to develop participation structures for children are based on forms of participation which are not always adequate for children, such as meetings, representation, or speeches. They do not provide a real space for children's engagement and certain groups of children in a vulnerable situation are excluded from these.

Generally, children in Belgium are not educated sufficiently about their own rights, and more efforts should be made to ensure that participation becomes an inherent part of children's everyday life, in school, healthcare, public services and every decision that influences their life. This is particularly true for groups in a vulnerable situation, such as children with disabilities, children in institutional care, children from disadvantaged families, migrant children or children in the justice system.



Bulgaria

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by developing well-coordinated and integrated services covering nutrition, health, early cognitive stimulation, and parental support, in order to achieve social inclusion and shared prosperity in the short and long-term.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

Despite the succession of five different governments over the

Respondent organisation: National Network for Children (NNC)

The National Network for Children (NNC) has been involved at the national level as part of various working groups, and sits on the Monitoring Committees of several Operational Programmes where it has had the opportunity to provide input. However, this participation is sometimes only formal and proposals are not taken into serious consideration. The NNC has also been invited to meetings on the European Semester organised by the European Commission at European level.

The NNC will be involved in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the CSRs through its work as a member of Eurochild, through its own Report Card, and by participating in the Operational Programmes: “Human resources development”; “Science, education, intelligent growth”; and “Good governance”. However, a lack of capacity and resources hampers its full participation in the European Semester process.

period 2013-2017, children’s issues have remained relatively high on the national policy agenda and progress has been achieved in several areas, notably in childcare system reform.

However, the approach of the government remains sectoral and

fragmented, with little coordination and synergy between policies, programmes or measures targeting children and families.

There is a need for projects that develop innovative approaches and



7.15 millions total
18.3% under 19 yrs
4.7% under 4 yrs

Population

13.8%

Early school-leavers rate

45.6%

Child poverty rate

models for targeting inequalities between regions and groups. However, there is a lack of sustainability of services run within pilot projects in Bulgaria. Currently, EU funding is being used mainly to fill state budget gaps rather than to find sustainable solutions for delivering systemic change.

The 2017 Country Report acknowledges the need to put more efforts into equal access and vulnerability of certain groups, including children as a whole, children with disabilities and Roma children. However, it also adopts a sectoral rather than comprehensive approach to child poverty and social exclusion, failing to address the need for the integration of services (social, health, educational, etc.) to provide a comprehensive child and/or person-centred approach.

Overall, positive developments in deinstitutionalisation, child poverty and other child issues still fail to live up to the Recommendation on Investing in Children that

encourages a comprehensive approach. Furthermore, reporting on the implementation of different sectoral policies tends to rely on quantitative indicators, whereas impact assessments are needed.

Child protection

Over the past decade, Bulgaria has made impressive progress in the area of childcare system reform, and in particular in ensuring the right of the child to live in a family environment. In line with the ambitious Vision on Deinstitutionalisation, all institutions for children with mental disabilities and almost half of the institutions for children under three years of age have been closed.

The number of children in the old-type residential institutions dropped from 7.587 in 2010 to 1.232 in June 2016. The number of children below the age of three in institutional care has been drastically reduced from

more than 3.000 in 2010 to 580 as of December 2016.

In October 2016, the Government adopted an updated Action Plan on Deinstitutionalisation for the period 2016-2020 which articulates steps for the continuation of childcare reform and puts a stronger focus on the prevention of family separation. It commits to the closure of all homes for children by 2020.

The Country Report for Bulgaria under the European Semester process fails to address this major reform, although the introduction text of the 2017 CSRs mentions the deinstitutionalisation process undertaken by the Bulgarian government.

Child poverty

While the relative poverty situation of children in Bulgaria has improved, its child poverty rate remains one of the highest in the EU, particularly among disadvantaged groups such

as Roma children or those living in rural areas.

Unfortunately, the social protection system achieves little progress in reducing income inequalities. Spending on unemployment benefits, social exclusion and housing benefits are particularly low and are reflected in poor social outcomes. This is exacerbated by the overall low access to quality integrated services, for the development of which responsible Ministries and stakeholders need to develop a joint legislative and financial vision.

In 2016, the Government set up a working group to prepare the report on the 2015-2016 Annual Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Promote Social Inclusion 2020. This group was also tasked with drafting a plan for the period 2017-2018 and reviewing the strategy. Despite NGOs' and trade unions' support for the adoption of a new strategy including more family-oriented

measures, tackling inequalities and supporting groups in a vulnerable situation, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy did not produce a new strategy.

Education

In both 2016 and 2017, one of the CSRs included a sentence related to education. In 2017, the European Commission recommends Bulgaria to “increase the provision of quality mainstream education, in particular for Roma.” The introduction text – although non-binding – provides further guidance by highlighting the need to develop a planned methodology for school financing and to improve educational opportunities, including during early childhood, for children from families with a lower socioeconomic status, in particular Roma families.

In July 2017, the Government adopted a multi-disciplinary mechanism for ensuring better enrolment and preventing early

school leaving among pre-school and school children. In addition, a National Plan of Action for 2017-2018 was adopted on 21 September 2017 for the implementation of the National Strategy for Encouraging and Improving Literacy 2014-2020.

Child participation

Approaches to child participation do not reflect the rights-based approach enshrined in international human rights standards – it is often understood as meaning only participation in activities. Efforts should be targeted at building the capacity of professionals, setting up mechanisms for participation, and creating a supportive environment conducive to the participation of children in decision-making affecting their life.



Croatia

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to implement the curricular reform based on scientific knowledge and evidence rather than value systems and ideologies, as this is a prerequisite for the sustainability of Croatian society and its social and economic development.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

Since 2016 there have not been new strategies or action plans promoting children's rights and well-being. KUD concludes that the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children has not played

Respondent organisation:

Coordination of Associations for Children (KUD)

The Coordination of Associations for Children (KUD) has only been involved in the European Semester process through its contribution to Eurochild's European Semester report. KUD lacks the resources and partially the knowledge to fully participate in the European Semester process. In addition, there is no structured process in Croatia which would enable it to participate in the European Semester process at national level.

a role in triggering social change for children.

The most positive policy developments for children in the past year have been amendments to the Law on Maternity and Parental Benefits. Ceilings to the benefits payable - calculated as a proportion of a base rate (c. €530) - have been raised. For example, the rate

paid during the first six months has increased from 80% to 120%. The rates for multiple births, for the third and every subsequent child, and for children with severe developmental disabilities or with increased childcare requirements have also increased. Possibilities have also been improved for leave to be taken flexibly - including being transferred to fathers.



4.19 millions total
20.2% under 19 yrs
4.7% under 4 yrs

Population

2.8%

Early school-leavers rate

26.6%

Child poverty rate

These issues were picked up in the introduction text of the 2017 country specific recommendations (CSRs). However, instead of a clear focus on the well-being of the child, it focused on employment issues for the parents, including the impact that a shortage of childcare has on women's participation in the labour market, the issue of unpaid paternity leave, and other challenges for work-life balance.

Child poverty

The introduction texts of the 2017 CSRs note that there is a high level of poverty and social exclusion in Croatia and that “only 0.6% of Gross Domestic Product was spent on the minimum income scheme targeting the poorest households”. It also points to shortcomings in the social protection system which are “not conducive to the efficient and fair delivery of public services, notably in health, education, and social assistance” due to “inconsistencies in eligibility criteria, fragmented geographical coverage, lack of coordination across authorities in charge, and low transparency”.

The 2017 CSRs for Croatia recommend to enhance the efficiency and reduce territorial disparities in the delivery of public services, and to improve coordination and transparency of social benefits. KUD estimates that this improvement could be positive if directed toward groups of children in a vulnerable situation and children and families who are most in need.

Major challenges in tackling child poverty remain a lack of political continuity and functional fragmentation of various strategic documents and policies aimed to improve children's life quality, including the 2014-2020 strategies for the Rights of Children and for Combating Poverty. Monitoring their implementation and evaluating their outcomes remains a challenge.

KUD also observes an increasing tendency for legislative measures to be developed not on the basis of evidence or out of concern for the best interests of the child, but from the influence of ideology and traditional value systems.

Early childhood

The lack of early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) services is an important issue in Croatia, as pointed out in the 2017 Country Report. Croatia is still among those EU countries with the lowest rate of participation of children in ECEC. There is lack of pre-school places for all children, and particularly for children in disadvantaged areas and children whose parents are unemployed.

There are significant regional differences and no national policy that would address these problems. Pre-school provision is the responsibility of local authorities, which often have insufficient administrative and especially financial capacity for quality, efficient and independent planning and provision of services. Other limitations include a shortage of professional specialists (especially in smaller local communities and in less developed and poorer counties), inflexible working hours which are inconsistent with the needs of parents, and high costs for parents.

Education

The Croatian government publicly advocates for the implementation of curricular reform to help address “severe deficiencies in basic skills, applied science, and mathematics among 15-year-old schoolchildren” as highlighted in the introduction text of the 2017 CSRs. Two major public protests (40 000 citizens in 2016 and 15 000 in 2017) have demanded a continuation of the reform. However, in practice the reform has stopped and there is no clear political will for its implementation.

The 2017 CSRs' introduction text recognises that “after ambivalent stakeholder reactions, the curricular reform was revised and implementation has been significantly delayed”. The 2017 Country Report highlights the stagnation of the reform, and the 2017 CSRs recommend to accelerate the pace towards implementation.

The 2017 CSRs also recommend to “improve adult education, in particular of the low-skilled and the long-term unemployed”. KUD

considers that this could be positive for children with low-skilled or long-term unemployed parents. These families are exposed to the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion and are often in an unfavourable socioeconomic position.

Child participation

Although the rights of children to participate are relatively well recognised in Croatian laws and strategic documents, in practice child participation in decision-making in Croatia is still at a very low level. Implementation is still mostly tokenistic.

There are additional challenges mitigating against the participation of specific groups of children. Roma children face systematic disadvantage and discrimination, with the result that they are under-represented at higher levels of the education system. Children who have been in institutional care receive too little support to integrate into the wider community upon leaving care. Children with developmental difficulties and children with serious and/or chronic health issues are also still not sufficiently consulted on matters of importance regarding their lives and treatment options.



Cyprus

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by adopting a comprehensive National Action Plan for promoting child well-being that sets specific child-related targets and that places an emphasis on respecting and promoting the enjoyment of rights for groups of children in a vulnerable situation.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

The PCCPWC has not detected any positive change in policies and does not feel that the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children has been seriously taken into account. On

Respondent organisation: Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)

The PCCPWC was not involved in the European Semester process at sub-national, national or European level and was not able to contribute to reports. However, all three Trade Union members of the PCCPWC were part of the consultations prior to the National Reform Programme.

The PCCPWC finds that the electronic consultation system recently put in place by the government is not an adequate form of consultation and provides an excuse for the state not to engage meaningfully in discussions with civil society. Overall the quality of NGO consultation has fallen, as the government resorts less and less to the statutory process of consulting.

the contrary there was a decline in spending on family and child policy.

There was nothing specifically related to children in the 2016 CSRs. All five recommendations had to do with economic and financial reforms, since Cyprus was still under the fiscal consolidation programme. Thus, the CSRs did not encourage any particular developments in

policies for children. Likewise, children were not mentioned at all throughout the 2017 CSRs.

Cyprus has a ‘Children Law’ that dates back to 1956. It was amended several times (in 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2013 and 2014) and is complemented by different laws seeking to protect children such as the ‘Violence in the Family Law’



0.85 millions total
22.5% under 19 yrs
5.6% under 4 yrs

Population

7.7%

Early school-leavers rate

29.6%

Child poverty rate

or the 'Corporal Punishment Law'. Despite efforts by the PCCPWC to promote the formulation of a new integrated and comprehensive piece of legislation, underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and gathering all existing texts, this has not yet been taken up.

Child poverty

There has not been any recommendation on child poverty or poverty in general in the CSRs for 2016 and 2017, even though Eurostat reveals an increase (27.4% of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2014, 28.9% in 2015). In 2014, 14.4% of children under 18 were at risk of poverty after social transfers, and this percentage rose to 16.3% in 2015, the highest increase in the EU. More than 60% of the population in Cyprus reported having difficulties to meet unexpected expenses in 2015.

The 2017 Country Report clearly mentions an increase in child poverty and social exclusion from 2014 to 2015 in Cyprus, but does not offer suggestions as to what should be done to address this

issue. There is specific mention of the risk of poverty or social exclusion faced by children with disabilities, but no mention of other groups in a vulnerable situation. The inadequacy of social protection, or lack of integrated approaches to support people facing poverty is ignored.

Education

The PCCPWC strongly criticises the education system as being designed to make children attend classes, write exams and get grades that define their future rather than focusing on enabling children to learn and develop their skills and abilities. Whilst both the Country Report 2017 and the CSRs support education reform, they only focus on labour market relevance rather than the best interests of children and they fail to take into account the particular needs of children in vulnerable situations.

The PCCPWC also recommends more investment in early childhood education and care, so that children aged 0-3 are included, in line with the Barcelona objectives.

Health

Health services for children are weaker than before. The financial criteria for access to free health care is rising along with poverty, and it is increasingly difficult for parents to seek preventive medical care for their children. A new Universal Health Care System that was adopted in 2017 is intended to improve the situation – this should come into effect from 2019.

The Country Report 2017 highlights a lack of progress regarding the implementation of the universal healthcare system, however it does not mention issues of accessibility and affordability for children or adults. The fifth CSR's recommendation focuses on ensuring the effective implementation of the universal healthcare system.

Child participation

Three child participation channels exist and, on paper, child participation was strengthened. However, the PCCPWC has not detected any real change in how

children's views are taken seriously into account or have any impact on formulating new legislation or policies. The Cyprus Children's Parliament is not funded by the government, the Commissioner's Young Advisors Team serves only the purposes of the Commissioner's office and the Pancyprian Coordinating Student's Committee is more 'decorative' than really acting on a consultative status with the Ministry of Education. While the parliament has committed itself to take children's views into account, results are yet to be seen.

While the report of the European Social Policy Network mentions strengthened child participation in decision-making, the PCCPWC points out that NGOs are the principal actors seeking to engage children in participation by developing and strengthening structures, without support from the government.

Estonia

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to ensure that high quality education, health care and social care services are accessible nationwide to every child and young person.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

While there have been no major new developments, previous strategies or action plans have been further developed. The Recommendation on Investing in Children did not play any role

Respondent organisation: Estonian Union for Child Welfare

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare was not consulted during the European Semester process. No information has been communicated to children's organisations on possible involvement in monitoring or reporting on the implementation of the country specific recommendations (CSRs). The European Semester and its content is never discussed publicly, but is dealt with internally by the responsible ministries. While many stakeholders would be able and willing to participate in the process, there is a lack of involvement of these actors by the government.

in these changes. In fact, this document is not well-known in Estonia, with little chance of influencing policies.

The Strategy for Children and Families 2012-2020 sets very high goals to improve the well-being and quality of life of children and families - including by supporting families through a combined system of benefits and services, by

promoting positive parenting and a better work-life balance, and by guaranteeing respect of the rights of the child and the creation of a functional child protection system. However, there are still many challenges in implementation.

One hopefully positive step has been the start of local government reform with the adoption of the Administrative Reform Act. This



1.32 millions total
20.6% under 19 yrs
5.4% under 4 yrs

Population

10.9%

Early school-leavers rate

21.2%

Child poverty rate

should facilitate better services for families and children living in rural areas. The reform follows the 2016 CSRs in which the European Commission recommended Estonia to “ensure the provision and accessibility of high quality public services, especially social services, at local level, inter alia by adopting and implementing the proposed local government reform”.

The introduction text of the 2017 CSRs invites Estonia to now implement this reform by taking further key steps, such as revising municipalities’ financing schemes and adopting legislative acts on the division of responsibilities and tasks between municipalities and the central government. The introduction text notes that adopting these measures “is critical to ensuring the provision of quality public services in areas such as education, youth work, health promotion and transport”.

The 2017 CSRs also recommend Estonia to review the parental leave system. While this is formulated within the objective of reducing the gender pay gap, the

Estonian Union for Child Welfare considers it to be a positive recommendation that supports children’s well-being. Estonia is already considering a revision of the parental leave system to improve flexibility for employees, and a draft law will be presented to the Government this autumn.

Child protection

In 2016, the CSRs recommended to “ensure the provision and accessibility of high quality public services, especially social services, at local level”. A lot of effort has been put into improving the effectiveness of some social services directly related to children. A pilot project of Children’s House (Barnahus) is ongoing and provides services for sexually or otherwise abused children. The centralised Child Protection Council helped to strengthen child protection services.

Currently, the reform of alternative care services (both institutional and family-based care) is being carried out in Estonia to increase the number of support services

for children and young people living in or leaving alternative care. According to the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) report could have included more information on alternative care.

Child poverty

Estonia has developed its family allowance system and the Estonian Union for Child Welfare estimates that it has produced good results. Notably, support for large families was increased. In addition, a Child Allowance Fund was created on 1 January 2017. This fund is intended for children whose absent parent is not paying the child allowance to the parent with whom the child is living. By 2015, parents owed €14.5 million to their children and enforcement proceedings were ineffective.

However, more cooperation is needed between different sectors, institutions and ministries in order to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. It is also necessary to pay more attention to shaping a

child-friendly budget, both at the state and local levels.

Education

There is currently a shortage of childcare and kindergarten places, which affects families’ work-life balance. There is a lack of child psychologists and educational support specialists at the local level. This negatively impacts local municipalities’ ability to provide quality educational support services. The Estonian Union for Child Welfare notes that it is important to value education professionals in schools and kindergarten and to invest in better remuneration in order to motivate and attract more people into the profession.

The reform of the education system and the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education is underway – both sectors will engage in cross-sectoral cooperation, for example by carrying out joint assessments of children’s needs.

Health

The ESPN report states that healthcare is free; however, the waiting lists are very long and primary healthcare is not accessible all over Estonia, particularly in rural areas.

Child participation

The government has made very little effort to involve children with disabilities, minority children and children in institutions in effective participation. The Estonian Union for Child Welfare points out that these issues could be addressed more in details in the ESPN report.



Finland

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

"Take action to increase the proportion of children participating in early childhood education, by guaranteeing sufficient resources for services and improved information provision for parents whose children do not currently participate."

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

The Finnish government is two years into the initial phase of implementing a programme to reform child and family services. The aim of the programme is that all services for children, young people and families

Respondent organisation: Central Union of Child Welfare

The Central Union of Child Welfare has not been involved in the European Semester process at sub-national, national or European level. However it intends to monitor the implementation of the country specific recommendations.



5.49 millions total
21.8% under 19 yrs
5.4% under 4 yrs

Population

7.9%

Early school-leavers rate

14.7%

Child poverty rate

will be pooled into a set of child and family-oriented services. The focus is on preventive services, timely access and curbing the rise in costs for remedial services.

The aims of the programme are positive, but the Central Union of Child Welfare does not feel that the Recommendation on Investing in Children has had an explicit impact

on its development. Furthermore, although it is too early to make a full evaluation of the reform's success, the government recently cut child and family services and benefits, which is not a positive step.

There were no child-related recommendations for Finland in the 2016 CSRs. In the 2017 CSRs, the focus is on macroeconomic policies.

Children or the Recommendation on Investing in Children are not mentioned in the introduction text. The only recommendation that has a direct impact on children is a mention of the social and healthcare reform, whilst references to the labour market and employment issues can indirectly support children's rights. Moreover, investments in the education of migrants can also be seen as positive for children and families.

Child poverty

The recent government decision to cut child and family services and benefits negatively impacts the rights of children and their well-being. The number of children and families with children, especially under the age of 3, living in poverty has more than doubled in the last ten years and this can be related to the reduction of the amount of child and parental benefits. The Council of Europe's Committee on Social Rights has recently noted that the level of basic social security is inadequate in Finland and does not meet the requirements laid down in the European Social Charter. The

cuts that have been made especially impact the everyday lives of families with low income.

The 2017 Country Report points out that the number of 15-24 year-olds who do not study, work or participate in vocational training is increasing. This creates a risk of increasing child poverty in the future for children living in jobless household.

Child protection

The 2015 Social Welfare Act aimed to strengthen child protection and social services in the field of prevention, but the municipalities have not implemented the changes in practice in a way that would reduce the need for child welfare services. The living conditions of children in foster care and in family care are not monitored or followed in an adequate, effective and systematic manner due to lack of adequate resources.

The availability of services and support for children with disabilities and their families is hindered by the complexity of relevant legislation and inadequate coordination and

cooperation between authorities. The implementation of practices related to services for persons with disabilities vary between municipalities and application instructions may limit access to statutory services.

Early childhood

The 2014 pre-primary education reform made pre-school mandatory for all 6-year-old children. This aimed to give all children more equal early educational possibilities, but has only partially remedied the problem. On average, fewer children participate in early childhood education in Finland than in other Nordic and European countries.

The 2017 Country Report notes that the costs of day-care have been reduced for families with low income, but does not mention that the right to full-time day care has been reduced for families with an unemployed parent or with a parent taking care of another child of the family on parental leave. Nor does it flag any concerns with private day-care services excluding children with greater support needs.

More worryingly, public austerity measures have undermined the quality of childcare provided. An amendment to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care increased the maximum number of children per class and per member of staff in day-care for over 3-year-olds. The logic of this reform fits with that presented in the 2017 Country Report, which points out the impact of motherhood on female participation in the labour market, but does not consider the needs and rights of the children.

Another explanation for Finland having problems meeting the Recommendation on Investing in Children in respect of the number of children enrolled in organised day-care, is that the 'home care allowance' (HCA), a cash-for-care benefit, reduces the use of day-care. The use of the HCA is correlated with education (parents with lower education use the HCA longer than well-educated parents); labour market attachment (those with weak attachment use it longer) and family status (single mothers use it longer than mothers with spouses).

Education

The 2017 Country Report notes that educational outcomes in Finland are weakening. However, the report does not discuss the effect on children's rights or the impact this will most likely have on the future careers of the young people. The Country Report also mentions the importance of access to education for asylum-seekers, although it does not go into detail on the specific needs of children in a vulnerable situation. The Central Union of Child Welfare also notes that educational equality, which used to be high in Finland, is declining. The educational background of parents and the place of residence has a clear influence on children's learning results. Migrants clearly lag behind Finnish students in literacy and mathematics. This difference is higher in Finland compared to other Nordic countries.

Health

Finland is preparing a reform of the social and healthcare system, which is linked to regional-government reform. The original aim of the reform was to increase the quality of the services by integrating social and healthcare services, and shifting responsibility from municipalities to counties. However, in practice, the reform has focused mainly on involving the private sector as service providers, which is more likely to jeopardise the integration of services.

Finnish child rights NGOs have criticised the reform as threatening children's right to equal services. They therefore do not welcome the 2017 CSRs which recommend Finland to ensure timely adoption and implementation of the reform to achieve budgetary objectives.

This places short-term financial objectives above the need to ensure investment in quality services in line with the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

Child participation

The right of children over 12 years to be heard is fulfilled relatively well in child welfare and in judicial procedures, although the opportunities and degree of participation at the municipal level vary greatly between cities and not all municipalities have a youth council. However, children under 12 seldom have their opinions taken into consideration.

France

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Guarantee access to adequate resources for young people, particularly those leaving care, strengthen prevention policies and investment in social services which could help prevent high-risk behaviour, child abuse/neglect and dropping out of school, and greater attention to unaccompanied migrant children’s access to education in French-administered overseas territories.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been several positive recent developments in child policy in France. Notably, the

Respondent organisation:
CNAPE, Solidarité Laïque, Apprentis d'Auteuil

The respondents have not been involved in the European Semester process beyond one invitation from the representation of the European Commission in France to discuss the social situation in France. There is no plan for them to monitor or report on the implementation of the CSRs.

The biggest barriers to participation are a lack of communication from the officials involved in the process and a lack of NGO resources to find out and get fully involved. The government consults relevant bodies such as the National Council for Policies to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, but the respondents would like to see a broader consultation which also goes beyond economic considerations to allow a place for highlighting social issues, such as child rights.



66.76 millions total
24.6% under 19 yrs
5.9% under 4 yrs

Population
(provisional numbers)

8.8%

Early school-leavers rate

22.6%

Child poverty rate

Children's Ombudswoman created an independent mechanism to follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, whose concluding observations on France were published in early 2016. This

mechanism includes a dialogue with non-profit organisations.

The 2016 Child Protection Law promotes a multi-dimensional approach to more strenuously respecting children's rights and the principle of the best interest of the

child. Moreover, two developments have sought to encourage child participation: the creation of a National Youth Council; and the adoption of an 'Equality and Citizenship law' in December 2016.

A more negative development has been the failure to fully implement, by lack of appropriate means, the "School Rebuilding" Law passed in 2013.

Neither the European Semester process nor the Recommendation on Investing in Children are seen to have driven these developments. Only one recommendation in the 2017 CSRs refers indirectly to children by calling on France to "revis[e] the system of vocational education and training". This echoes the 2016 CSRs which also focused on links between the education sector and the labour market.

Child poverty

Child poverty is an important area of concern. The UNICEF 2015 alternative report on France to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that 1 in 5 children

lives below the poverty line, which represents a total of more than 3 million children in the country. At the end of 2016, the Observatory of Inequalities noted that 36%, or 1.8 million people out of the 5 million persons in a situation of poverty in France are children.

The 2017 Country Report highlights poverty, social exclusion and inequalities, focusing on certain groups in a vulnerable situation, such as children, young people and single parents, who remain at high risk of poverty.

In October 2017, the government launched a consultation to build a national plan for fighting child and youth poverty, and nominated an inter-ministerial delegate on the subject.

Child protection

The adoption of the 2016 Child Protection Law demonstrates a willingness to address child rights issues through a multi-dimensional and child-focused approach, promoting more strenuously respect for children's rights and the principle

of the best interest of the child. It considers the fundamental needs of children as the basis for the observation, evaluation and systems of care.

Civil society, young people in alternative care and their parents were consulted during the drafting of the law. The law has created a national council of child protection which acts as a national governance mechanism for the child protection system, and allows a better cooperation of all the stakeholders involved in the system.

The three respondents highlight the urgent need for an appropriate care system for unaccompanied migrant children, in order to address their specific needs, taking into account their history and experiences, in respect of their rights, and in order to enable their social inclusion and their well-being.

Although the 2017 Country Report speaks about the deteriorating employment situation of children born outside the EU and notes that "pupils with a migrant background face additional difficulties", it fails to mention the situation of children

in the child protection system and unaccompanied migrant children. NGOs working to support these children face difficulties and a lack of funding, which varies from region to region.

Education

Both the 2016 and 2017 CSRs called for reforms to improve the links between the education sector and the labour market, particularly through vocational education and training. The introduction text of the 2017 CSRs also mentions the difficulties faced by students from a disadvantaged background, the issue of early drop-outs, and gaps in educational outcomes.

The main initiative to counter this phenomenon is the 2013 Youth Guarantee, which enables minimum funding for 16-25 year-olds neither in employment, education or training. However, no new efforts were specifically invested into solving youth unemployment issues in 2016-2017.

Furthermore, education reforms are also needed focusing on promoting

the education of future citizens and helping to develop their critical thinking and social skills. The access to education for children on the move, refugee children and unaccompanied migrant children is a particularly important challenge. A systematic co-construction of public education policy is needed with all interested parties.

The respondents support the European Social Policy Network report's call to "define a strategy to reduce the level of inequalities at school and improve the coordination between social workers and teachers, social and family policies and education policy". They also concur with the 2017 Country Report, which states that school inequalities and learning difficulties of children have to be addressed. The School Rebuilding Law should also be fully implemented, as the Country Report suggests.

On a positive note, in current debates, the new government seems to be concerned about early childhood education and care and primary school.

Health

Access to health services for vulnerable children, especially children who live in slums, is a subject of concern. Some poor families do not have access to the whole range of health services.

Child participation

France has shown a strong willingness to develop child participation through two major developments. In December 2016, the country adopted the 'Equality and Citizenship law', which recognises the value of children's engagement and encourages child and youth engagement

by developing the civic service programme and the creation of local child and youth council. The law also ensures the right of all children to publish material, for example within a child council.

Since December 2016, a youth council (which is a college of the High Council of Family, Childhood and Age, created by the 2015 law on the adaptation of society to ageing) has been running at national level. The youth council is consulted on laws and in national debates which affect children, young people and their families.

While the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommendations seem to have had a tangible impact on these developments, it is not clear whether the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children had any influence.

Germany

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address the persisting social injustice and poverty of children and young people by employing a holistic and integrated strategy.”

Respondent organisation: Alliance of German child and youth welfare organisations (AGJ)

AGJ has not been involved in the European Semester process this year. Participation remains difficult due to the European Semester’s strong focus on fiscal and economic policy, and even more so after the complementary National Social Reporting in Germany – in which AGJ previously took part – was suspended in 2017.

AGJ’s general diagnosis from 2015 remains valid: “It is essential to integrate child and youth welfare associations into the national consultation process on the Europe 2020 strategy right from the beginning.”



82.18 millions total
18.3% under 19 yrs
4.4% under 4 yrs

Population

10.2%

Early school-leavers rate

19.3%

Child poverty rate

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have not been any major policy developments promoting children’s rights and well-being in Germany since June 2016. There has been an intense debate on the inclusion of children’s rights in the German Basic Law, but this initiative

by the Länder has not (yet) been translated into a concrete draft bill.* One small, yet positive step in terms of family policy is the recent reform of the advanced child support which benefits children in single-parent households.

The 2017 Country Report attests that there was limited progress

* For more details see ESPN report

on implementing the 2016 CSRs recommendation to “achieve a sustained upward trend in public investment, especially in [...] education”. Despite more spending by the Federal Government, expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP has remained stagnant and below the EU average.

As in 2016, the 2017 CSRs make no direct mention of children, but largely

repeat two potentially relevant recommendations to “[a]ccelerate public investment at all levels of government, especially in education [...]” and “reduce disincentives to work for second earners”. The latter recommendation is linked to children insofar as it entails a promotion of parents’ labour participation and an expansion of childcare facilities.

Overall, the advancement of children’s rights and well-being continues to play a minor part in the CSRs for Germany. From the perspective of children’s rights and well-being, a mention of the need to reduce child poverty and social inequality in Germany would have been desirable.

Child poverty

Despite economic growth, there is an increasing number of people living in poverty or at risk of poverty in Germany. The 2017 Country Report recognises that child poverty continues to be a major problem in Germany. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for children remains above pre-crisis levels at 14.6%. This is largely due to the high risk of poverty experienced

by single-parent households (33.7% in 2015) and families with more than three children, as well as due to the growing phenomenon of in-work poverty (24.3% in 2015).**

Until now, the German support system does not take into account the real needs of children and young people. The Country Report highlights that several instruments of the current support system do not benefit disadvantaged households, such as the tax-free child allowance (Kinderfreibetrag), or set conflicting incentives, such as the joint taxation for married couples (Ehegattensplitting).

There is an important need for, amongst other things, a reform of the monetary support for children and families. However, these issues are not picked up in the 2017 CSRs for Germany.

Early childhood

Investment in early childhood education and care is urgently needed to help overcome societal

.....
** See 2017 Country Report Germany

disadvantages. The 2017 Country Report refers to the additional financial resources needed to further expand and improve early childhood education and care.

In relation to this, the introduction text of the 2017 CSRs highlights the crucial importance of “quality and affordable full-time childcare, all-day schools and long-term care [...] for increasing female participation in the workforce”. Such measures are welcomed provided they retain their focus on the quality of the services provided based on the best interests of the child.

Education

The 2017 Country Report mentions the good overall performance of the German education system. However, the need for further investments in the education sector, especially due to integration challenges, is clearly highlighted. The report alludes to the difficulties migrant children face in the education system.

AGJ believes that, in fact, the education system in Germany tends to perpetuate social injustice instead

of remediating it. This challenge should urgently be addressed in order to separate children’s chances and performance in the education system from their socioeconomic background. To this aim, it is necessary to improve access to and the quality of school education, especially with regard to all-day schools.

Child participation

Effectively implementing child and youth participation across the entire country is a challenge. Since many aspects of this policy realm are regulated at the municipal level, the implementation of participation rights varies across municipalities and, in many places, remains sketchy.

In the European Social Policy Network report, the analysis of the implementation of children’s right to participation focuses on the initiative to include children’s rights in the German Basic Law . It might have been fruitful to also take into account other aspects covered by pillar 3 of the Recommendation on Investing in Children, such as children’s participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities.

Ireland

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to enhance social infrastructure, including social housing supply and the supply and quality of early childhood and school-age childcare; address child poverty through an integrated balance of universal and targeted policies on income and services; and deliver an integrated package of activation policies to increase employment prospects of low-skilled people and to address low work intensity of households”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been numerous positive policy developments for children in Ireland, although implementation has not been fully realised. Developments include an Affordable Childcare Scheme, Rebuilding

Respondent organisation: Children's Rights Alliance

Through its work with Eurochild, the Children's Rights Alliance feels well-informed on the process and is invited to comment on the Country Report and make recommendations for the CSRs every year through its membership of the Community and Voluntary Pillar, a 17-member organisation based on social partnership.

In 2016, the Alliance held a child poverty conference, with the support of Eurochild.

One of the panel sessions was on the CSRs, including representatives of the Irish Government and European Commission. The Alliance has carried out follow-up work with relevant departments and through its annual Report Card analysis continues to be involved in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the CSRs.

Ireland (the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness), the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, the Educational Inclusion Action Plan, the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, the Future of Healthcare, and the Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, National Drugs and Alcohol Strategy 2017-2025.

The Recommendation on Investing in Children has not explicitly played a role in triggering social change in Ireland but it has provided a very useful framework. Notably, a paper on Actions to Achieve the Child Poverty Reduction Target adopted by the National Advisory Council on Children and Young People in November 2016 followed the format and order of the Recommendation on Investing in Children.



4.72 millions total
28% under 19 yrs
7.5% under 4 yrs

Population

6.3%

Early school-leavers rate

28.8%

Child poverty rate

The 2017 Country Report and CSRs include references to quality childcare and the need for social infrastructure including social housing. However, the focus remains on the economic rather than societal benefits. There is not enough focus on how this will improve children's well-being.

Child poverty

Ireland has a National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 called 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', which contains an important child poverty reduction target. The National Advisory Council on Children and Young People adopted a paper on actions to achieve this target in November 2016. The paper and its recommendations aim to inform a whole-of-Government approach to tackling the number of children in consistent poverty.

A number of changes related to the adopted paper were announced already in Budget 2017, including extension of the School Meals Programme, an increase to the income disregards for lone parents

who qualify for certain social welfare payments, the announcement of a childcare package and an increase in the Youth Work Budget.

Whilst the Children's Rights Alliance welcomes these developments at national level, it was disappointed to see that the 2016 focus on child poverty has been lost in the 2017 CSRs. It calls for increased investment in services which are proven to improve outcomes for children and families living in poverty.

Housing and homelessness

Both the 2017 Country Report and the CSRs refer to the need for social infrastructure including social housing, which is one of the most severe infrastructure shortcomings in the country. As the introduction text of the CSRs points out, "demand for new housing currently exceeds supply by a wide margin in the country's main urban areas. As a result, residential property prices and rents continue to increase rapidly, in turn resulting

in a recent high increase in housing exclusion and homelessness". This is particularly important given that the most recent figures indicate that more than 3.000 children are now living in emergency homeless accommodation. The Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness 'Rebuilding Ireland' committed to end the use of unsuitable emergency homeless accommodation for families with children by July 2017 but the Government did not meet this target. While the introduction of 'family hubs' with cooking facilities to accommodate homeless families is welcome, more affordable and social housing is required to address the ongoing housing crisis.

Early childhood

The Government announced an 'Affordable Childcare Scheme' (ACS) in Budget 2017 to replace the existing complex targeted childcare subsidy programmes only available to specific groups of low-income parents. The ACS includes a universal non-means tested subsidy for parents of children aged from six months to three years - the first such subsidy towards childcare costs for

this age group. It also includes a targeted and graduated childcare subsidy for low-income parents with children aged six months to 15 years.

Despite some technical delays in implementation, the Alliance welcomes the use of both universal and targeted approaches as the best means for impacting on child poverty and continues to press for implementation in September 2018 following the introduction of the necessary legislation and infrastructure. As an interim measure, the Government is distributing both the universal and targeted subsidies in respect of an anticipated 70.000 children through existing targeted programmes.

The 2017 CSRs introduction text state that "concerns remain over the quality of childcare provisions, including the availability of full-time services. As a percentage of wages, net childcare costs in Ireland are among the highest in the Union." The reference in the 2017 CSRs to quality childcare is very important, since only quality makes the positive difference for children.

The Government also introduced two weeks paternity leave and Paternity Benefit, commencing in September 2017. This initial small step represents a positive cultural shift in Irish attitudes towards the role of fathers in children's lives and well-being.

Education

The Children's Rights Alliance calls on the Irish Government to build on its commitments to overcoming educational disadvantage. This includes: enacting the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 to prohibit the charging of admission and enrolment fees in all non-fee paying primary and secondary schools; strengthening the roll-out of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020; and delivering the National Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan.

It stresses the need for a cross-departmental national strategy on school food provision and food poverty providing for a significant

expansion and increased funding of the School Meals Scheme including early years' settings. It also asks for the restoration of the rate of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to the 2011 level and a five-year template for the delivery of an entirely free schoolbook system.

Finally, the Alliance demands an urgent review of the impact of the withdrawal of Traveller specific education supports to help Travellers remain in mainstream education, as well as a review of the School Completion Programme and an increase in the minimum age for leaving compulsory education to 18 years.

Health

The Children's Rights Alliance calls on the Government to complete negotiations to extend free GP care to all children up to age 18, with access for under 12 year-olds being the first priority. It also stresses the need to enhance the preventative and health promotion components of the GP contract. Proposed steps to increase access to sports and

structured physical activity for children in poor households must also be resourced.

Key preventive interventions which need to be enhanced include free early diagnosis and intervention of children's speech and language difficulties and more proactively tackling the significant problem of overweight children. To do this effectively, there is a need to develop better child-specific data systems – including data on the length of time children are waiting for diagnosis and treatment and their socioeconomic status.

There is a need to develop a resource allocation model which aims to ensure that each geographic area has the appropriate skills mix, and sufficient staffing resources to meet needs taking into account the recommendations of the National Disability Authority. A social deprivation indicator should be included in the resource allocation formula and area-based Children's Public Health Nurses could be a useful approach.

Child participation

There has been some good progress on this over the year in terms of publication of a consultation with asylum-seeking children and young people who live in direct provision as well as a youth mental health consultation and one on a new LGBTI+ strategy. A consultation undertaken by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with 177 children directly informed the development of a plan on school-age childcare on after-school care. This falls under Ireland's strategy on participation in decision-making for young people. However there has been as yet no consultation with children and young people in areas like the age of digital consent and the Guardian ad Litem service which relates to the voice of the child being heard in childcare proceedings.

The launch in November 2017 of a new National Centre for Excellence – Hub na nÓg -that will focus on including the voice of young people in decision-making is particularly welcome.

Latvia

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by improving the adequacy of the minimum income, as well the accessibility and quality of social services for families with children.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

An Action Plan for 2017-2018 was developed - coordinated by the Ministry of Welfare. However, this is in response to the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued for the

Respondent organisation: Latvian Child Welfare Network

The Latvian Child Welfare Network and other child rights NGOs in Latvia have not been involved in the European Semester process at sub-national, national or European level, nor will they be involved in the monitoring and/or reporting on the implementation of the country specific recommendations (CSRs).

The Network faces internal barriers to participation through lack of capacity, resources and knowledge, and external barriers due to a lack of access to information and possibilities to participate. This exclusion is reflected in a weak analysis of the situation of children in Latvia.

government of Latvia in 2016, rather than to the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Nevertheless, there are links between the 2017 CSRs and the Recommendation – even if these are not causal links.

One recommendation in the 2017 CSRs recommends Latvia to “increase cost-effectiveness and access to healthcare, including by

reducing out of pocket payments and long waiting times”. This would be relevant to improving access to affordable, quality services (the second pillar of the Recommendation) although access to healthcare in Latvia remains problematic in 2017.

Another recommendation in the 2017 CSRs is to “improve the



1.97 millions total
19.6% under 19 yrs
5.3% under 4 yrs

Population

10%

Early school-leavers rate

24.7%

Child poverty rate

adequacy of the social safety net and up-skill the labour force by speeding up the curricula reform in vocational education". This would be relevant to the first pillar on access to resources and improving life chances of young people. However, following a similar CSR recommendation on reducing youth unemployment in 2016, there has still been very limited progress - as highlighted in the 2017 Country Report.

Child poverty

The high rate of children living in poverty and children living in families at risk of exclusion are among the most important issues in Latvia. Yet, these issues have never been mentioned in the CSRs for Latvia. The closest reference has been a recommendation in the 2017 CSRs to "reduce taxation for low-income earners by shifting it to other sources", which could benefit at-risk families and their children.

Limited progress has been made to improve the adequacy of social assistance benefits. The state has increased child benefits for some

at-risk families, including for families with more than three children and the survivor's child benefit. In January 2017, the Parliament adopted legislative amendments stipulating that family benefits should be excluded from the 'income test' which had the effect of slightly widening the coverage of benefits for families with children.

However, levels of social assistance for tackling child poverty are still inadequate and a key reform of the minimum income level announced in 2014 has been abandoned. The Latvian Child Welfare Network recommends an adequate increase of minimum guaranteed income for families with children.

Child protection

Currently, a lack of support services for children in a vulnerable situation and their families is reflected in the high number of children suffering from physical or emotional abuse at home. This significant issue affects the educational outcomes of these children, as well as their later integration in society and the labour market. It is a key aspect of the need

to invest in children in Latvia in order to break cycles of disadvantage.

The 2017 Country Report highlights the relatively high number of children living in childcare institutions and directly references Eurochild's Opening Doors campaign. The crucial deinstitutionalisation process in Latvia is still facing implementation delays and an overall lack of understanding among municipalities about its aims. Disappointingly, the tendency among municipalities is to use available funds to resize and renovate existing institutions instead of closing them down and opening new, community-based services.

The ESPN report contains only a few sentences on deinstitutionalisation and does not reflect on the current difficulties. It mentions that the total number of children placed in out-of-family care has gradually declined, without noticing that the ratio of children in such care settings has remained the same.

The 2017 Country Report noted one positive development in that monthly allowances for children in custody or foster families has been

increased since January 2017. In addition, parents of an adopted child under 3 receive ten days of paid leave, and the allowance during the pre-adoption period has been raised. However, the allowances are still very low.

Early childhood and education

In May 2016, the central government stopped financing childcare vouchers for children without a place in public kindergartens, transferring the responsibility to ensure equal access to pre-school education back to the municipalities. This development is likely to have a negative impact on access to childcare.

Latvia should ensure inclusive and accessible education for all children, including children with special needs.

Health

Low public funding and structural impediments serve to limit access

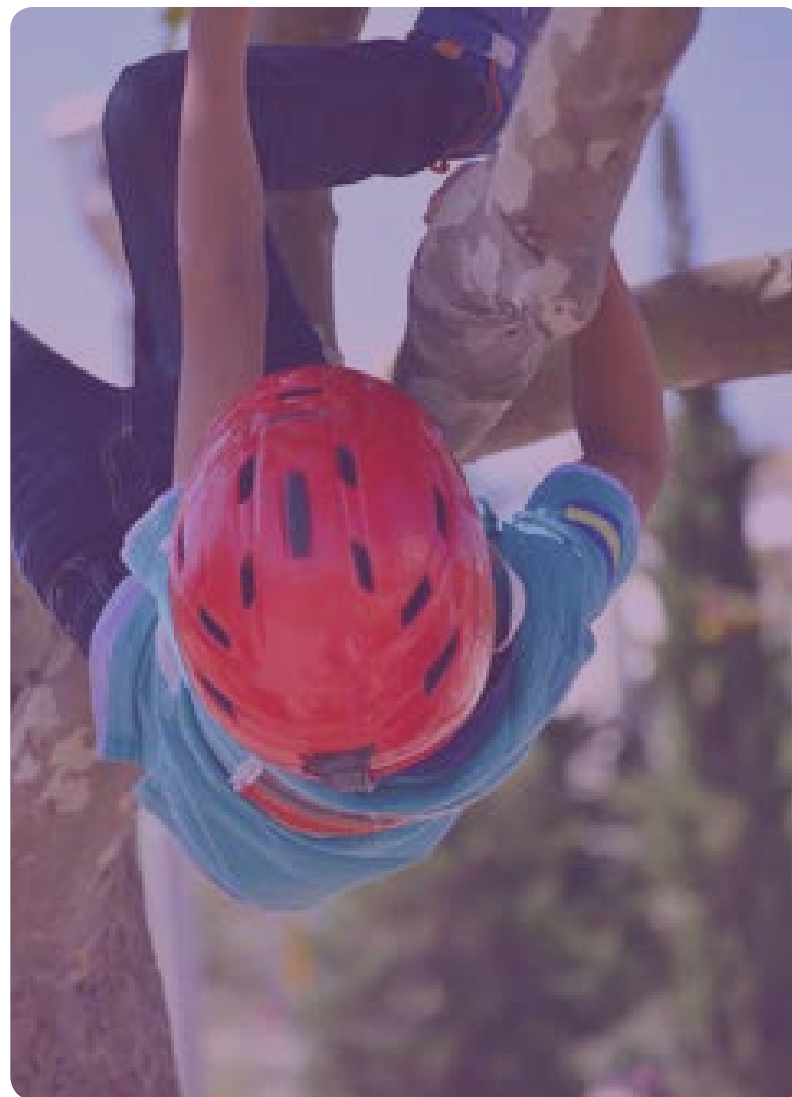
to healthcare and leave a large part of the population with unmet healthcare needs. While there was a slight increase in public funding in 2017, no medium-term financing plans have been adopted. Meanwhile, the high number of out-of-pocket and informal payments is not transparent and continues to create risks of inefficiency and corruption.

Child participation

The term “child participation” should be clearly stated in the Child Rights Protection Act and policy planning documents. At the moment, the Child Rights Protection Act mentions listening and considering children’s

views in decisions affecting their lives. However, “listening” and “considering” are narrower in scope than the term “participation”, which implies a more active involvement of children in different areas affecting their lives.

The assessment in the European Social Policy Network report of children’s right to participate was rather superficial and failed to evaluate existing practices. Implementation of the child participation assessment tool is currently ongoing and should enable deeper analysis of child participation from 2018.



The Netherlands

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action towards an increase of the minimum income for single parents, provide access to social security for children and withdraw its reservation to article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been some positive developments for child rights in the Netherlands in the form of a renewed attention to the issue of

Respondent organisation: Defence for Children NL

Defence for Children NL has been able to engage in the European Semester process through its own initiative by contacting and establishing a positive and enduring working relationship with the European Semester officers in the country. It has thus been able to contribute to consultations and fact-finding missions. It will monitor the implementation of the CSRs insofar as they concern children and are relevant for its ongoing advocacy work with central and local governments. It has also been active in communicating about, and making the European Semester process more understandable to its members, although this is limited by the fact that the CSRs for the Netherlands more often focus on tax reform, pension reform, housing market, or labour market reform and it is challenging to find links with the needs and challenges facing children in the country.

child poverty (see below). Defence for Children NL has frequently referenced the Recommendation on Investing in Children in its advocacy work on issues of child rights and child poverty.

However, Defence for Children NL regrets that the 2017 Country

Report did not make any remark on social policy affecting children and that the 2017 CSRs do not mention children at all. Furthermore, the European Semester documents hardly mention the consequences of long-term recession for families and children, preferring to focus on recent economic growth.



16.98 millions total
22.5% under 19 yrs
5.2% under 4 yrs

Population



8%
Early school-leavers rate



17.5%
Child poverty rate

Child poverty

Many at-risk families and their children have been negatively affected by the long recession in the Dutch economy. Many working parents are now in insecure employment situations and many families in a vulnerable situation such as single parents are struggling to make ends meet. Social security payments are not enough to raise at-risk families out of poverty and many working parents have to spend a lot of their income on childcare.

Now the Dutch economy is growing again, Defence for Children NL is hopeful that this will increase minimum incomes and the budget made available for social assistance. An additional budget has already been made available for municipalities to support in-kind assistance for children (for books, electronic devices, bicycles, etc.). However, this budget is only 'lightly' earmarked, creating a risk that municipalities might not spend it on the cause intended. A part of the total budget was made available for civil society organisations to support

projects focusing on children living in poverty.

Unfortunately, the in-kind assistance is not always spent appropriately. Some municipalities use the money to close a general budget gap, meaning the money will not end up with the children that need it most. Whilst Defence for Children NL will continue to monitor this, the 2017 Country Report failed to make any remark on the risks of granting a budget to municipalities for providing in-kind support for children without installing proper check and sanctions mechanisms.

Besides assistance in kind, the government should look at the bigger picture and focus on increasing minimum income standards, social assistance for single parents, and access to social security for children (by withdrawing its reservation to article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Finally, Defence for Children NL agrees with the recommendation included in the European Social Policy Network report on the

development of quantitative measurable targets with regard to the reduction of child poverty. However, there is still an urgent need to agree which definition of poverty to use.

Child protection

Defence for Children NL is concerned about the current situation of migrant children. Following the Dutch general elections last year, the new government has been installed. In the governmental agreement, the four ruling parties agreed that the current Children's Pardon will not be changed. This is unacceptable, because it is crystal clear that the current Children's Pardon is no solution for children who have resided in the Netherlands for over five years. Scientific research proves that these children cannot be deported to their country of origin without damaging their development. Nevertheless, the deportation of children and families continues. Defence for Children NL calls for an end to the deportation of children and their families and

urges the Dutch government to find a humane solution for these children.

Education

Inclusive education for children with disabilities remains an issue. The Netherlands currently has a system of regular and special schools. In some cases, this can lead to the seclusion of children with disabilities because they are not able to join other children in regular schools.

Health

All municipalities should provide equal minimum availability of care and health services, which is not currently the case due to the decentralised system. Crucially, it should also provide free and accessible healthcare for migrant and refugee children, regardless of migration status or phase of their asylum procedure.

Child participation

Defence for Children NL identifies several gaps and areas for improvement concerning child participation. Municipalities should be involved in structural participation of children and young people affected by their policies. This is an issue addressed by the project 'Speaking Minds'. Defence for Children NL would also like to see the adoption of an action plan for child participation at national level. Moreover, there should be funding invested in an ongoing children's parliament.

Defence for Children NL and Save the Children - together with a consultancy firm for municipalities - have been able to access the civil society budget to deliver the 'Speaking Minds' project. In this, a group of young people having experienced poverty work with their municipality in a 10-week process to address a specific local policy challenge regarding poverty or exclusion. The municipality then has to implement the agreed solution, and report to the group with concrete results.

The first outcomes of the project have shown that it is highly valuable for young people to participate in local policy-making and to have the opportunity to advise municipalities on policy. It also informs them on the types of assistance available for people living in poverty.



Portugal

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action regarding the alternative care system and deinstitutionalisation and take concrete measures on child participation in public and private organisations (for example public services, schools, financed projects).”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been several recent developments in child policies in Portugal. However, the respondent is doubtful whether the Recommendation on Investing in

Respondent:
Sérgio Araújo*

The respondent has followed the European Semester process at national level, including by participating in the meeting ‘Child Poverty: What Priorities for Public Policy? - discussion cycle of the National Reform Programme’, organised by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security in March 2017.

* Sérgio Araújo is a researcher and professor at the Psychology Department of the Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico do Porto.



10.34 millions total
19.5% under 19 yrs
4.2% under 4 yrs

Population

14%

Early school-leavers rate

27%

Child poverty rate

Children had any impact on these developments.

The government is pursuing a more integrated approach to addressing the needs of children with a number of complementary sectoral measures focusing on proximity services with a particular focus on children and their families. The government has planned to

increase family allowances and the Strategy to Combat Poverty in Children and Young People includes complementary measures in fields such as education and health.

In the field of education, the government has put in place several programmes such as the Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education, National

Programme for the Promotion of School Success, and the National Education Strategy for Citizenship. It has also allocated a budget to provide free books to students in public schools.

Child poverty

In Portugal, children have been particularly affected by the economic crisis. The proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (27%) is almost 2 points higher than for the total population. The 2017 Country Report also notes that “households with dependent children are particularly vulnerable to in-work poverty (12.7%)”, which is higher than the European Union average of 11.2%.

The government is pursuing a more joined-up approach to tackling child poverty. The Strategy to Combat Poverty in Children and Young People aimed at children below the age of 12 will involve complementary measures in the field of education and health, and a follow-up of children receiving family allowance, alerting to situations of precariousness and making possible

a more integrated action of the social protection system, in cases of activation.

The government plans to gradually increase family allowances for children between 12 and 36 months, standardising the higher amount which is currently only allocated to children under 12 months. It has also restored the guaranteed minimum income scheme to the pre-austerity levels of 2012, which has benefitted more than 96.000 low-income families and provides for an increase in income in excess of 20% for many at-risk families with children.

These developments were closely followed and commented on by the European Semester documents. However, the 2017 Country Report notes that increases in child benefits and support for single parents, while positive, have had a limited impact on poverty reduction. It further notes that increases in the minimum wage could help reduce in-work poverty, but warns of possible adverse effects for low-skilled workers.

Early childhood

An expansion of capacity in pre-school education and care was carried out, aiming to achieve effective universalisation of access for children from the age of 3 by 2019.

Education

There have been several developments at national level. The government adopted a National Programme for the Promotion of School Success. Schools or groups of schools can apply with a strategic action plan to improve learning and school success. This programme is different from the ongoing TEIP (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention), a successful programme that specialises in interventions, prevention and reduction of absenteeism, early school leaving and situations of indiscipline.

For the year 2016-2017, free education in public schools was extended for the entire first cycle of primary education. In addition, the State Budget for 2017 has allocated

resources for free textbooks to be distributed to students in public schools. Altogether there will be about 1 500 000 books, amounting to four books per year for four school years for about 375 000 students.

The government has put in place the OPRE - Operational Programme for the Promotion of Education, an initiative directed at young Roma students in higher education with the central objective of avoiding early abandonment of this cycle of studies. It is also intended to alleviate the barriers between Roma communities and the formal education system by providing 30 university scholarships as well as a number of other trainings, mentoring and follow-up measures.

The 2017 Country Report and the introduction text of the CSRs describe an improvement in educational/basic skills outcomes. However, the Country Report also points out that the difference in school performance based on students' socioeconomic background remains an important issue and the introduction text highlights that a high rate of grade repetition creates risks of early

school leaving and increases education costs. Nevertheless, the 2017 CSRs fail to recommend any action on these issues.

Child participation

A new National Education Strategy for Citizenship will also be implemented in 2017-2018 and aims for students to develop and participate actively in projects that promote fair and inclusive societies upholding the principles of democracy, respect for diversity and the defence of human rights.



Romania

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to improve policies, services and the budget for the prevention of child poverty, child separation, child abuse and neglect, and to address the situation of children dropping out of school at the local level.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

Sadly, Romania ranks poorly in European statistics on several child-related issues. Romanian children are the poorest in Europe, and poverty is the cause of undernourishment and, implicitly,

Respondent organisation: Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations for the Child (FONPC)

FONPC was not involved in the European Semester process in Romania. The main obstacle is that the process lacks transparency, collaboration and participation. While FONPC does not have a mechanism to monitor and report on the implementation of the CSRs, it would be able to be part of the process were it to become transparent and participatory.

high mortality rate. The rate of teenage abortions is extremely high, while counselling and family planning services have low priority. There are shortcomings in the childcare service, particularly in rural areas due to a lack of information aggravated by deep poverty.

Unfortunately, neither the European Semester process nor the



19.76 millions total
21% under 19 yrs
4.8% under 4 yrs

Population

18.5%

Early school-leavers rate

49.2%

Child poverty rate

Recommendation on Investing in Children have triggered significant change for children in Romania. The policies, practices and programmes related to children and the prevention of social exclusion of all children remain unsatisfactory. There are no clear targets to alleviate child poverty. There is also no specific budgetary allowance to ensure adequate access to quality

basic services, including services enabling deinstitutionalisation or preventing the separation of children from their family, allowing to monitor and prevent child abuse and neglect, or supporting children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds in the education system.

Child poverty

Although the poverty rate is declining slowly, children (0-17) and young persons (18-24) are still the age groups most affected by poverty and experience the slowest decline in the poverty rate. As many as 50% of children from rural areas and 17% in urban areas are living in poverty.

The 2017 Country Report recognised that “poverty and social exclusion persist among young people, families with children, people with disabilities, Roma, the rural population and inactive people”. It also recognised that this has consequences for education and health outcomes, and employability.

In 2016, the National Strategy on anti-poverty and anti-exclusion for 2016-2020 was approved, with a

focus on groups in a vulnerable situation. However, more is needed in terms of a minimum compulsory state-guaranteed package of basic and mandatory services to protect children from poverty based on children’s real needs. The allocation of public budget to social services should be drastically increased and there should be more provision for training professionals and supporting NGOs that provide crucial services.

Child protection

The effects of institutionalisation are now well-known and devastating for the long-term development and life chances of children. Studies and analyses realised by SERA Romania and HHC Romania argue that residential care may in fact be more expensive than community care. The European Commission recommended in 2015 and 2016 that Romania take further action to facilitate the transition from institutionalised services to community-based services.

Although progress has been made, the reform of the Romanian

child protection system is far from finalised. Data points to a rise in the number of children arriving in residential care from their close and extended families. At the end of 2016, 56.866 children were in the child protection system.

Local prevention services continue to be primarily attached to financial benefits (minimum guaranteed income, heating aid, child benefits, single parent and complementary benefits), to the detriment of the development and implementation of a social services system centred on prevention and counselling, development of life skills, job-seeking assistance, etc.

FONPC notes that the European Social Policy Network report provides little information about the situation of children in the child protection system, children left behind by parents working abroad, children with disabilities, and street children. The situation of these groups remain a concern in the country.

Education

Early school leaving, low educational attainment and limited connection between skills gained in education and the labour market remain heavy problems in Romania. FONPC recommends to allocate more than 6% of GDP for education, including adequate budget allocation for the implementation of the recently adopted Strategy on Early School Leaving and increased availability and accessibility of customised educational programmes.

The 2017 CSRs recommend Romania to improve access to quality mainstream education, in particular for Roma and children in rural areas. Issues include discriminatory attitudes towards Roma children within the education systems and the difficulties of attracting good teachers in rural areas. Targeted allocation of resources will be crucial for improving educational outcomes for these two groups, as well as children with disabilities.

The Strategy for the inclusion of Roma for 2014-2020 and the National Strategy on anti-poverty

and anti-exclusion 2016-2020 include integrated measures targeting the most disadvantaged groups in society. However, their implementation and tangible effects will only be seen in following years.

Health

In healthcare, the 2017 CSRs recommend Romania to make efforts to curb informal payments, which hinder access to health services for all, and to shift to outpatient care.

FONPC highlights that children coming from poor families or rural areas, Roma children and children with disabilities, and children with long-term illness face unequal access to specialised medical services. There is an urgent need to improve primary social and healthcare assistance and early intervention. Specialised services are needed for children and their families in all communities, notably in rural areas.

Child participation

FONPC would like to see more involvement of children in the promotion of the principles of children's rights at all levels: within families, schools and society. Representatives of local public authorities (county councils, town halls, General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (GDSACPs), schools) need continuous training programmes to fully understand the importance of involving children in decision-making.

It is also necessary to monitor children's associations supported by the central authorities, in order to avoid political manipulation of these associations.



Slovakia

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to make kindergartens accessible and affordable for all, expand free pre-school education for at least 2 years before the start of schooling (including children from excluded Roma communities), and create a cross-sectoral Ministry of the Child with the aim to address all child-related topics through an integrated approach.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been some positive policy developments concerning children in Slovakia. These include ‘Learning Slovakia’ - a new National Programme for the Development of Education - and a new Code of Civil

Respondent organisation:

Open Society Foundation in Slovakia

The Open Society Foundation in Slovakia was not involved in the European Semester process, but it will be involved in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the CSRs as a member of the Committee for Children and Youth. There is a great lack of capacity within NGOs in Slovakia to follow the European Semester process closely.

Procedure regarding children in legal proceedings, which incorporates the principle of the best interest of the child.

However, issues of child poverty and protection, and investing in children to break cycles of disadvantage are not addressed in the 2017 Country Report. The 2017 CSRs recommend to “improve the quality of education

and increase the participation of Roma in inclusive mainstream education”. However, there is no mention of other groups of children in a vulnerable situation, such as migrant or refugee children.

The 2017 CSRs contain a positive recommendation on “extending affordable, quality childcare”. Nevertheless, this recommendation



5.43 millions total
20.6% under 19 yrs
5.3% under 4 yrs

Population

7.4%

Early school-leavers rate

24.4%

Child poverty rate

is placed clearly in the context of the need to “enhance employment opportunities for women” rather than through an approach based on the best interests of the child. An additional aspect of this recommendation calling for improved services to support the long-term unemployed into work can indirectly benefit at-risk children.

Overall, the European Semester process focuses strongly on finances, fiscal stability and employment. This includes a 2017 CSRs recommendation that states that “When taking policy action, consideration should be given to achieving a fiscal stance that contributes to both strengthening the ongoing recovery and ensuring the sustainability of Slovakia’s public finances.” The importance of investing in children is not considered in this context.

Child poverty

Child poverty is not mentioned in the 2017 Country Report. However, child poverty is linked to the poverty of parents or caregivers which is highlighted in the report: “Long-

term unemployment remains a major challenge. The labour market participation of underrepresented groups, including Roma, young people, women with young children and the low-skilled, remains limited. Social safety nets continue to be rather weak, particularly for the unemployed and families with children. The risk of poverty or social exclusion is relatively modest, but the intensity of poverty is pronounced”.

Despite attempts to develop basic outreach programmes (work in the social field, preventive healthcare and community work), the link to quality social services such as individualised support for inactive people and registered jobseekers, access to social housing, debt management counselling, participation in early childhood education and support for weaker pupils is underdeveloped.

Child protection

A new Code of Civil Procedure and a new regulation regarding the status of children in legal proceedings has entered into force. The Code

specifically emphasises that courts must act in the best interest of the child and, where appropriate, inform the child of all important issues related to the course of the proceedings and the substance of the case.

Courts will be obliged to investigate the opinion of the child, which is not conditioned by the age limit or his or her intellectual maturity, but by the ability to express an opinion, primarily independently. The role of the court is to choose a procedural act, appropriate for the maturity of the child, which will enable him or her to understand the meaning and consequences of decisions in court proceedings.

In 2014, a National Strategy was adopted for the Protection of Children against Violence. To implement the strategy, a National Coordination Centre for Resolving the Issues of Violence against Children was established to ensure cooperation with ministries, regional and local governments, and other relevant stakeholders. It also coordinates periodic reports on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child and the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

There is also an ongoing public debate in Slovakia on corporal punishment and positive parenting.

Early childhood

The 2017 CSRs include a call to “Enhance employment opportunities for women, especially by extending affordable, quality childcare”. There is still a shortage of childcare facilities, especially for children under the age of three and this is one of the causes of a low employment rate of women of childbearing age.

While there is evidence of some progress in increasing the availability of and access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), the low participation of Roma children in ECEC (estimated at 34%) is particularly problematic. As participation in ECEC contributes to better future educational outcomes (PISA 2015), the low attendance of Roma children in ECEC services

puts them at a disadvantage from the start.

European Social Fund projects have contributed to provision of childcare at the workplace, and activities aimed at preparing Roma children for primary school.

Education

Slovakia is experiencing declining educational outcomes, rising inequalities in education and heavy societal pressures (including teachers' strikes). The 2017 CSRs introduction text notes that "the education system is insufficiently geared to increasing Slovakia's economic potential". The impact of socioeconomic status on educational outcomes and inequalities continues to be strong and general government expenditure on education remains very low.

In 2017, the CSRs recommended Slovakia to "improve the quality of education and increase the participation of Roma in inclusive mainstream education". This followed a 2016 recommendation to "improve educational outcomes by making the teaching profession more attractive and by increasing the participation of Roma children from early childhood in mainstream education".

A reform to support inclusive education entered into force in 2016 aiming to avoid misplacement of children in special schools or classes on the sole basis of their disadvantaged socioeconomic background. However, in many cases directors of schools are failing to implement effective measures. There are practical challenges, but effective implementation also depends on political commitment and segregation in schools remains a hot political topic.

Against this backdrop, the authorities have initiated ambitious reforms at all levels of education and the government published the National Programme for the Development of Education 'Learning Slovakia'. This document has been designed as a basis for a major reform of the educational system in the country. Following a public consultation, the document went through a final stage of preparation by a group of experts. The future of the document as well as of the reform remains unclear due to change of Ministers and lack of political will.

Health

Most of the references to healthcare in the 2017 Country Report concern cost-effectiveness of the healthcare system, healthcare contributions and e-health.

Child participation

Despite the fact that the law states that there must be a student council in each secondary school, this is not true for all schools around the country. Even in schools with such a body in place, the members are very often not asked to join when the decisions are being taken.

The latest research* conducted in Slovakia among young people aged 15-24 showed very high distrust in the government and parliament (82%), and 43% of respondents think that they have no influence on the functioning of the state and its institutions.

* <http://mladez.sk/2017/09/27/prieskum-rady-mladeze-slovenska-tato-krajina-nie-je-pre-mladych/>.

Slovenia

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Adopt a renewed Programme and Plan of Action on child well-being. The previous Programme was for the period 2006-2016.”

Respondent organisation: Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth (ZPMS) on behalf of the Slovenian NGO network (ZIPOM)

The Slovenian NGO network ZIPOM was not involved in the European Semester process and will not be involved in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the CSRs. The biggest barrier is a lack of resources and limited capacity to participate, despite ZIPOM's interest in the European Semester process.



2.06 millions total
19.4% under 19 yrs
5.2% under 4 yrs

Population

4.9%

Early school-leavers rate

14.9%

Child poverty rate

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

ZIPOM emphasises that overall, the present situation of children's rights in Slovenia is good and there is currently a lot of action being taken by the government that aims to improve the situation of children.

The hope is now that these positive developments will soon be fully implemented.

Although the Recommendation on Investing in Children is not referenced directly in the recent proposals, it seems to have had a clear influence. However, the European Semester process has not contributed to these developments;

neither the 2016 nor the 2017 CSRs referred to children or offered a recommendation on children.

In April 2017, the Family Code was adopted. The essential novelties are related to the protection of the child's best interest, the transfer of decision-making powers on measures for the protection of the child's best interest from the centres

for social work to the district courts and broadening the definition of the family.

At the time of writing, the state was also preparing a proposal for a Resolution on Family Policy, which includes measures in support of working parents and a better reconciliation of working and private life. The proposal seeks to address the shortage of places in public day-care services and improve policies on issues such as parental care, child protection and adoption.

Furthermore, a new project gathering the Ministry of Labour, Family and social affairs, UNICEF and the Slovenian Social Protection Institute will bring a whole new perspective of monitoring children's rights in Slovenia.

Child poverty

Positive labour market and social trends continued into 2016, however, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is still considerably higher than the intended target. In 2016, 371 000 people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which represents 18.4% of the total population.

While none of the 2017 CSRs directly mention children, indirectly, the recommendation that the state should intensify its efforts to increase the employability of low-skilled and older workers influences families with low-skilled and older parents or grandparents, and this can help tackle child poverty.

Early childhood

ZIPOM notes that there is a lack of places in public day-care for children aged 11 months to 4 years old. However, the proposal for a Resolution on Family Policy contains measures to address this issue.

Education

Slovenia has already achieved its Europe 2020 national targets to reduce early school leaving and to increase tertiary educational attainment. The early school leaving rate is 5.0% which is the national target and one of the lowest in Europe. However, in 2015 the rate actually increased by 0.6 percentage points and the challenge is to prevent the rate from increasing further.

Health

Although reform of long-term care has been delayed, the authorities have presented proposals to reform the funding of the health care system in Slovenia which are in public consultation. ZIPOM considers that it is important that children become independent health insurance holders.

Child participation

The new Ombudsman Act created the function of 'child's advocate' in court proceedings (for example, in case of divorce) – this is someone who supports the child and communicates the child's wishes. This significantly improves the participation of children and their right to be heard in decisions affecting them. There are currently 52 active advocates. ZIPOM welcomes such concrete action.

In addition, the proposal of a Resolution on Family Policy emphasises that extra-curriculum activities should be free for all children. The same goes for other primary school activities (outings and school trips).

ZIPOM urges Slovenia to ratify the Third Optional Protocol to the CRC on a Communications Procedure (OP3 CRC), which is a complaint mechanism available to children directly.

Spain

Country Profile



Our Country Specific Recommendation for 2018-2019

“Take action to address child poverty and social exclusion by increasing child and family income support, and by using a child rights approach in preparing any public budget through implementing a tracking system for the allocation and use of resources for children throughout any budget.”

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

Since 2016 there have been no major development in child policies in Spain and the Recommendation on Investing in Children has not had any impact. The latest National Child Strategy (PENIA) ended in 2016.

Respondent organisation: Plataforma de Infancia

Plataforma de Infancia participates in the European Semester process indirectly through the ‘Third Sector Platform’, which is recognised as representative of civil society to the government. Although child rights organisations are thus consulted in the European Semester process in Spain, their contributions are not taken seriously.

The main challenges to better participation are the lack of time and the lack of timely information available, which hampers the internal consultation process between organisations and their ability to meaningfully contribute. The process is not transparent nor of high quality.

A new strategy should be formulated for 2018, with the hope that it will take the Recommendation into account.

The government has made limited progress regarding the 2016 CSRs relevant to children, which called on the country to address “gaps and disparities in minimum income schemes and improve family

support schemes, including access to quality child-care and long-term care”. Spain introduced a maternity benefit supplement for women with two or more children, extended paid paternity leave and increased pension, widowhood or permanent disability benefits. However, the issue of child poverty is still missing in relevant policies.



46.44 millions total
19.8% under 19 yrs
4.7% under 4 yrs

Population

19%

Early school-leavers rate

32.9%

Child poverty rate

Child poverty remains a challenge in Spain. Poverty is highlighted in the introduction text of the 2017 CSRs for Spain and one of the recommendations is to “address regional disparities and fragmentation in income guarantee schemes and improve family support, including access to quality childcare”.

There has been a slight recent increase in the national budget allocated to existing programmes on: ‘support to family and childhood’ and ‘social services’. These programmes include a variety of measures to finance social emergency economic benefits and social intervention projects for severely deprived families and children under their care. However, this budget allocation is still very far from the amount pledged by the Government to tackle child poverty and is insufficient to address the challenges in the country.

Child poverty

There has been a recent decline in poverty and social exclusion due to improved labour market conditions

in Spain since 2014. Nevertheless, income inequality rose significantly in Spain during the crisis and levels of child poverty remain high, closely linked to unemployment levels among parents. Spain also sees the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate for children in working households.

There was an increase of €24.59 million in the national budget allocated to child poverty – through programmes on ‘Support to family and childhood’ and ‘social services’ - to which the parliament also added €10 million. However, this is still an insufficient amount to address the challenges of child poverty in the country and is very far from the € 1.000 million pledged by the Government. The issue of child poverty is still missing in relevant policies.

The introduction text of the 2017 CSRs notes that certain households are left out of income support schemes and one of the recommendations is to “address regional disparities and fragmentation in income guarantee schemes and improve family support, including access to quality childcare”. This is an important

recommendation and reflects urgent needs to address child poverty in a context where income support schemes have gaps in coverage and limited effectiveness.

The impact of social transfers on reducing child poverty has also decreased. Family benefits are not only amongst the lowest in the EU both in terms of amounts and coverage, but they are also poorly targeted – the benefits system does not provide additional support for families in the most vulnerable situations with small children. Efforts to improve the progressivity of the system have been weakened by the pressure on expenditure.

Child protection

There are still no effective national mechanisms monitoring the reality of the child protection system (evolution of risk declarations and of protection measures adopted, etc.).

The reduction in public investment on risk prevention and family preservation, which depends on the local administration, represents a great obstacle to helping parents

and legal guardians exercise positive parenthood, and thus meet the needs of children they are responsible for.

Early childhood

There is a worrying correlation between increase in income and use of childcare, which suggests that low-income families face barriers in access to childcare. This means that the system cannot achieve its aim of investing in children to break the cycles of disadvantage.

Education

The introduction text of the 2017 CSRs highlights that the early school leaving rate in Spain is one of the highest in the European Union. Having to repeat years increases the risk of early school leaving, as well as lower attainment expectations. It also increases chances of educational inequality across regions and according to students’ socioeconomic or migrant background. Grade repetition is as high as 53% among disadvantaged students compared to less than

9% among advantaged ones (PISA 2016).

A recommendation in the 2017 CSRs calls on Spain to “increase labour market relevance of tertiary education. Address regional disparities in educational outcomes, notably by strengthening teachers’ training and individual students’ support.” However, Plataforma de Infancia considers this difficult to implement in relation to other recommendations that require Spain to “undertake a comprehensive expenditure review in order to identify possible areas for improving spending efficiency”. There is a contradiction between the recommendation on education which requires public investment, and this recommendation promoting austerity.

While the European Commission sees teachers’ training and individual students’ support as drivers of successful education, Plataforma de Infancia recommends to improve the quality of education and allow free access to education for children from 6 to 16 years old, as well as a reduction of additional schooling costs.

Health

Inequalities in access to healthcare have risen significantly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. The adoption in 2012 of a Royal Decree-Law on ‘urgent measures to guarantee the sustainability of the National Health System and improve the quality and safety of its services’ has led to a worsening in the quality and the safety of the services provided to families, and does not ensure universal access to healthcare (especially in the case of Roma and migrant populations).

Child participation

There is no data about child participation analysing existing structures for participation, the use of this right and the inequalities that exist between different areas in Spain. Thus, it is difficult to design adequate strategies to improve child participation, beyond the clear need to establish genuine channels for participation at the local, regional and national levels.



United Kingdom

Country Profile

Our Country Specific Recommendations for 2018-2019

To England: “Make the elimination of child poverty a national priority and ensure progress, monitoring and reporting continues against previous indicators in the Child Poverty Act 2010. Conduct a cumulative impact assessment of welfare and benefit reforms affecting children.”

To Northern Ireland: “Take action to develop a childcare strategy which addresses the high cost of childcare and ensures all children have the best start in life, and draft a bill that allows those on free school meals to be fed during the long summer holidays.”

To Scotland: “Take action to meaningfully improve the quality of early childhood education and care.”

To Wales: “Take action to implement the 2016 CSRs to: ‘Address skills mismatches and provide for skills progression, including by strengthening the quality of apprenticeships. Further improve the availability of affordable, high-quality, full-time childcare.’”


Respondent organisations:
Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE); Children in Northern Ireland; Children in Scotland; and Children in Wales.

None of the respondents took part in the European Semester process this year. The primary reasons were insufficient capacity to engage and a lack of consistent government commitment to stakeholder consultation around this process.

Children in Scotland intends to participate in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the country specific recommendations (CSRs) at the Scottish level.

Investing in Children and the European Semester process 2016-2017

There have been a number of positive policy developments in relation to promoting children’s rights and well-being across the UK. However, it is not clear that positive changes have been driven by the

 65.38 millions total
23.5% under 19 yrs
6.1% under 4 yrs

Population

11.2% 

Early school-leavers rate

27.2% 

Child poverty rate

Recommendation on Investing in Children.

Meanwhile, the European Semester process is not seen to support these efforts, but rather to reinforce the UK’s fiscal austerity programme, which has disproportionately impacted on children. Thus, the 2017 CSRs recommending to, when taking policy action, consider

“achieving a fiscal stance that contributes to both strengthening the ongoing recovery and ensuring the sustainability of United Kingdom’s public finances” is potentially negative as it leads to further austerity measures.

A further criticism is that European Semester documents and figures take a UK-wide approach and fail to account for the fact that responsibility for many relevant policy areas has been devolved to the governments of Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland – including education, health, housing, family support, childcare, mental health and children in care. The situation in England is often conflated with the situation in the UK as a whole, leading to a lack of detailed understanding of realities in the four nations and insufficient targeting of recommendations.

For example, the 2017 Country Report states that “skills policy is largely devolved to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and there is little scope to reflect differentiation in this report.” However, it then provides examples

from England as if they represent the situation in the UK as a whole.

Likewise, the European Social Policy Network report on implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children provides a general summary of the UK, but there is little or no commentary on devolved competences in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

England

The UK Government announced a new ‘programme of action’ to take forward children’s rights in England in October 2016. It is unclear if the Recommendation on Investing in Children has played a role in triggering these proposals, but it is considered unlikely.

Northern Ireland

The situation of children in Northern Ireland is never addressed properly in the Country Reports or other European Semester documents. Children in Northern Ireland recommends to examine the particular issues surrounding investment in children in Northern Ireland.

Wales

The Welsh Government has set out its priorities for the next five years. Although there is no explicit evidence to suggest that the Recommendation on Investing in Children has played a direct role, actions to take forward the three pillars of the Recommendation are evident.

Measures have been undertaken or planned focusing on the employability of parents and young people, supporting new parents and families with additional needs, increasing free childcare for working parents of 3 and 4 year-olds and a programme of work to improve the outcomes of children in and leaving care.

Key Welsh legislative measures place duties on national and local governments in respect of children’s rights (the strongest in the UK). The Welsh Government continues to invest in participatory structures for young people through the ‘Young Wales’ programme. Additionally, a new Government programme is focused on preventing and tackling Adverse Childhood Experiences,

which directly harm children or affect the environment in which they live.

Scotland

The 2017 Country Report contains information on England only. While some of the figures in the Country Report represent the situation in the UK overall, lack of disaggregated data is misleading as each UK nation’s policies and consequent impact differ. The CSRs address education, childcare, youth skill development and child poverty, none of which reflect Scottish systems, legislation and policies. Scotland has statutory child poverty reduction targets, recognition of child rights in law, statutory entitlement to 1.140 hours of free childcare for 3 and 4 year-olds, and very low youth unemployment. The CSRs do not acknowledge this.

Child poverty

The 2017 Country Report recognises the high levels of child poverty in the UK, that these are only likely to increase and that welfare reform is a factor. The recognition of the high number of children in

poverty living in families where at least one member of the family works is particularly welcome. Two thirds of children growing up in poverty live in a family where at least one member is in work.

The 2016 CSRs made specific recommendations relating to childcare and children in poverty particularly in working households. The 2017 CSRs introduction text also highlights the issue of child poverty throughout the UK, mentioning specifically its concern for the number of children in poverty who live in working households.

However, the repealing of sections (1-7) of the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 waived the Government from its duty to report on the four key targets for eradicating child poverty by 2020: relative low income; combined low income and material deprivation; absolute low income; and persistent poverty.

A key issue in the UK is the lack of quality affordable housing, increasing numbers of homeless families with dependent children and the number of children

living in unsuitable temporary accommodation. The 2017 Country Report notes the high cost of housing and the CSRs recommend the UK government to take further steps to boost housing supply. Although neither document explicitly links the issue with the situation of children, it is still welcomed as a positive recommendation that can help reduce the number of homeless families with children.

Northern Ireland

Poverty figures did go down slightly but the reason is unclear. The Northern Ireland Assembly did put in place a welfare reform mitigation package, but there are now new measures/proposals which will have an adverse impact upon children and families, namely the bedroom tax, a two-child limit on universal credit recipients and benefit sanctions. The full effects of the welfare reform figures are yet unknown.

Children in Northern Ireland recommends to examine the particular issues surrounding investment in programmes to help

people out of poverty in Northern Ireland.

Wales

Children in Wales points out that child poverty levels in Wales are higher than for the other three UK nations, although this is not reported in the Country Report. The welfare reforms and austerity drive of the UK government continues to have a negative impact on children and families living in Wales.

The challenge for the Welsh Government is how to respond to pressures beyond its control and with ever decreasing resources from the central government. The Welsh Government must continue to prioritise action which seeks to invest in children and prevent poverty. Positive recent commitments include a programme of work to improve the outcomes of children in and leaving care and to improve the availability and affordability of housing which will benefit low-income families.

Scotland

There has been a 3% reduction in the number of children living in combined material deprivation from 2015 to 2016 in Scotland. Legislation enacted by the Scottish Parliament set robust targets for reducing child poverty and for measuring and reporting on it. An increase in statutory entitlement to pre-school provision from 600 to 1.140 hours per year is intended to improve early life experience and reduce family poverty. In addition, the Pupil Equity Fund has given £120 million directly to schools to close the poverty-related educational attainment gap.

Early childhood

The 2016 CSRs recommended to “further improve the availability of affordable, high-quality, full-time childcare” and there have been some positive steps taken to implement this recommendation.

The 2017 Country Report also makes some welcome comments in relation to the availability and quality of childcare, noting that “there is

mixed progress on improving the affordability, quality and full-time availability of childcare”, whilst the 2017 CSRs introduction text recognises that the participation of children under three in formal childcare is relatively low.

However, more attention is still needed on improving the availability of quality services, which help to overcome disadvantage and improve school readiness for children in vulnerable situations – especially in disadvantaged areas.

England

The number of local authorities in England reporting a shortage of free early education places for 3 and 4 year-olds has more than doubled since last year. More than a third of councils are now struggling to meet demand.

A pilot scheme to double the free childcare for three and four year-olds to 30 hours a week has commenced, with full roll-out planned for late 2017. This is a welcome development. However, it does not apply to parents seeking work or undertaking work-related

training (only working parents) and concerns remain over the adequacy of childcare supply.

CRAE's report State of Children's Rights in England 2016 concluded that “whilst extending free childcare entitlement is extremely welcome, more needs to be done to improve the quality of such provision, particularly in areas of high disadvantage”. Research has found that childcare settings in the most deprived areas are the least likely to have qualified staff.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland does not yet have a childcare strategy. Childcare is patchy and expensive for families and there is little help. Northern Ireland families do not receive the free childcare which is being offered to families in England. Children in Northern Ireland recommends to examine the particular issues surrounding childcare investment in Northern Ireland.

Wales

There is a new commitment to increase free childcare for working

parents of 3 and 4 year-olds to 30 hours per week for 48 weeks of the year. The childcare commitment is now being piloted in seven areas of Wales with a further roll-out in the future, but it is too early to comment on the outcomes achieved.

However, for families that are not eligible, childcare is still expensive and there is a gap in affordable provision for school-age children, for parents who work less than 16 hours, and for very young children. Furthermore, the new measures do not address the issue of access to childcare for children under 3.

Education

The 2017 Country Report notes that “almost 70% of young children now reach a good level of development by the age of five, compared to just over half in 2013 (Ofsted, 2016)”. However, it does not make reference to the disparities in ‘school readiness’ between different groups of children. Statistics show that children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were less likely to achieve ‘a good level of development’ in the Early Years

Foundation Stage (44.8% in 2013-2014, compared with 63.7% of children not eligible for FSM).

The 2017 CSRs fail to pick up on the important education achievement gap suffered by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The CSRs on education focuses on the transition to work, recommending to “address skills mismatches and provide for skills progression, including by continuing to strengthen the quality of apprenticeships and providing for other funded “Further Education” progression routes”. This closely matches a similar element in the 2016 CSRs. Following this recommendation, there has been a commitment to create a minimum of 100,000 apprenticeships over the next 5 years.

England

Many children living in poverty in England are not meeting the expected level of language development when they begin primary school. One in three disadvantaged children start school struggling with early language skills – up to 44% in some localities.

Secondary schools continue to be the stage of education where gaps are largest. By the end of secondary school, disadvantaged children are on average 19 months behind their peers. While the attainment gap is closing fastest in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantaged pupils, it is concerning that it is widening in schools with lower proportions.

Northern Ireland

Education budgets are being cut and schools are having to ask parents for money to cover the shortfall. In addition, there is a selection at age 11, which contributes to disparities in opportunity and educational outcomes. This is still not addressed as per previous reports.

Wales

Whilst examination results are improving, there is still a gap between those most and least affluent, and certain groups in vulnerable situations do poorly compared with their peers.

Further work needs to be done to promote the availability of

apprenticeships to school-age children and to work with schools to promote vocational routes alongside higher education.

Scotland

The Scottish Government has focused on reducing early school leaving and widening access to further and higher education. There was a 1.4% decrease in early school leaving in 2015 - 2016. This has been achieved by providing financial support through a bursary scheme to further education students (generally vocational courses) who may otherwise not be able to afford to participate. University fees for Scottish students attending Scottish universities at undergraduate level are paid by the Scottish Government. The recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access to Higher Education are being implemented, including universities being required to set and be accountable for targets for increasing the number of students from deprived communities. Finally, 31% of 16 - 19 year olds who are still at school receive financial support in the form of an educational

maintenance allowance if they are from low-income families.

Health

The European Semester process mainly deals with healthcare in terms of the financial sustainability of the National Health Service as a whole, without consideration of the particular needs and challenges facing (particularly disadvantaged) children. The 2017 Country Report notes that the “healthcare system is currently under financial pressure and, in the medium to long term, faces high risks to sustainability”.

The Country Report also raises concern about rising mental health problems, however, it does not highlight anything specific in relation to children in this area.

England

Worsening mental health and poor access to both community and in-patient services has limited England’s progress towards a child’s right to have the best possible health and access to health services, sometimes with fatal consequences.

Government efforts to tackle obesity are a step in the right direction but these are undermined by continued health inequalities amongst some groups of children.

Northern Ireland

Due to the lack of a Stormont Executive, Northern Ireland is struggling with waiting lists and mental health issues for young people. Underinvestment is still a huge problem that is not yet being adequately addressed.

Wales

The health spend from the Welsh Government is almost half of their entire budget. Increasing pressures being placed on acute and emergency services is placing pressure on services being able to invest early to prevent many problems occurring or escalating.

Child participation

England

The State of Children’s Rights in England 2016 stated: “Many

children still feel they're not listened to or provided with feedback by professionals. There continues to be no permanent structure to facilitate systematic participation of children in policy making (provision for under-11s is particularly patchy)."

Measures in the Children and Families Act 2014 have aimed to strengthen the participation rights of children with disabilities. However, research has found that many are still excluded from decision-making opportunities. Participation is not fully embedded in strategic, service-level decision-making, and basic access needs to support participation of children with disabilities are not being met.

A recent review of safeguarding arrangements and healthcare of looked-after children found that 'too often inspectors found the voice of the child had been lost'. Children also still have key participation rights denied in school, including to be heard and taken seriously by school Governing Bodies, and the right to appeal on their own behalf against school exclusions.

Positively, the government recently announced it will commission a new training programme for independent advocates (a statutory provision to all looked-after children). However, a report by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 55% of children still do not know about advocacy or how to get an advocate.

Northern Ireland

Actively promoting child participation has all but stopped as there is currently no Executive. Although there are some departments that are requesting help from Children in Northern Ireland in getting the views of children and young people, child participation is very limited.

Wales

The Welsh Government continues to invest in participatory structures through the 'Young Wales' programme which is managed by Children in Wales and engages children and young people across Wales on key issues of importance to them and policy-makers. However, further long-term and sustainable

funding needs to be made available to enable children's participation in decision-making to take place routinely and to a high enough quality at a national and local level.

The ESPN report makes limited reference to child participation in Wales, but there is no reference to the investment made by Welsh Government into 'Young Wales' or to legislation which places local duties in respect of participation activities, or any reference to Wales-based NGOs keeping children's rights on the agenda.

Statistics explained

Early school-leavers rate: population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training.

Child poverty rate: population aged 0-17 at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The risk of poverty or social exclusion is a combination of 3 indicators: the risk of poverty after social transfers (income poverty), severe material deprivation and living in a household with very low work intensity.

All data on population, early school leaving and child poverty provided in country profiles was retrieved from: *Eurostat, 2016.*



Other recent Eurochild publications

Childonomics Introduction to the conceptual framework and methodology, 2017
<http://bit.ly/2jMBpzj>

Let Children be Children: Lessons from the Field on the Protection and Integration of Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe, 2017 (joint publication with SOS Children's Villages International)
<http://bit.ly/2C25YIV>

Eurochild's Policy Position on the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2fr8TAY>

Opening Doors for Europe's Children campaign, "Deinstitutionalisation of Europe's Children: Questions and Answers", 2017 <http://bit.ly/2ye7CUS>

Eurochild Conference 2016 Declaration "Doers should start speaking; speakers should start doing!", 2016 <http://bit.ly/2ebq3EU>

Working Paper on Child Guarantee, 2016 - <http://bit.ly/2en2loz>

Is Europe doing enough to invest in children? 2016 Eurochild Report on the European Semester, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2xxqEce>

Conditional cash transfers and their appeal: recommendations and key issues for debate, 2015
<http://bit.ly/1YvF8y2>

A child-centred investment strategy: Why the Investment Plan for Europe needs to prioritise children, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1OhUVxl>

Policy Position on Evidence and Evaluation Methodologies for Family and Parenting Support Policies and Practice, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/1T6xiXX>

Speak Up! Voices of European Children in Vulnerable Situations, An Explorative Study of Children's Rights in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, 2015
<http://bit.ly/2efy4se>

EU Alliance for Investing in Children - Implementation Handbook, 2015 - <http://bit.ly/1SIYUbr>

Realising the Rights of Every Child Everywhere - Moving forward with the EU (joint publication with UNICEF), 2014 - <http://bit.ly/21hsSmT>



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