



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Is Europe doing enough to invest in children?

2015 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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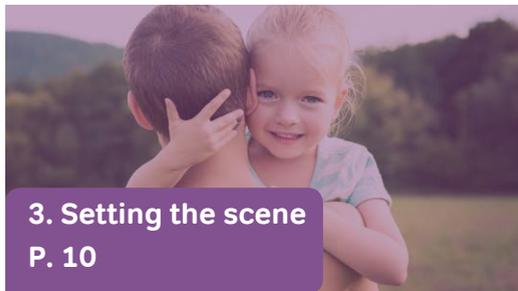
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Purpose of the report

Eurochild carried out the assessment of the 2015 European Semester with the help of its member organisations. The work draws on the experience of the past four years' (2011 - 2014) analysis of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) of EU Member States, with an extended scope this year. In this year's analysis we particularly assess the extent to which the European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (2013) has been implemented across the EU and whether the European Semester process is helping or hindering the achievement of positive outcomes for children.

The 2015 Eurochild Report on the European Semester contributes to the network's efforts to put children at the heart of policy making. It is based on the assessment of 25 contributors from 23 Member States.

The compiled analysis of responses provides an EU-wide overview of the commitment to investing in children and identifies necessary changes to improve the impact of the Semester process. The analysis is also intended to feed into the 2016 European Semester and mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy.

Acknowledgements

The report is based primarily on assessments by Eurochild members in 23 Member States. These are: **Austria** (National Coalition for the Implementation of the UNCRC), **Bulgaria** (National Network for Children Association), **Croatia** (Coordination Association for Children in Croatia), **Cyprus** (Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children), **Denmark** (The Joint Council for Child Issues in Denmark), **Estonia** (Estonian Union for Child Welfare), **Germany** (Child and Youth Welfare Association, AGJ), **Greece** (office of the Ombudsman for Children¹), **Finland** (Central Union for Child Welfare), **France** (National Federation of Association for Child Protection - CNAPE, with the contribution of SOS Villages d'Enfants France and Solidarité Laïque), **Hungary** (Family Child Youth Association), **Ireland** (Children's Rights Alliance), **Italy** (Foundation L'Albero della Vita), **Latvia** (Latvian Child Welfare Network), **Luxembourg** (Coalition for Children represented by Ombuds - Comité for the Rights of the Child), **the Netherlands** (Dutch Children's Rights Coalition, represented by Defence for Children International), **Poland** (Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work, University of Lodz), **Portugal** (Sérgio Araújo, independent researcher), **Romania** (Federation of Nongovernmental Organisations for the Child Romania - FONPC), **Slovakia** (Coalition for Children Slovakia), **Slovenia** (Slovenian NGO Network ZIPOM in collaboration with the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia), **Spain** (FICE Spain) and from the **United Kingdom - Northern Ireland** (UKNI) (Children in Northern Ireland), **Scotland** (UKS) (Children in Scotland) and **Wales** (UKW) (Children in Wales). Respondents from the UK replied from the perspective of their devolved governments.

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The report is based on individual assessments. Not all respondents have provided input to the same extent. In view of this, the findings should not be interpreted as objective statistical data.

¹ The office of the Ombudsman for Children is not a member of Eurochild.

1. Key Findings

Eurochild notes a weakening social dimension of the European Semester in 2015 overall, and a lack of focus on policies addressing child poverty in particular. Both EU institutions and Member States governments share responsibility for the weakened political prioritisation of child poverty. At European level there is a lot of uncertainty around the future of Europe 2020, an integrated strategy which was designed to monitor progress on a broad range of areas from energy, environment and research to education, youth, labour market policies and social inclusion. The message of smart, sustainable, inclusive growth sent a clear signal to Member States that stimulating the economy should not be at the cost of social cohesion or the environment. Unfortunately by 2015 the clarity of this message has been lost.

The Semester process is not helping enough to counter negative trends in relation to child poverty in Europe. Economic growth and employment have supremacy, and the very tool designed to implement the integrated strategy - the European Semester - is becoming less coherent.

The 2015 Annual Growth Survey (AGS) failed to mention Europe 2020. Whilst the 2015 National Reform Programmes (NRP) recognise the urgency of addressing child poverty and social exclusion they do not set out how this will be acted upon. Implementation of 2014 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) has proven to be insufficient. There has been improvement in the governance process as the country reports are prepared by the Commission at an earlier stage in the Semester, allowing more time for stakeholder involvement. However, despite this extra time, the 2015 CSRs failed to balance the various dimensions of the Semester. Streamlining of the Semester process has significantly weakened the focus on addressing child poverty and social exclusion.

At national level, Eurochild members note that the financial crisis and budget cuts continue to erode welfare support for vulnerable families and investment in services such as education and housing. The social investment approach which advocates for investment throughout the life cycle to prevent social exclusion and its consequences appears to have been lost.



2. Recommendations to make the European Semester deliver for children



28%

.....

Child poverty levels have been around 28% in the EU as a whole over the past two years, higher than the poverty rate of the total population.

1. Invest in national child-focused policies

A key message of this report is that Member States need to prioritise investment – of both national and EU resources – in children, in line with national integrated strategies for tackling child poverty and promoting children's well-being. If efforts are fragmented, piecemeal or not backed up by adequate funding they will be insufficient and ineffective.

Why?

Children have been disproportionately affected by the financial crisis and austerity measures. Budget cuts are preventing the design or implementation of policies that could help alleviate poverty. Since the adoption of the *EC Recommendation on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (2013²)* – Hereinafter the Investing in Children Recommendation – there is little evidence of any improvement in the situation of children in Europe. Child poverty levels have been around 28% in the EU as a whole over the past two years, higher than the poverty rate of the total population.³

2 013/112/EU. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112&from=EN>

3 EU-SILC

2. Strengthen the social dimension of macroeconomic governance ensuring it supports investment in children

Whilst primarily a macro-economic governance tool, the European Semester needs to take better account of its social impact. It should consider how Member States are achieving all Europe 2020 targets and maintain poverty reduction as a political priority.

As proposed in the European Commission's Investing in Children Recommendation, **the European Semester should monitor how Member States are delivering on tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being.** To facilitate monitoring at EU level:

- Include reference to child poverty and well-being in each Annual Growth Survey ensuring Member States recognise it as a priority in their National Reform Programmes;
- All Member States should be asked to include a specific section in their National Reform Programmes on tackling poverty and social exclusion and to include within this a chapter addressing child poverty and social exclusion, documenting how they are implementing the three pillar approach advocated in the Commission Recommendation (i.e. adequate income, access to quality services and participation of children);

- Develop child focused Country Specific Recommendations for all countries with high or worsening levels of child poverty and social exclusion. These should urge them to develop a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and rights-based approach covering the three pillars of the European Commission Recommendation;
- Assess the potential impact of policies before they are introduced and monitor their actual impact through ex-ante and ex-post impact assessments to determine how policy measures (including macroeconomic and financial measures) impact children and in particular children at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Why?

The European Semester is designed to get the EU's economy back on track but it fails to steer Member States towards structural reforms and investment that have a broad societal benefit.

The EU's objective to promote social justice and protection (Treaty on European Union, Article 3) is being subordinated to short-term economic gain. The long-term consequences for social cohesion, political stability and economy will be devastating.

3. Ensure robust EU social policy coordination

Eurochild calls for a reinforced social policies pillar for the EU that prioritises child poverty. An inclusive Europe goes beyond job creation, skills, or long-term unemployment. To address complex social challenges comprehensive approaches rooted in local realities are required. There is a need for the EU social policy space to support innovation and mutual learning and follow through of implementation of existing policy guidance.

Eurochild also urges the EU to follow up on the call it made to Member States in 2013 and design a **Roadmap to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Investing in Children Recommendation.** We recommend therefore to:

- Develop a multi-annual programme of social policy priorities allowing for more strategic planning of activities. Develop multi-annual reporting mechanisms on themes that have been identified as trends to watch, such as child poverty and well-being;
- Member States should be required to either set a specific national (sub-) target for the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion - or to indicate what proportion of their

overall Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion target is expected to lift children out of poverty;

- Finish work on and use the proposed portfolio of indicators included in the Investing in Children Recommendation and report on progress on its implementation.

More and better indicators need to be developed to measure child poverty and well-being in the European Union, to support development and implementation of evidence-based policies. This work should be done in coordination with the Social Protection Committee's (SPC) Indicators sub-group. The indicators should then form part of the Joint Employment Report accompanying the AGS, the Social Protection Performance Monitor which identifies the trends to watch of the SPC, and reflected on in the Country Specific Recommendations. Member States should be asked for specific detailed multiannual reporting on progress on child poverty and well-being, on the basis of an agreed portfolio of indicators.

Why?

So far the EU has not effectively followed through on its policy guidance. Investing in children appears to have fallen down the priority list despite evidence to show that growing inequalities in childhood will put a significant social and economic burden on future societies⁴. According to the analysis of Eurochild members, there has been some positive progress across the EU although the overall picture is bleak. In addition to the European Semester process, the EU should strengthen its coordination of social policies, in particular promoting inspiring examples, mutual exchanges and monitoring the impact of policies and practices.

4. Create ownership through improved stakeholder engagement

The National Reform Programmes are an opportunity for short-term strategic planning to achieve better long-term outcomes. The breadth and quality of stakeholder engagement will not only improve the quality of the plans, but also the level of ownership and the likelihood of effective implementation. It is important to involve relevant ministries, parliaments, sub-national government and local authorities as well as civil society. To ensure effective approaches to tackle child poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations working with and for children should be supported in their involvement in the European Semester.

In particular we recommend:

- Ensure clarity and transparency on processes;
- Allow sufficient time for contributions;
- Motivate civil society and build their capacity to meaningfully engage;
- Enable European Semester Officers to better reach out to stakeholders.

At a European level the European Commission should develop, as it has committed, a set of **guidelines for the engagement of stakeholders in Europe 2020**. The guidelines should be drawn up in cooperation

with the Social Protection Committee and should be monitored regularly in a specific section of the NRPs and reported on by the Commission in the CSRs and AGS.

Why?

Civil society, including children's rights organisations play a critical role in promoting and supporting the necessary reform at national, regional and local level. Through their engagement in European networks they are supporting policy convergence across the EU Member States. However, this is not fully recognised by many policy makers.

Despite commitments both in the Semester process and in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds there are still no accompanying enforcement mechanisms to ensure civil society engagement.

National civil society organisations can help raise public awareness, identify obstacles and solutions, and contribute to the direct delivery of policy reforms. Their engagement would also encourage broader support for the targets and implementing measures.

4 A child-centred investment strategy: Why the Investment Plan for Europe needs to prioritise children, Eurochild Working Paper 2015.

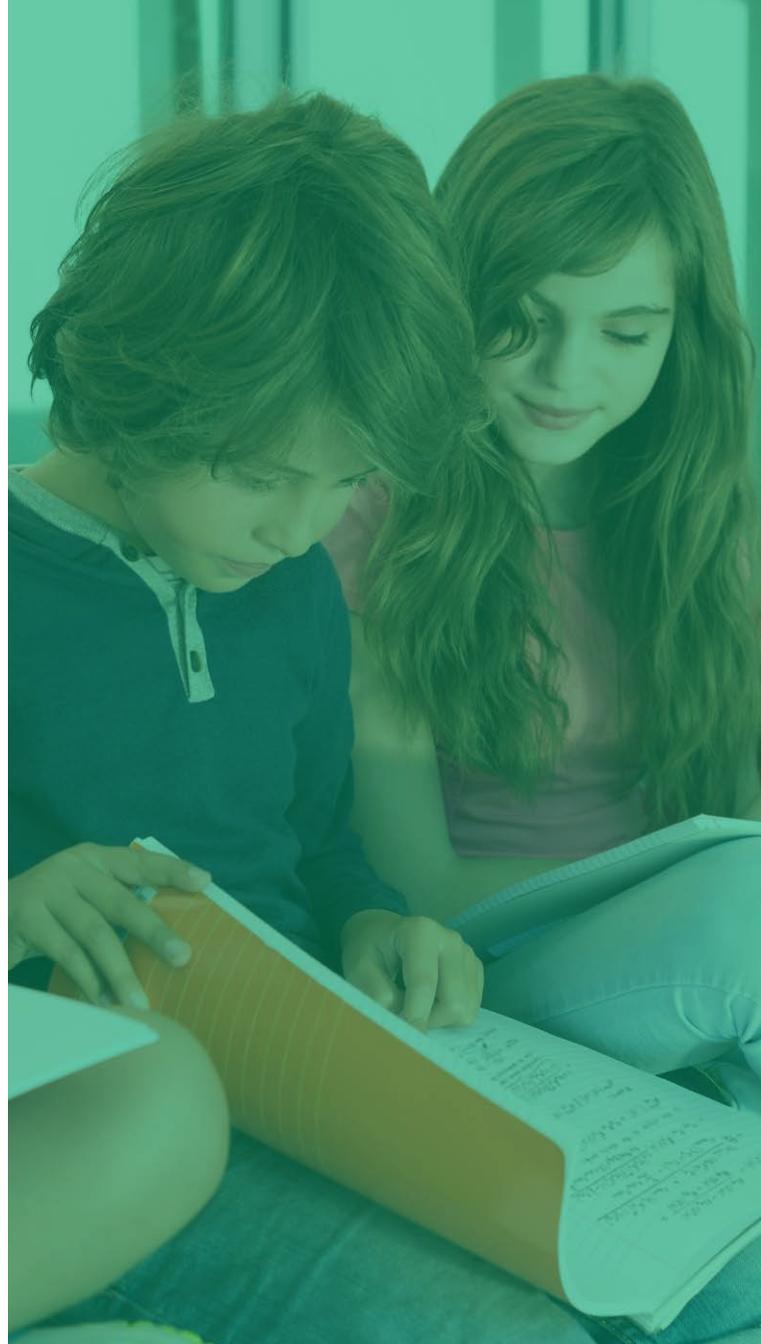
5. Make better use of EU funding to stimulate investment in children

There are already significant funds available at EU level that, if effectively deployed, can stimulate structural reforms and investment in child and family services that help address child poverty and social exclusion. The European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund (European Structural and Investment Funds - ESIF) can be used in a complementary way to support inclusive growth. Their deployment is conditional on Member States having in place comprehensive poverty reduction strategies, which should include a focus on children and families. The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) supports EU countries' actions to provide material assistance to the most deprived, including children. Finally, loans available through the European Fund for Strategic Investment, and the European Investment Bank could be mobilised within an overall strategy which prioritises investment in children. **In view of the upcoming mid-term review of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework**, we recommend to focus attention on:

- Increasing the overall budget envelope targeted at reducing child poverty and social exclusion;
- Improve and clarify the accompanying monitoring and evaluation frameworks;
- Address the lack of information on budget allocations;
- Improve stakeholder involvement in planning, implementation and evaluation of funding programmes.

Why?

European Structural and Investment Funds offer a significant opportunity to direct resources to the Investing in Children Recommendation. This can be used in combination with other EU financing instruments and national budgets. However, the strategic links between ESIF spending and the Investing in Children Recommendation are insufficiently developed.





3. Setting the scene

We live in a society where the socio-economic status into which children are born is still the most important determinant of their well-being, educational outcomes, health and employment prospects. For children, the negative effects of living in poverty and social exclusion can last a lifetime. Poverty can limit access to a whole range of other rights, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Eurochild advocates for investing in children and their well-being from as early as possible. Such an approach ensures that children's well-being is addressed in a holistic way and that their needs are seen from their perspective. It will not only impact on lives and chances of individuals; it will also have a direct effect on countries' ability to trigger disposable household income, investment capital and employment – and hence growth.



More than one child in every four in the EU is at risk of poverty or social exclusion i.e. over 26 million children



Over 11% of children in the EU leave school before completing secondary education.



Youth unemployment in the EU is double the average unemployment rate.⁵

⁵ Data from EU-SILC

3.1 The Investing in Children Recommendation

Child poverty has been repeatedly recognised as a political priority and substantial work has already been carried out at EU level to support Member State's efforts:

- **2007:** the EU social coordination mechanism (social OMC) dedicates the year to child poverty;
- **2010:** the EU Presidency Trio of Spain, Belgium and Hungary call for an EU Recommendation on child poverty;
- **2011:** European Council Conclusions on tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being;
- **2012:** Social Protection Committee report on child poverty and well-being endorsed by Ministers;
- **2013:** the European Commission launches its Recommendation on “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage”.

The Investing in Children 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.”

It provides helpful guidance to Member States on how to tackle child poverty, understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing not only income deprivation, but also other forms of deprivation and loss of dignity. Strategies must be based on recognition of children as rights-holders, the best interests of the child, equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged whilst ensuring quality universal provisions for all.

The European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013

Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage

The Recommendation “recommends that member states: Organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children’s well-being, through multi-dimensional strategies... guided by... horizontal principles.”

It calls on Member States to “Develop integrated strategies, based on three key pillars:

- 1. Investing in “Access to adequate resources”**
 - Support parents’ participation in the labour market
 - Provide for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits
- 2. Investing in “Access to affordable 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. Investing in “Children’s right to participate”**
 - 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

Horizontally, it further calls on Member States to:

- A. “Further develop necessary governance, implementation and monitoring arrangements**
 - Strengthen synergies across sectors and improve governance arrangements
 - Strengthen the use of evidence-based approaches
- B. Make full use of relevant EU instruments**
 - Address child poverty and social exclusion as a key issue within the Europe 2020 strategy
 - Mobilise relevant EU financial instruments



3.2 Children and Europe 2020

Designed in 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy set targets in areas of education, employment, poverty reduction, as well as research and environment protection. The targets should be reached by the collective efforts of Member States by 2020. There are many potential links between the Europe 2020 targets and the Investing in Children Recommendation.

Poverty reduction

The most obvious link between Europe 2020 and the Investing in Children Recommendation is on tackling poverty. The poverty reduction target aims to lift **20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion** by 2020. As stated in the preamble of the Investing in Children Recommendation: “Tackling and preventing child poverty are an essential part of the EU and Member States’ efforts in this respect”.

This report highlights some of the progress and the paralysis in different countries towards effective strategies to reduce child poverty.

Employment

Employment growth targets, especially those promoting female labour market participation, are expected to lift children out of poverty by increasing household income. Efforts to promote gender equality and reconciliation of work and family life, such as childcare provision system and flexible working time are expected to contribute to achieving these targets.

However, focusing on employment rates alone does not guarantee positive outcomes for children. Several Member States have a low or no minimum wage, and an increasing number of working poor. In **Greece**, for instance, there are increasing forms of employment which are underpaid, part time, temporary, or not contracted.

Education

Europe 2020 education targets aim to reduce early school leaving and increase participation in tertiary education. They link to more comprehen-

sive education and training targets (ET2020) which, among others, aim to ensure that 95% of children aged between 4 and compulsory primary school age participate in early childhood education.

Early childhood education and care

does get substantial attention across the 2015 NRPs. Unfortunately, these are too often seen as a tool for supporting employment of parents rather than for investing in children. The quality and affordability of these services are more often forgotten. **Germany** is one exception where, in 2014, the Federal State, the Bundesländer and the municipalities agreed on a schedule to define common quality standards for child day care facilities.

Several Member States refer to **comprehensive education and curriculum reform** in their NRPs, and the importance of supporting the education of children from low-income families or disadvantaged areas (e.g. **France**).

From an investing in children approach, education is obviously key. Whilst there is some positive progress, the overall trend is worrisome.

Transition from education to employment

Leaving school is a particularly sensitive time in people’s lives when well-planned investment in children and young people can lead to better outcomes for individuals, the society and the economy. **Tackling early-school leaving** is a prevalent measure in the NRPs often supported by plans and strategies.

Various countries have introduced the Youth Guarantee and apprenticeship programmes to reduce **youth unemployment** and provide more opportunities to young people leaving school. However, in some countries, the career support to young people in transition from the education system to the labour market has not made progress, or – for example in **Northern Ireland** – are in fact considered for cuts.

Research and development

Measures to achieve the R&D targets have the potential to contribute to the aims of the Investing in Children Recommendation, for example through specific **digital skills and services**. Unfortunately, none of the NRPs mention specific research and innovation initiatives in the field of children's rights and well-being.

Climate change, energy and the environment

Measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote renewable energies and recycling can impact positively on children's environments. Programmes aimed at **increasing energy efficiency in homes** (e.g. in *Wales*) can be particularly beneficial. However, few NRPs contain measures to advance on these targets reflecting a worrying trend to de-prioritise environmental goals.



European Commissioners speak at EPSCO meeting 2015

3.3 The shifting EU political agenda

The 'European Semester' was put in place in 2010 as the coordination mechanism of the Europe 2020 strategy alongside budgetary surveillance. The Semester process was intended to address European, but particularly national, challenges to achieving the Europe 2020 targets in a coordinated way.

However, the new Juncker Commission in place since November 2014 has already sought to leave its mark on EU policy priorities. It quickly launched its Investment Plan for Europe through the mobilisation of both public and private capital to boost competitiveness and create jobs. Promotion of the Juncker Plan took centre stage in the Commission's work for 2015. It has also influenced the European Semester, since the Annual Growth Survey 2015 was driven by the new triptych of the Commission: 1. structural reform; 2. investment; and 3. fiscal sustainability.

The Investing in Children Recommendation could still fit within the prevailing logic of investment. However, with the social dimension of European policy and coordination tools losing out, it is fairly clear that the European Semester has been side-tracked from implementing a comprehensive EU agenda to implementing economic and budgetary surveillance.

National Reform Programmes do not tend to emphasise the positive interlinkages between the Europe 2020 targets or with the Investing in Children Recommendation. Poverty is no longer mentioned as a priority concern for the EU. This is particularly concerning considering the Europe 2020 target on poverty reduction is still far from being reached.

We are now further from tackling poverty in the EU than we were five years ago.

The ongoing lack of national child poverty strategies

In light of the Investing in Children Recommendation, some EU countries have made specific commitments to address the situation of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. As examples:

- In **Ireland** the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 published in April 2014 establishes a target of lifting 70,000 children out of poverty by 2020.
- In August 2014 the **Polish** government approved The National Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2020, where one of the five operational goals is focused on reducing child poverty and social exclusion.

However, the overwhelming majority of EU Member States have not set specific national targets to tackle child poverty and social exclusion.

Furthermore, as this report shows, **the political climate has even tended to move away from this long-term thinking and investment in children.**

A striking example was provided when **the UK** government announced in July 2015 that it had decided to **repeal the UK Child Poverty Act** that was passed in 2010. The Act had legally bound the UK governments to a commitment to eradicate child poverty in Britain by 2020, with a series of four measurable targets against which Governments were required to report. These have been replaced by a statutory duty to report only on measures of worklessness and educational attainment.

3.4 Looking ahead

This report sets out the views of Eurochild members, backed up by evidence and examples from their countries on the current state of implementation of the Investing in Children Recommendation and the extent to which the European Semester is helping or hindering the achievement of positive outcomes for children.

It highlights good practices where Member States are developing integrated child poverty strategies and using available EU funds in line with the Investing in Children Recommendation.

However, progress is patchy and, with no consistent prioritisation at EU level, the momentum gained through adoption of the Europe 2020 strategy and 2013 Recommendation, is being lost. In 2016, the second “half” of Europe 2020 begins. With or without a mid-term review, this provides one of the last opportunities to refocus the EU political agenda towards more balanced priorities and integrated strategies. This is central to the future well-being of our children and the delivery of real social, environmental and economic benefits to the whole of society.



Eurochild Secretary General Jana Hainsworth on panel with European Parliamentarians

4. Progress on Investing in Children 2013-2015

This chapter reflects on current realities in the EU Member States. It summarises progress made in terms of political commitments and measures taken to tackle child poverty and promote child well-being across the EU since the adoption of the Investing in Children Recommendation, until mid-2015. We also look at developments in particular within each of the three pillars of the Recommendation over the past year. This overview helps evaluate reported progress of the 2015 National Reform Programmes and recommended actions of the 2015 Country Specific Recommendations in the following section.



4.1 Child-focused strategies

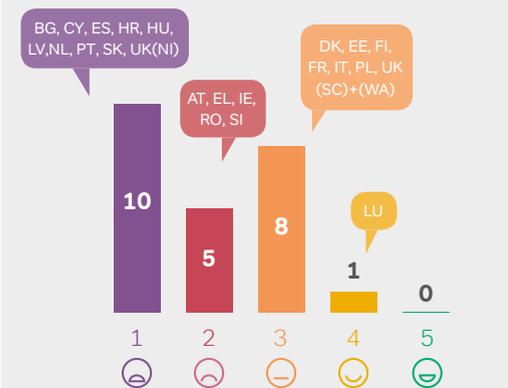
“The Investing in Children Recommendation calls on EU Member States to: *“Organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children’s well-being, through multi-dimensional strategies.”*”

One of the key guiding principles provided is that Member States should: *“Tackle child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies that go beyond ensuring children’s material security and promote equal opportunities so that all children can realise their full potential.”*”

In general, the verdict of Eurochild members is that progress towards integrated, child-focused strategies has been disappointing during the period 2013-2015. The majority of Eurochild members judge that national policy or legislative measures have been ineffective over the past year when it comes to children. 10 out of 24 respondents gave the lowest rating, and only one respondent gave a rating of above average.

Figure 1

Rate your government’s efforts in the last 12 months towards putting children at the heart of policy making



Note: UK countries replied from the perspective of their devolved governments. All ratings are the subjective opinions of respective Eurochild member organisations and do not reflect an objective or comparable rating made by Eurochild as a network.

Integrated child-focused strategies

The experience so far suggests that coherent child-focused strategies are still missing in many Member States. Even when such strategies have been put in place, full implementation is weak. Key challenges are the impact of the economic crisis and the lack of an effective implementation and monitoring framework joining up national, regional and local levels.

Integrated child-focused strategies still missing

Whilst all Member States can point to policies and initiatives designed to benefit children, in most cases these do not form part of an integrated strategy joining up the impact of policies and measures in different areas.

For example, respondents in *Italy* highlight that the **fragmentation of policies and investments at regional level without national**

“ *Key challenges are the impact of the crisis and the lack of effective implementation and monitoring frameworks joining up different levels of governance.* ”

coordination hinders the efficiency of the efforts being made to invest in children. More specifically, Italy has no basic standards for the provision of services at national level and statistics on services vary considerably among regions.

Similarly, in **the Netherlands**, the decentralisation of youth care - shifting responsibilities from provinces to municipalities - has led to less bureaucracy but also a difficulty in maintaining an overall strategic approach to ensuring the quality and availability of care.

In the worst cases, countries are focusing on strategies that take no account of children. Cyprus is

operating under a Memorandum of Understanding for Fiscal Consolidation with the European Commission, in which children are not explicitly mentioned anywhere.

Implementation and monitoring of child-focused approaches is insufficient

Member States sometimes fail to effectively implement and monitor laws and policies passed. For example, the respondent in **Ireland** highlights that **no implementation plan has yet been published** for the new National Policy Framework on Children and Young People 2014-2020. The plan has thus not yet been translated into tangible

actions and results to provide better outcomes for children.

In **Croatia**, there is an implementation programme for the **National Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion**, setting out strategic activities. However, the respondent highlights that **such national policies and strategies do not always influence practices at regional or particularly local level.**

In **the UK**, the distribution of competences between the central government and the devolved authorities leads to some implementation issues for both UK and devolved strategies. While tax and social protection systems are dealt with at the UK level, most other relevant policy areas are devolved. Ensuring these are joined up effectively remains a challenge, particularly where national spending cuts threaten regional strategies. **For example, the Welsh budget will be cut by the UK government, which will impact on the ability to deliver on the Welsh child poverty strategy.**

Positive examples of integrated child-focused strategies

- In **Croatia**, there is now a coherent and strong national policy framework for promoting children's rights and well-being, centred on a National Strategy for Children's Rights. There is also a National Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, which highlights children and youth as some of the most vulnerable people at greatest risk.
- **Ireland** approved a new National Policy Framework on Children and Young People 2014-2020 called 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures'. This includes a specific child poverty target.
- In **Wales (UK)**, the Child poverty strategy was revised to include priorities regarding impact of welfare reform, childcare, food poverty, housing etc. It covers universal and targeted services and provision to enhance the general well-being of children and young people.

Adequate public funding for child-focused policies

Successful strategies need to be adequately resourced so that policy changes can be effectively implemented. However, austerity-driven budget cuts have significantly undermined governments' capacity (at all levels) to invest in children.

In *the UK*, all three devolved governments are worried about the UK budget reduction programme and austerity measures. As part of UK legislation for reforming the welfare system, the new 'Universal Credit' was introduced, the full effect of which remains to be seen. NGOs predict this will increase child poverty and reduce overall family income. For example, in *Wales*, the austerity programme is having a profound impact on children and families, particularly low income households. In *Scotland*, the government has committed to an anti-austerity strategy, but its powers are limited by the UK financial settlement, which affects capacity of local authorities to

deliver services such as education and social care.

The economic crisis has exacerbated the challenges facing social welfare provision in many countries and made it harder to put efficient actions in place. In *Hungary*, the resources allocated to local authorities are decreasing despite growing needs. Similarly, in *France*, the financial difficulties facing regions risks leading to a reduction of spending in important child-focused social areas.

In *Ireland*, respondents identify a clear link between the cuts to both social welfare payments and the Child Benefit payment and the increase in child poverty rates. Funding for services for children were severely cut across a wide number of areas in austerity budgets from 2008-2012 in particular. The savings made were not put into better services for children.

Impact on child poverty and social exclusion

Ultimately, adequately resourced, integrated strategies must make a positive difference on the lives of children, decrease child poverty and increase equality of opportunity. Unfortunately, the reality across Europe is that since the Investing in Children Recommendation, there is little evidence of any improvement in the situation facing children.

In *France*, there is political will and a multi-annual plan against poverty and social exclusion has been adopted. However, the implementation is difficult because of the current crisis and there has been no real improvement in poverty rates among the most vulnerable. Child poverty remains high.

In *Ireland*, a child poverty target was set in the National Policy Framework on Children and Young People 2014-2020. However, the level of child poverty is still unacceptably high; the latest figures from 2013 show that 11.7 per cent of children were living in consistent poverty while 17.9 per cent of chil-

dren were at risk of poverty. The rate of poverty among lone-parent households is disproportionately higher than other family types. No poverty impact analysis has been undertaken on recipients who have transitioned from the One Parent Family Payment to a different payment.

Welfare reforms and benefits in *the UK* are thought to have contributed to increasing levels of child poverty. **The UK government has not signed up to the EU targets on poverty, and is not meeting the child poverty targets it set for itself.** Recent income tax and welfare reforms in *Wales* are forecast to have devastating effects on low income families and child poverty, with even more welfare cuts being planned.

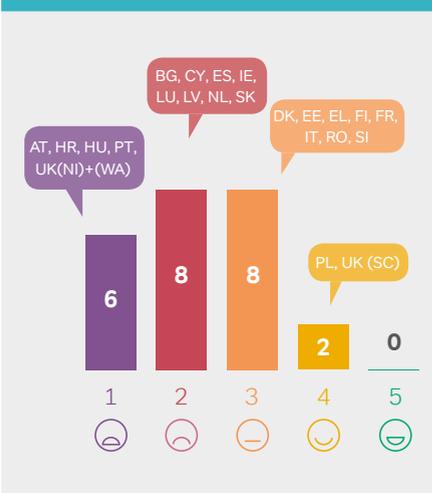
4.2 Access to adequate resources

“The first of the three pillars of the Investing in Children Recommendation is on access to adequate resources to ensure that families and their children are able to live dignified lives and fulfil their potential. Reducing income poverty and material deprivation are key elements of successfully investing in children.

When asked about the efforts made by their government over the past 12 months towards addressing the financial situation of children and their families, respondents indicated that much more can be done. More than half think that their government is performing poorly in this area.

Figure 2

Rate your government's efforts in the last 12 months towards addressing the financial situation of children and their families



Note: UK countries replied from the perspective of their devolved governments. All ratings are the subjective opinions of respective Eurochild member organisations and do not reflect an objective or comparable rating made by Eurochild.

Parents' participation in the labour market

The Recommendation highlights “the strong link between parents’ participation in the labour market and children’s living conditions”. Unfortunately, the employment situation in Europe remains poor and measures to support parents have been limited at best. Some of the more progressive changes since 2013 have centred on improvements to parental leave and efforts to target youth unemployment.

In **Croatia**, parents’ participation in the labour market has been supported by a reform of the Labour Act promoting active labour market policy. This includes priorities like increasing employability of young people and women, increasing participation of socially vulnerable groups and preventing early drop-outs from the education system.

In **Ireland**, the Back to Work Family Dividend was introduced, which provides a tapered two-year cushion for

parents returning to, or entering, the labour market. Despite this, many parents, and particularly lone parents are finding it increasingly hard to stay in work and make it pay. In 2012, 60% of lone parents receiving the One Parent Family payment were working at least part time outside the home: this figure has fallen to just 36%. Key among the barriers is access to affordable high-quality childcare and after-school supports. The Back to Work Family Dividend only goes a small way to paying childcare costs.

Poland has introduced new instruments (activation benefit and telework grant) for the unemployed re-entering the labour market after taking care of a dependent person.

In **Greece**, employment programmes mainly run through EU funds, but irregularly and for short periods of time. A Reconciliation programme is being implemented for provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC), which aims at enabling, in particular, mothers to (re-)enter the labour market or reinforce their situa-

tion in it. However, there are strict criteria for participation and limited numbers of participants. Moreover, the child care services are not enough to cover needs. Many have closed or are overpopulated due to a lack of personnel or budget.

However, respondents from **Scotland (UK)** cite a more fundamental underlying problem: a lack of secure and permanent employment to move families out of poverty.

Some positive developments have taken place in support of parental leave.

In **Poland**, an extension of maternity leave has been introduced as well as additional paid parental leave that can be used by both parents. Nevertheless, female full-time employment remains behind the EU average.

Luxembourg made parental leave more flexible, in order to increase female labour market participation.

Some focus is also being given to the crucial question of youth

employment, so important for the transition of children into independent adulthood.

Levels are unacceptably high across Europe and particularly in Member States such as **Spain** and **Portugal**. Respondents in **France** highlighted that the youth unemployment rate is concerning and not decreasing.

Estonia is implementing a youth guarantee to tackle youth unemployment, among other things.

Germany is setting up nationwide youth employment agencies with pooled responsibility for services provided for under 25 years.

Scotland (UK) has introduced measures to tackle youth unemployment with EU funds.

Respondents say that **Croatia** has improved the possibilities for people with disabilities to access their rights in terms of employment and parental/maternity benefits. Such efforts are important in targeting the most at-risk groups.



Sean from Ireland speaks about his experiences, European Parliament, Brussels, November 2015.

Adequate benefits

Employment alone cannot solve the resource needs of all families. The Recommendation stresses the need to: “Make it possible for children to enjoy adequate living standards that are compatible with a life in dignity, through an optimal combination of cash and in-kind benefits”. The questionnaires suggest that some positive policy developments have taken place targeting benefits for vulnerable families. Nevertheless, the overriding political context is one of cuts and restricted access to benefits.

Croatia operates a child benefits scheme which is means-tested with the level of benefits varying between three low income groups. A working group has been created to analyse the tax and benefits system, and an action plan for consolidation of the social protection system [should have] been prepared (June 2015). The objective of this consolidation is the creation of a Guaranteed Minimum Standard – a new kind of benefit which would ensure a higher and better

level of protection of the poorest groups in society.

In **Greece, Hungary, Portugal** and **the UK** family/child-related benefits have decreased. **Greece** has no tax relief arrangements and benefits for the unemployed have declined. **Hungary** has introduced several restrictions to child allowances and **the UK** has put a cap on the amount of benefits any family can receive. Respondents from **Portugal** stress the need for a revised minimum income scheme to meet the social demands resulting from the crisis.

Child allowances and/or benefits have increased in **Estonia, Romania** and **Bulgaria**. In **Bulgaria** professional foster care subsidies have increased, and in **Estonia** a child allowance fund has been established.

In **Latvia** family income has somewhat improved, partly thanks to tax relief.

In **Italy**, economic support to families takes the form of cash benefits, and the share of GDP allocated to

families and children is increasing - although an increase from less than 1% to 1.4% in 2011 means the rate is still low compared to most EU and OECD countries.

In **Poland** the expenditure on family/child-related benefits is low. However, the income threshold for entitlement to family benefits is going to increase and the tax relief has already increased from the third child.

Spain has worked to try to improve the economic situation of families notably by attempting to improve the effectiveness of family support schemes and coordination between employment and social services to support those most at risk. Nevertheless, these are largely insufficient to address issues of poverty.

In **Bulgaria**, the efficiency of social transfers, still under EU average, needs to improve, as well as the efficiency of services. The Eurochild members advocates for combining social benefits with social work based on individual approaches and family assessment so that family

support is provided not only on basis of income assessment, but all factors and resources of parents to look after the child. Monthly allowances for children have been bound to compulsory attendance of preschool and school. This risks punishing already vulnerable families.

In **Ireland**, the 2015 Budget provided an increase in the Child Benefit payment of €5 per child. Furthermore, the Government committed to an additional €5 increase in 2016 “if circumstances allow”. The increase to Child Benefit has helped move some social welfare dependent household compositions with a pre-school child to income adequacy. Nevertheless, the small increase in 2015 must be seen against the backdrop of a cumulative decrease in average household income of €20.93 since 2008. Furthermore, changes to the means-tested One Parent Family Payment since 2012 have led to about 60,000 recipients losing the payment and 40% of families ‘at risk of poverty’ have reported that they do not receive any social welfare supports in addition to the Child Benefit payment.

4.3 Access to affordable quality services

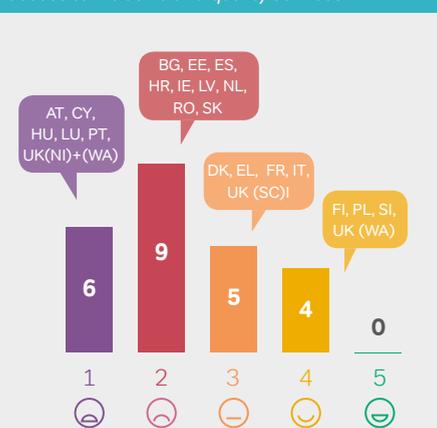
“ The second of the three pillars of the Investing in Children Recommendation is on access to affordable quality services.

Ensuring all children have equal access to good quality services is key to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage and is the hallmark of an effective child poverty approach.

When asked about the efforts made by their government over the past 12 months towards improving children's access to inclusive and quality services, a majority of respondents indicated that their government is not doing enough. 9 out of 24 respondents do nevertheless think that their government is making a good or average effort.

Figure 3

Rate your government's efforts in the last 12 months towards improving children's access to inclusive and quality services



Note: UK countries replied from the perspective of their devolved governments. All ratings are the subjective opinions of respective Eurochild member organisations and do not reflect an objective or comparable rating made by Eurochild as a network.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Quality ECEC services can contribute to the social and personal development of the child and give the child a good start in life, whilst freeing parents to work, study or engage in professional training. There is an increasing awareness of the value in investment in ECEC and there have been some positive policy developments in this field. Nevertheless, these are often relatively limited initiatives and fail to rectify long-standing under-investment in the sector affecting both the quality and quantity of ECEC services. They are also often undermined by broader budget cuts affecting services.

There have been some positive initiatives.

In **Poland**, the number of child-care facilities for the under 3s has tripled 2010-2013 in part due to government incentives to open

such establishments e.g. help with funds. Every child under 4 will have the right to a place in preschool from September 2015. Parents are offered support through e.g. reduction of kindergarten charges.

Luxembourg has widely reached its quantitative objective of increased childcare provision, and in the medium term, informal education 0-3 shall become free of charge - currently fees depend on family revenue and composition. Receivers of social assistance pay no fees under the Guaranteed Minimum Income policy which is considered the main tool for combating child poverty (monetary and cultural).

In **Germany, Latvia** and **Estonia** child day-care services for the under-3s/toddlers have also been increased.

Scotland has invested in additional provision for children and families - e.g. additional hours of preschool for 2-4 year-olds subject to child protection measures - but it is difficult to assess how effective these have been or to what extent

they compensate for reductions elsewhere.

However, there is still a general lack of affordable and available ECEC services – especially for the most vulnerable children.

Respondents from **Slovakia** highlight a low capacity of kindergartens and a lack of laws on nurseries.

In **Wales (UK)** funding cuts have resulted in reduced services.

Northern Ireland (UK) still needs to agree a Childcare strategy.

In **Italy** the number of ECEC places and services have decreased due to the economic crisis, with enormous regional differences in quality and quantity of available services.

In **Slovakia**, Roma children have limited access to pre-school education, and Roma segregation in schools continues. Pre-school is only covered for children that will enter primary school.

In **Ireland**, the cost of full-time childcare can account for over 40 per cent of household income. The high cost of childcare for parents is acting as a barrier to employment and training for some parents, preventing them from exiting poverty. The cost of full time private childcare for an infant in an urban area is approximately €11,000 per annum. In this instance, Child Benefit, which is paid at €135 per month, meets 15% of the annual cost of childcare.

Croatia has introduced a national curriculum for early and pre-school education, prescribing mandatory pre-school programmes for all children. However, respondents highlight that pre-schooling is not easily accessible in all regions.

Other issues concern the quality of the services provided.

Bulgaria is developing early childhood development standards; reports an increase of social services for children, an intention to develop a new law on social services, and an increased access to integrated services as part of a social inclusion project. However,

the focus is still rather on quantity/access than on quality. There is a lack of a monitoring and evaluation system using indicators focusing on results for children and parents rather than the number of services available.

Hungary offers a very limited number of quality services, with no standards, no protocols, no evaluation, and no accountability. In most settlements, there are no psychologists or other services available for children. The caseloads of social workers, health visitors etc. make them unable to provide quality services.

In **Finland**, the number of children in day care has increased, and social and health care services are available for all children, however there is a lack of professional support to e.g. families of children with disabilities.

Respondents in **Croatia** point to a lack of flexible and adequate ECEC programmes and services, adjusted to parents' working hours.

Education

Education systems need to become more inclusive to break the cycle of disadvantage, foster individual development and ensure equal opportunities for all children. There are successful examples of initiatives to improve access to education, increase educational attainment and reduce drop-out rates, particularly for vulnerable children. However, positive impact is not at all clear in a broad context of underfunding and disadvantage.

Some new strategies and curricula aim to provide more equal educational outcomes in the future.

In **Luxembourg**, a plan to increase the quality of education with smaller classes and more space per child has been elaborated and will be defined within a legal text. This aims to provide equal opportunities for less advantaged children.

Croatia offers free primary education and has elaborated a strategy for education, science and technology, which should lead to comprehensive curriculum reform.

Amendments in education legislation and policy aim to improve the availability and quality of education. It includes a regulation which defines education assistance for students with disabilities.

Scotland (UK) has approved a new school curriculum and additional funds for schools to support closing the attainment gap between rich and poor.

Poland has approved a new school equipment programme aimed to help parents to access subsidies to purchase school books.

Bulgaria has developed a strategy for decreasing the number of early school dropouts, including binding monthly allowances for children to compulsory attendance of preschool and school. However, instead of increasing access to education, this risks pushing out vulnerable and poor children and families.

Estonia has introduced programmes for juvenile offenders and school drop-outs.

However, many respondents reported ongoing and even widening inequality in educational outcomes.

Educational inequalities are increasing in **France**, although political will to fight this exists.

Greece has a lack of educational staff, overpopulated classes, irregularity in school days, hygiene problems, overcrowded buildings and lack of funds to extend, repair or build new sites for municipalities (many students moved from private to public schools).

In **Latvia**, there are difficulties in providing adequate educational services close to children's homes.

Portugal notes negative developments in education quality and increased bureaucracy for teachers.

Vulnerable groups such as Roma and children with disabilities require more targeted support, which is generally inadequate.

In **Romania** there has been little or no progress in the development of measures for increasing school

integration of Roma children, preventing early school dropout and supporting Roma families. Nor does the strategy for people with disabilities respond to the real needs of beneficiaries (e.g. school integration for children with disabilities).

In **Ireland**, supports to children with special educational needs and disabilities were seriously reduced during the recession. While efforts have been made to increase supports in the Budget 2015, there is still a disparity between available supports and the needs of many children, who are being left without individual needs assessments or education plans. There is evidence that some schools are not cooperating with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, meaning that parents often have to send their child to a special class or school to receive therapeutic inputs. These exclusionary practices should not be permitted in a publicly funded education system.

Health Care

The Recommendation reiterates the universal right of all children to health care. This right is to be realised through disease prevention and health promotion on the one hand, and through access to quality health services on the other. However respondents raise a number of issues with regard to the lack of capacity of services to effectively implement this important right.

Respondents in **Ireland** flag that there is no overarching statutory or policy basis for a child's right of access to healthcare services. However most Member States do (at least in theory) provide free health and medical care to children. In some there is extra attention paid to children aged 0-3. New developments include a law being drafted in **Greece** to provide health care for immigrant children without legal status as well. However, significant problems are being seen with the implementation of free health care services for children in practice.

Respondents raise a number of issues such as:

- A lack of service providers in **Estonia**.
- Increasing inequality in access to health services in **France**.
- Problems providing access to health care close to children's homes in **Latvia**.
- Reduced capacity to implement a law providing free vaccinations for children due to budget cuts – and an increasing number of people without health insurance - in **Greece**.
- Mental health services for young people at breaking point in **Northern Ireland (UK)**.
- Waiting times for accessing community mental health services for children steadily increasing year-on-year in **Ireland**. Cases identified where children have been waiting for psychological treatment for over two years.

Housing

A child's living environment has a profound influence on his/her long-term health and educational outcomes. Situations of insecure or inadequate housing and/or homelessness can impact on a child's ability to access other rights including education and recreation. Unfortunately the financial crisis in Europe has only increased these risks for children.

Ireland provides an interesting case study of some of the problems facing children and their families. The country has seen: low levels of rent supplements in an era of rapidly increasing rent prices; increased demand for rental accommodation; landlords refusing to accept rent allowance; lack of availability of social housing and personal indebtedness.

These factors have combined to cause a rapid increase in the rate of families with children becoming homeless. In 2014, an average of over 40 families became homeless each month – twice the number in 2013. Between December 2014 and March 2015, the number of

families with children in emergency accommodation rose by 24 per cent. By March 2015, there were 471 family units, with 1,054 children, living in emergency accommodation, the majority in Dublin.

The quality of emergency accommodation being offered to families – in hotel rooms and bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation – is inappropriate for family life as such accommodation often means whole families living in one room with no kitchen facilities. There are even reported instances of families with children being forced to sleep in their cars, and of parents who are facing homelessness asking for their children to be put into State care or requesting other family members to care for their children.

Long-term living in emergency accommodation is costly, unsustainable and not conducive to children's development. Children's right to play and education are affected as there is little space for them to play or do homework and in some instances, children may have to travel long distances to remain in the school which they were attend-

ing prior to their family becoming homeless.

Nearly 90,000 households were already on the social housing waiting list in 2013, with as many as 47% of them waiting seven years or more. A positive development has been that, in 2014, the Government published 'Social Housing Strategy 2020' which provides the basis for an enhanced approach to social housing provision and contains clear actions to be taken to increase supply and most importantly, reduce the number of people on waiting lists. Its successful implementation will be crucial for many children in **Ireland**.

“ *Much remains to be done to prevent family separation and promote good quality alternative care for children* ”

Family support and alternative care

Several Eastern European Member States have been taking positive steps towards deinstitutionalisation (DI) of child protection services, albeit with many associated challenges. However, Eurochild members still report poverty and material deprivation remaining important underlying factors for family breakdown. Family support services need more support, but are often facing cuts, which increases the risk of family break up.

Bulgaria is undergoing a process of DI reform, financial standards for social services have increased and there has been an increase of financial resources for the most vulnerable and marginalised children and families. However, the quality provision of alternative care services remains a major challenge and there is still no comprehensive family policy. Much remains to be done to prevent family separation and to promote good quality alternative family and community based services. There is also a lack of clarity on financial sustainability

of newly developed services after European Structural and Investment Funds support ends.

In **Croatia**, the policy focus on DI has been reinforced through a Master Plan for DI, which is reflected in the Social Welfare Strategy and law. Nevertheless, progress is slower than anticipated and problems exist regarding data used which may exclude children in residential care classified as health or educational facilities. In addition, reporting is inconsistent, making it hard to assess the level of progress.

Latvia still has problems finding foster homes for children in out-of-home care.

A positive development in **Austria** focused on unaccompanied minors in the migration/asylum-seeking process. Normally, such children are housed in group homes of around 40 children with little possibility for workers to give individual attention to the children. However a new group home has been opened in Vienna for max 6 children, with 6 social workers, psychiatrists and pedagogues.

An example of cuts to family support services is provided by **Luxembourg** which has abolished two child-rearing benefits which were incentives to take care of children at home.

In **France**, a bill related to child protection is currently in parliament process. The bill promotes child well-being and takes better account of individual needs of children, including better support for young people leaving care and the creation of a national council for child protection. This will need to be implemented.

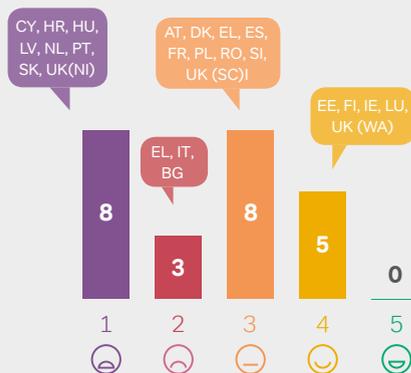
4.4 Children's right to participate

“ The third of the three pillars of the Investing in Children Recommendation is on children's right to participate. Enabling children to participate fully in various forms of active life and more specifically in the decisions that affect their lives is paramount to promoting social inclusion. The standards and principles of the UNCRC must continue to guide policies and actions in the EU.

When asked about the efforts made by their government over the past 12 months towards engaging with children, the majority of respondents rated it medium or bad.

Figure 4

Rate your government's efforts in the last 12 months towards engaging with children (child participation)



Note: UK countries replied from the perspective of their devolved governments. All ratings are the subjective opinions of respective Eurochild member organisations and do not reflect an objective or comparable rating made by Eurochild as a network

Children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives

Many respondents report positive developments in the area of child participation through law reforms, strategies and support for child or youth councils. Nevertheless, these developments remain quite limited and the situation in practice is still far removed from the systematic implementation of this crucial right. Furthermore, developments are not universally positive.

In **Ireland**, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs launched Europe's first Children and Young People Participation Strategy in July 2015 - the latest in a series of positive measures. There are several fora available for participation such as Young People's Parliaments (Dáil na Óg) and Councils (Comhairle na nÓg).

Respondents in **Scotland** note a big improvement, with child participation now much more widespread and acknowledged part of deci-

sion-making. Both local and national level public authorities have improved and extended their practice, children are consulted and involved in many areas of decision-making both on specific issues (e.g. on a particular plan/strategy for delivering services to children and consultation on proposed school closures) and on routine activities carried out in mainstream services (e.g. staff selection in schools).

In **Wales** the national structures for participation have been improved. The government must now give due regard to the UNCRC in all its functions, and local authorities will have this duty from April 2016 regarding new social care arrangements.

In **Slovakia**, the Action Plan for Children proposes to strengthen mechanisms in the Committee on Children and Youth to involve children in policy making, including actions to strengthen capacity of school councils and organise trainings for supporting counsellors. The best child participation opportunities exist in high schools (since school councils

are legally compulsory), far less in secondary and primary education. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of awareness of child participation in most areas of policy-making.

Estonia has changed its constitution lowering the voting age in local elections from 18 to 16.

There are positive examples of child participation in **Croatia**. Around 30 Children's Councils are active, as well as 70 Children's Fora (organised by Union of Societies "Our Children" **Croatia**) where children learn about their rights and the UNCRC. There is also the network of young advisors to the Ombudsman for children, which is a standing advisory body to the ombudsman and also supports communication of information about children's rights. Nevertheless, in practice, there is no systematic approach to implementing the right to participation in the daily lives of most children.

Luxembourg is aiming at training democratic participation "from the beginning". A bill (Framing Plan)

modifying the Youth Act will define the main structures of informal education, which participation is part of. The Framing Plan foresees different actions in order to improve participation and democratic attitudes of three age groups (3-18 years). A referendum recently rejected to drop the voting age to 16 years.

In **Romania** the national authority for child rights protection organised several projects on child participation in partnership with a Pupils Council and Council of Europe, UNICEF and NGOs.

Bulgaria reports a need for a comprehensive child participation plan and monitoring and evaluation framework for developing policy and practice in this area. At the moment there is a limited scope of work on child participation which is only carried out in one specific targeted way (strengthening the role of school councils at school, municipal and national level).

Regional differences are reported by **Estonia** and **France**. The

latter note that political will and awareness exists through the child protection bill, but there is a need to put measures into practice and to organise trainings for facilitating child participation.

In **Italy**, participation projects in decision processes concerning children's lives are in the early development phase. The only concrete actions so far have concerned children's right to be heard.

Not all respondents reported positive developments around child participation

Greece, Hungary and **Portugal** report no change or efforts by the government to include children in decision-making processes and a lack of participation mechanisms.

In **Northern Ireland**, funding to the Participation Network to ensure government departments engage directly with children and young people was withdrawn without any replacement.

5. The European Semester: help or hindrance?

Assessing the 2015 National Reform Programmes and Country Specific Recommendations

This chapter assesses the extent to which both Member States and the European Commission include and reflect the central elements and principles of the Investing in Children Recommendation in the European Semester process.

It summarises the overall focus on children as well as how each of the three pillars of the Recommendation are addressed. Where relevant it considers follow-up of the 2014 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs), the 2015 National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and the 2015 CSRs.

Finally, the alternative Country Specific Recommendations offered by Eurochild members are set out by theme to highlight their view of what the Semester could and should be directing Member States to do.

The assessment is structured similarly to the previous chapter, with a reflection on the Investing in Children Recommendation to help cross-referencing and to strengthen linkages between the Semester and the Recommendation.



5.1 Does the European Semester include a child focus?

Fewer child-focused CSRs in 2015

The number of child-focused Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) decreased significantly from 2014 to 2015. Furthermore, our evidence shows that although some Member States did not deliver on their child-related 2014 CSRs, these did not necessarily get followed up with CSRs in 2015.

In **2014**, around two thirds of Member States (MS) were given child relevant CSRs.

Eurochild members judge that in the framework of the 2014 European Semester, **Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain** and **the UK** received CSRs that were relevant to children.⁶

In 2014 the number of CSRs addressing **child poverty** peaked

at 7; with even more MS receiving CSRs related to childcare (9) or education (13).

In **2015**, the number of CSRs related to children has dropped significantly. There are only two countries which received CSRs relating to child poverty or family support (**Ireland** and **Spain**), 8 MS related to childcare and 10 to education. To some extent, there is a knock-on effect from the decrease in the overall number of CSRs (reduced in line with the Better Regulation Package of the European Commission).

However, members flag that there are almost no CSRs directly related to investing in children in 2015. A general feedback is that 2015 CSRs are concentrated on economic growth and the business environment; they are short and general, and hence lacking a children's perspective. The trend raises serious concerns about the extent to which children's issues

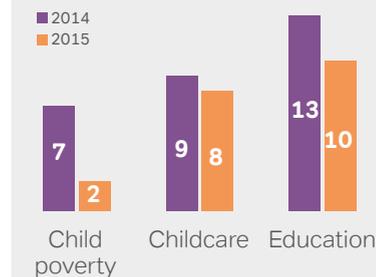
are considered priority and, if not, on what justification.

Low implementation of child-related CSRs from 2014

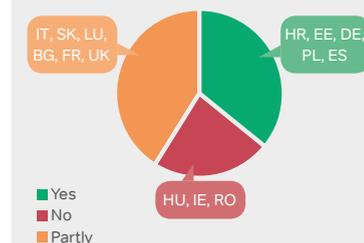
Concern about the disappearance of many child-related CSRs in 2015 is heightened because respondents from only five Member States considered that their 2014 child-related CSRs had been implemented, whilst six felt they had been partly implemented.

Furthermore, those CSRs that were implemented were mostly concerned with labour law reforms, skills training, youth unemployment, increasing female labour market participation, tax schemes and benefits to families. Most of these are 'child-related' without being 'child-focused'. The ambition to deliver a rights-based approach for children has not been met.

CSRs addressing child poverty, childcare provision and education in 2014 and 2015



Assessment of implementation of the 2014 CSRs relevant for children



⁶ To avoid duplication with measures set out in the Economic Adjustment Programme, Cyprus and Greece did not receive any CSRs in 2014

European Commission 2015 Country Reports

Around half of our respondents found that the Country Reports provided an adequate representation of the situation of children. In general, **the 2015 Country Reports better reflected the situation of children and their families** compared to the Country Specific Recommendations.

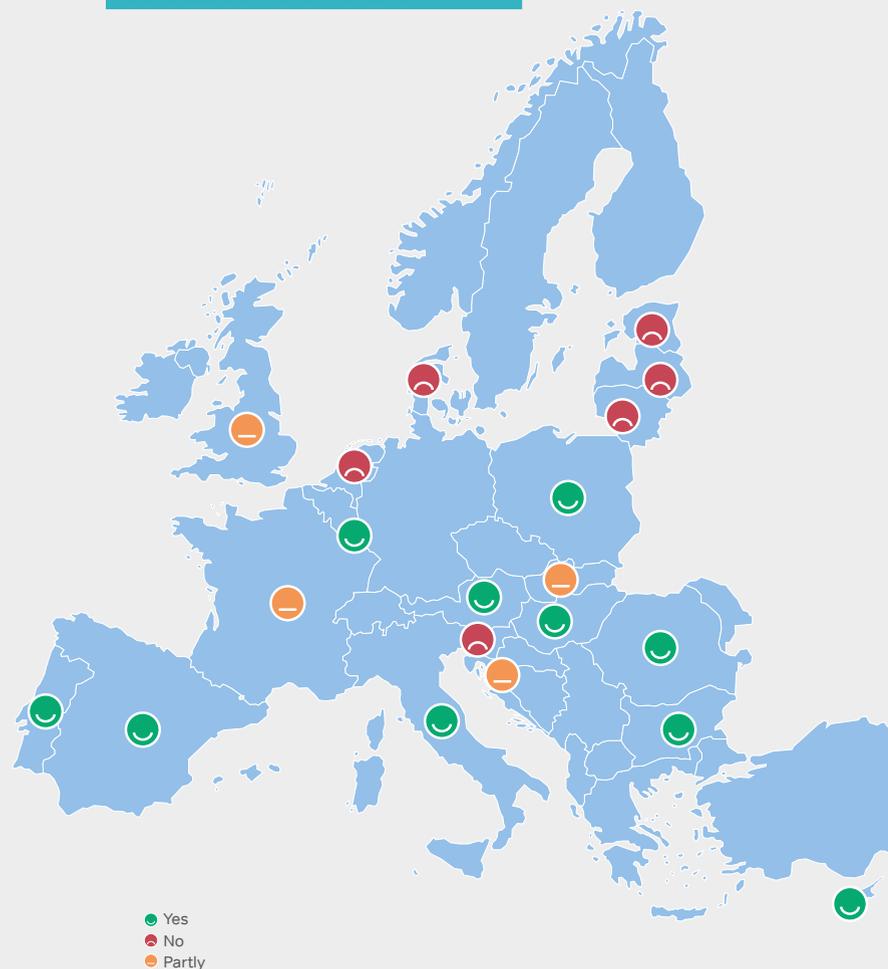
Children are mentioned in nearly all the Country Reports, although the focus differs greatly between them. In some they are only mentioned in relation to tax benefits (e.g. Latvia), while in others their situation is explored in great detail and in different areas (e.g. Bulgaria and Romania).

Several Country Reports clearly point out that **children are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion** (e.g. BG, HR, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, PT, RO, SI, ES, UK). Whilst some country reports make specific reference to children in particularly vulnerable situations, such as migrant children (e.g. DK, AT, CY); Roma children (e.g. RO, SK); and in the context of deinstitutionalisation (e.g. BG, RO).

Often children are mentioned in relation to **education, labour and employment**, e.g. female labour market participation and accessible and affordable child care or pre-school education, and in relation to education (training, inclusive education). Youth is often mentioned in relation to unemployment, retraining and skills, and children in relation to education and taxation (families with children).

Although the Country Reports might reflect the real overall situation of children in the country, they generally **do not give adequate attention to particular measures and policies to address the situation**. Child poverty and social exclusion is not explored with a child well-being focus and analysis typically missed the impact of the financial crisis on children. The aspect of child participation was also missing in most countries.

Do EC Country Reports reflect the real situation of children?



Failing to support integrated child-focused strategies

The Semester process has not served to reinforce the message that integrated child-focused strategies are essential for breaking the cycle of disadvantage facing many children in the EU.

Eurochild member organisations highlight that the CSRs provided under the Semester process focus more on tackling issues such as employability and tax schemes rather than calling for integrated strategies to promote the well-being of children.

For example, strengthening the link between education and the labour market is a recurring CSR. However, if educational establishments are only profiled as places for acquiring skills in a narrow sense, such an approach fails to acknowledge the role of education in tackling inequalities, breaking cycles of disadvantage, promoting citizenship and enabling personal development. The 2015 CSR for **Bulgaria** is promising in this

regard. It recommends to “increase the participation in education of disadvantaged children, in particular Roma, by improving access to good-quality early schooling”.

Other CSRs have tended to focus on the quantity of services rather than the quality. For example, **Austria** and **Ireland** received CSRs related to accessible child care. However, the focus of these recommendations was not on the quality

of care and outcomes for children, but rather on the employment goal of enabling parents to return to work.

In other cases, CSRs were very general and failed to address key aspects of an integrated approach to addressing the well-being of children. Even recommendations to promote the economic situation of families typically fail to give specific attention to children's well-being.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

Four Eurochild members make the promotion of children's well-being the focus of an alternative CSR for 2016:

- **Cyprus:** “take action to account for children's well-being in all actions taken – financial or social.”
- **Germany:** “take action to put the well-being of children at the centre of debates on reconciliation between professional and family life and further develop quality day care; promote cross sectoral orientated reform of existing supporting systems and the development of an integrated prevention landscape; promote a coherent youth welfare strategy that stimulates youth employment and takes into consideration the different needs of different target groups.”
- **Denmark:** “take action to include children's well-being as a specific target.”
- **Finland:** “take action to assess and evaluate how plans for the Finnish government program 2015-2019 concerning cutting of public family and child services will effect on children's wellbeing.”

Insufficient attention on child poverty and social exclusion

The Semester process has largely failed to support the poverty target of the Europe 2020 strategy or the ambition of the Investing in Children Recommendation to address child poverty and break cycles of disadvantage.

The previous chapter set out the many negative trends in relation to child poverty in Europe. The Semester process is not helping enough to counter such trends.

For example, the approach promoted in **the UK** to reducing family/child poverty is focused on encouraging parents to enter the labour market. However, this is not proving effective since in more than half the affected families at least one parent is already working.

As for previous years, the 2015 NRPs tends to recognise the existence of child poverty and social exclusion and the need to address it for the good of individuals and societies, without actually setting out effective measures to do so.

All too often, recommendations are focused on promoting austerity rather than supporting vulnerable families and children.

Several Eurochild members stress that the Semester process including CSRs provided by the European Commission need a clear and direct focus on addressing child poverty and exclusion.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

Six Eurochild members make eliminating child poverty and exclusion the focus of an alternative CSR for 2016:

- **Cyprus:** “set realistic targets for eliminating child poverty and exclusion, including all children residing on the island.”
- **Ireland:** “take action to adopt a multidimensional rights-based plan to achieve the Child Poverty Target, in line with the Investing in Children Recommendation and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with a focus on both investment in public services as well as income support.”
- **Portugal:** “take action to ensure that the Investing in Children Recommendation is incorporated clearly in all the headlines that concern education, social inclusion and poverty reduction, defining clear indicators towards that target.”
- **Slovenia:** “take action to address the problem of child poverty in policy and relevant strategic documents.”
- **Northern Ireland (UK):** “take action in 2015 and 2016 to eradicate child poverty.”
- **Wales (UK):** “take action to ensure that the maximum extent of available resources are used to tackle child poverty, and to reconsider all policy decisions, particularly in relation to welfare reform, that are having, and predicted to have a negative impact in increasing child poverty levels and take all necessary steps, through material assistance and support programmes, to help mitigate the negative effect on children most in need of support.”

5.2 The European Semester and access to adequate resources

The European Semester has directed attention towards the need to ensure access to adequate resources for families, both in terms of promoting parents' employment and adequate benefits. Nevertheless, as the analysis below shows, approaches in both cases are flawed and will fail to effectively break cycles of disadvantage.

Promoting parents' employment is not a panacea for children

The Semester process has focused welcome attention on the need to support parents to reconcile work and family life. Nevertheless, all too often, these approaches are not developed with the best interests of children in mind, particularly in the context of growing numbers of working poor and the quality of childcare.

Implementation of 2014 CSRs

Since the 2014 CSRs, there have been some positive developments

in the promotion of parents' participation in the labour market.

For example, **Poland** implemented measures to boost women's participation in the labour market, including by increasing the availability of affordable pre-school childcare, which was also addressed by Member States including **Germany**, **Estonia** and **Luxembourg**.

Nevertheless, much more needs to be done. Respondents from both **Scotland** and **Wales (UK)** stress that whilst childcare initiatives are being implemented, they are not enough to overcome the barriers that many parents face.

Furthermore, a big issue for Eurochild members is that the promotion of these childcare services is insufficiently focused on ensuring a sufficiently high quality of service to support the needs and interests of the children.

In other cases, for example in **Italy** and **Slovakia**, respondents highlighted that policies had largely failed to address the shortage of services for children under 3 years.

Furthermore, there are concerns that some approaches to removing 'disincentives' to unemployment of parents risk punishing vulnerable families, with knock on effects for their children. This is particularly relevant in the face of the increasing evidence of in-work poverty. **Employment alone is not always a solution to poverty and exclusion, especially in the increasingly prevalent precarious and low-paid forms.**



Eurochild National Partner Networks (NPNs) meeting in Amsterdam, September 2015. Eurochild has 18 NPNs that monitor implementation of EU policies, legislation and funding.

2015 NRPs

Both *Luxembourg* and *Poland* continue efforts to increase female labour market participation by investing in affordable quality childcare and pre-school education.

In *the UK*, the NRP mentions measures aimed at providing childcare support within the Universal Credit system. It also mentions increasing the minimum wage and continued focus on providing job and training opportunities for workless households.

The *Italian* NRP commits to efforts to support parents' participation in the labour market as well as facilitating the work-life balance.

In *the Netherlands* measures are being taken to improve labour market participation, including reforms to child benefit schemes and measures aimed at the labour participation and economic independence of women. However, the measures are not explained in detail in the NRP.

2015 CSRs

The UK, Ireland and *Estonia* are among the countries recommended to improve the availability of affordable full time **childcare**. *The UK* CSR also includes the welcome reference to the need for these services to be of high quality.

Italy is to act for more active labour policies with particular attention to work-life balance. *Croatia* has been recommended to strengthen incentives helping unemployed and inactive people to take up paid employment.

Some Member States are recommended to address minimum income. *Portugal* should improve the efficiency of public employment services and ensure the effective activation and adequate coverage of a minimum income scheme. A revision of **minimum wage** mechanisms is recommended for *Slovenia* paying special attention to addressing the impact of in-work poverty.

Youth Unemployment

Several countries have received CSRs related to tackling youth unemployment.

Eurochild members generally felt that Member States failed to adequately implement 2014 CSRs related to youth unemployment and skills development, including in *Croatia, Poland* and *the UK*.

In *France* the Youth Guarantee is likely to have a positive impact but it remains challenging.

Recommendations in 2015 vary from increasing the quality and effectiveness of job search assistance and counselling (e.g. *Spain*), increasing the employability of young people (e.g. *UK* and *Finland*) and strengthening measures to facilitate the transition from education to the labour market (e.g. *Hungary*).

The Semester needs to strengthen its commitment to adequate benefits

Addressing household incomes from sources outside the labour market are a delicate aspect of the Semester. There are few Country Specific Recommendations related to benefits and taxes and they can too often be misinterpreted or simply implemented as cuts, especially given the prevalence of CSRs calling for action to tackle “excessive deficit[s]”.

Implementation of 2014 CSRs

In *Slovakia* there has been some progress on improving the effectiveness of social transfers and reducing the tax burden for low-income groups.

Croatia has strengthened the effectiveness and transparency of their social protection system as well as the effectiveness and adequacy of social assistance benefits.

In *Latvia* the ministry of welfare is working on a reform, of which the results are yet to be seen, in rela-

tion to the 2014 CSR on reforming social assistance and its financing.

Our **Cypriot** member notes that the reforms set in place to promote children's welfare are not progressing and the Social Welfare System is under-resourced, under-staffed and frustrated. The new Minimum Income Scheme has not been implemented as planned.

2015 NRPs

Slovenia aims to implement activation measures for beneficiaries of social transfers and is reorganising centres for social work in order to empower direct work with users. Among the measures to be covered is the adjustment of the basis for minimum income to 288.81 EUR, which is anticipated in the social agreement and will raise expenditure on financial assistance and pension support.

In **Spain** a new law on Tax Reform aims at reducing poverty and social exclusion by increasing disposable income, among others, through negative taxes for vulnerable groups such as large families, single parents and those taking

care of persons with disabilities, although it is deemed by our member to be insufficient.

The **Scottish** NRP mentions funding support to mitigate impact of UK welfare reforms. Recently approved devolution of more social transfer power to the Scottish authorities might lead to improvements.

In **Hungary** measures are put in practice to tighten the eligibility criteria for financial benefits.

In **Estonia** there are worries that although some benefits will increase, the new fuel taxation will affect the living standards and will probably raise food prices.

In **the Netherlands** although government finances have been improved, it is done by lowering collective expenditures on (primarily) care and social security.

2015 CSRs

In 2015 **Croatia** was asked to carry out "reform of the social protection system and further consolidate social benefits by improving targeting and eliminating overlaps".

Ireland should taper the withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments upon return to employment.

Members were careful to judge CSRs which encourage steps "to reform social assistance, ensuring adequacy of benefits" (**Latvia**) or "streamlining minimum income" (**Spain**) as much is dependent on interpretation and implementation of such measures.

For **Italy**, unlike the 2014 CSR, in 2015 the CSR does not mention poverty nor the need to improve the effectiveness of monetary support as well as the quality of services to low income families with children. Though in the preface it is mentioned that Italy registers one of the highest poverty and social exclusion rates in EU with consequences especially on children, social assistance infrastructures are still fragmented and inefficient in coping with the problem, with consequent cost inefficiencies. It is surprising that poverty and in general measures to low income families with children are not mentioned in the 2015 recommendations.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

One alternative CSR provided a key message on the importance of ensuring adequate benefits:

- **Italy:** "take action to realise an optimal combination of cash and in-kind benefits, making monetary transfer more efficient."

5.3 The European Semester and access to affordable quality services

The European Semester does address issues of service provision in the areas highlighted by the Investing in Children Recommendation. However, even in those Member States where access to affordable services is a priority, the issue of quality is often forgotten.

Attention to ECEC services should focus on access and quality

Increasing provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is commonly referenced in the NRPs and CSRs. However this is mostly in the context of increasing labour market participation, particularly of women, and not part of an integrated approach to breaking cycles of disadvantage for children, based on quality of care.

2015 NRPs

Many countries are investing in early childhood education and care services including **Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovakia** and **the UK**.

Specific approaches and priorities vary from increasing capacities for 0-3s (e.g. **France**), or pre-school aged (e.g. **Latvia**), to offering free informal education to migrant children below age 3 (**Luxembourg**).

2015 CSRs

A few Member States received CSRs related to improving provision of childcare facilities. Unfortunately it is not widely acknowledged that ECEC services

are crucial for children's education and development. Investment in quality provision, including in staff and in inclusiveness are usually secondary.

A CSR for **Ireland** calls for “better access to affordable full-time childcare”, whilst one for **Estonia** recommends efforts to “ensure high-quality social services and availability of childcare services at local level”. Both are recommended in the context of improving labour market participation.

Better examples are the CSR for **the UK** which explicitly calls for it to “Further improve the availability of affordable, high-quality, full-time childcare” and one for **Romania** which highlights the need to “increase the provision and quality of early childhood education and care, in particular for Roma”.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

Two suggested alternative CSRs focused on ECEC, both of which explicitly refer to quality:

- **Scotland (UK)**: “take action to provide high quality early childhood education and care (and define high quality in line with 2011 EC Recommendation) for children from end of parental leave.”
- **France**: “take action to pursue the development of a prevention policy and early childhood education and care, including access to and quality of care, diversification of types of care, and better adapted to the situation of parents (such as working hours).”

Education must be about more than preparing a workforce

Education has received significant attention under the Semester process, particularly linked to efforts to address youth unemployment. Nevertheless, implementation is weak. Furthermore, whilst a focus on improving educational outcomes is welcome, there is a tendency to associate this with employability, rather than a broader set of life skills.

2014 CSRs

Survey respondents highlighted a number of Member States who did not successfully implement educational recommendations from 2014. **Luxembourg** did not properly address the long-standing disadvantage of students with socio-economic and/or migration background, while **France** did not reduce educational inequalities.

Slovakia and **Hungary** failed to effectively implement recommendations related to better inclusive education for Roma.

With regard to youth employment the Irish budget did not provide additional funding to implement the Youth Guarantee in 2015.

2015 NRPs

There are many positive and welcome references in the 2015 NRPs to ensuring equal opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Luxembourg pays special attention to ensuring equal opportunities for children from all backgrounds in its education system in its NRP, from an early age, through secondary school, to professional training and diploma recognition.

France has plans to target schools in disadvantaged areas, improve digital education and address gender inequality in schools. **Latvia** is to carry out measures planned in 2014 related to assessing the access to education for children with disabilities.

Slovakia's priorities include the integration of marginalised Roma communities throughout the different stages of the education

system; new educational programmes and curricula; and dual education with closer links to the labour market.

The **Scottish** NRP promises investments in improved teacher education, in the expansion of school building programme, in widening access to higher education for young people from deprived families and communities, in support for young people's entry to the labour market including a wider range of learning options and improved careers advice.

Several Member States – including **France, Greece, Italy** and **Luxembourg** – prioritise efforts to reduce early school leaving in their NRPs.

2015 CSRs

Some of the issues from insufficient implementation of the 2014 CSRs were re-addressed in the 2015 CSRs, though not all and the focus remains too clearly centred on employment outcomes.

Strongly employment focused education-related CSRs include:

Latvia is recommended to “improve vocational education and training, speed up the curricula reform and increase the offer for work-based learning”.

Estonia is recommended to “increase participation in vocational education and training, and its labour market relevance, in particular by improving the availability of apprenticeships”.

Finland was requested to “pursue efforts to improve the employability of young people, older workers and the long-term unemployed, focusing particularly on developing job-relevant skills”.

Another approach is to focus on reducing drop-out rates. **Romania** is asked to “Take action to implement the national strategy to reduce early school leaving”.

More balanced education recommendations focusing also on equal access and broader educational outcomes are given to:

Bulgaria, which is recommended to “Adopt the reform of the School Education Act, and increase the

participation in education of disadvantaged children, in particular Roma, by improving access to good-quality early schooling.”

Slovakia, which is recommended to “Improve teacher training and the attractiveness of teaching as a profession to stem the decline in educational outcomes. Increase the participation of Roma children in mainstream education and in high-quality early childhood education.”

“ *Education systems have an important role to play in developing the individual potential and life skills of each student.* ”

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

One of the proposed alternative CSRs gives very clear and detailed recommendations on education:

Slovakia: “take action to encourage the introduction of innovative methods of education and transform schools into open learning schools, which means supporting new teacher education in innovative methodologies that develop the individual potential of each student, enable inclusive education, develop the life skills (critical thinking, acceptance of diversity, teamwork, self-confidence) of every student and prepare them for their personal as well as professional lives. It also means simultaneously actively engaging students in peer learning, supporting that teacher education/training opens up to the parents and the whole community as well as increasing the participation of pupils in school operation, and increasing the involvement of independent experts and NGOs who have long experience in such trainings/ education.”

Healthcare needs to be more clearly included as part of integrated child strategies

References to healthcare within the Semester process do not tend to focus on children specifically. Nevertheless, positive references are made in the Semester, which could benefit vulnerable children. The problem is whether the negative impact on health services from the public finance pressures applied by the Semester process outweigh any good intentions.

2015 NRPs

Some NRPs make specific child-related healthcare references.

In its NRP, **Croatia** is planning to strengthen the role and resources of the primary health care providers, such as paediatricians and family doctors, in particular in deprived areas of the country.

In **Latvia** additional resources are budgeted to increase the provision of child health care services and reimburse subsidised medicines.

Italy, Poland and **Romania** also continue efforts to improve access to healthcare for children and young people.

2015 CSRs

Recommendations towards quality and inclusive health care systems have the potential to positively affect children’s lives even if reforms are not aimed specifically at children.

Latvia was recommended to “Take action to improve the accessibility, cost-effectiveness and quality of the healthcare system” To be implemented effectively, this would entail reducing queues to consult specialists for children.

Romania is urged to “Pursue the national health strategy 2014-2020 to remedy issues of poor accessibility, low funding and inefficient resources”. This should benefit children and vulnerable families if implemented successfully.

A recommendation to **Bulgaria** included a call for “strengthening outpatient care and primary care,” although the focus seems to be

on the more ambiguous aim of improving “the cost-effectiveness of the healthcare system”.

Access to decent housing for vulnerable children is not adequately addressed

Housing problems have been exacerbated by the crisis, which an increase in the number of evictions and in homelessness across Europe unfortunately testify. Yet the European Semester has not been adequately addressing these issues over the years, which in 2015 seem to have received even less attention.

2015 NRPs

Assistance for the family to secure better living conditions including through housing support are mentioned in the **Greek** NRP.

The UK NRP notes reforms on housing law, including tackling homelessness, restoring empty homes, duties to provide spaces for gypsy and traveller communities, programmes to increase the energy efficiency of

homes, and to increase the number of affordable homes.

2015 CSRs

Our **Dutch** member reported a CSR this year calling for the government to “provide for a more market-oriented pricing mechanism in the rental market and further relate rents to household income in the social housing sector.” They add, however, that such measures might pose a risk to families living on a low income, since it could eventually lead to selective housing allocation. Practice has shown that even with lowered rents there are still families, and thus young children, who end up on the street due to rent arrears.

The Semester needs strengthening on family support and alternative care

Deinstitutionalisation reforms have been supported by the Semester as well as by Structural Funds over the years, yet this year there is less attention in the CSRs to the issue.

The number of alternative CSRs proposed by Eurochild members in this field demonstrates the importance they attach to deinstitutionalisation, prevention, family support and alternative care and the desire to see stronger commitments in this area.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

The specific issue of deinstitutionalisation was raised in several alternative CSRs:

- **Hungary:** “take action to implement the parliamentary decision of 2013 on deinstitutionalisation of all children under 12, by developing a comprehensive strategy...”
- **Romania:** “take action to facilitate the transition from institutionalised services to community. Romania needs to increase its capacity to provide quality child monitoring, child protection and child participation services at the local level.”
- **Latvia:** “take action to ensure that, within the framework of deinstitutionalisation, no infants up to the age of three for whom out of home care is required are placed in institutions.”
- **Croatia:** “... implementation of the transformation of homes for children without adequate parental care and children / young people with behavioural problems. Deinstitutionalisation of children and youth should be better coordinated with local and regional governments to ensure that existing county social plans are put into operation.”

2015 NRPs

Facilitating the transition from institutional to integrated community based services remains a top priority in **Romania**.

Preventing the separation of a child from his/her family is also a priority for **Italy**, alongside the development of the foster care system.

According to the NRP, **Estonia** would like some improvement for child protection services thanks to a new Child Protection Act.

Our member from **Northern Ireland** highlights that **the UK** NRP mentions the family support hubs and parenting programmes which will impact positively on children and young people but notes that these are under threat due to budget constraints.

Bulgaria envisaged a reduction of the administrative burden and focusing on effectiveness and efficiency of services, and **Portugal** mentions it is rolling out a social canteen – food bank – programme.

The **Spanish** NRP mentions the Integral Plan of Family Support which includes measures for the social and legal protection of families and supporting families with special needs, but quality standards applied to services are not mentioned.

2015 CSRs

A CSR calls for **Estonia** to “ensure high-quality social services”.

A **Spanish** CSR this year recommends to “streamline family support schemes”, without any specific mention about improving these schemes or access to quality services.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

Many of the alternative CSRs for 2016 address the issue of ensuring equal access to quality services and the effectiveness of social and child protection systems and family support. Extracts include:

- **Bulgaria**: “take action to improve the effectiveness of social and child protection systems through decentralisation and adoption of new measures to increase effective coverage...”
- **Estonia**: “take action to ensure sustainability and equal services (child protection, social welfare) in all municipalities to fight against poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, abuse.”
- **Croatia**: “take action to tackle the inequality in access of quality services for children by taking a clear commitment to a stronger networking and coordination of the system and service support [including]...additional training [to] professionals... [and] the expansion of the network of alternative services and programs in the local communities.”
- **Netherlands**: “take action to guarantee access to assistance, care and education for all children. Ensure that no child is excluded from assistance, care and education. Furthermore, ensure assistance, care and education is tailor-made, based on the needs of the child, regardless of the problems, disabilities or immigration status...”
- **Hungary**: “...the provision of proper family strengthening efforts, prevention, early intervention, including non-discrimination, inclusive services provision and education...”
- **Greece**: “take action to strengthen community social services and provide counselling and financial support to the most poor and socially excluded families with children.”
- **Austria**: “take action to improve the situation for unaccompanied minors in Austria, and treat them as children”.
- **Italy**: “take action to improve the quantity and quality of the services to families and their children.”

5.4 The European Semester and children's right to participate

Although one of the three pillars for realising the European Commission's Investing in Children Recommendation, the dimension of children's participation remains unacknowledged by the European Semester process.

Children's participation is missing from the European Semester

2015 NRPs

In *Spain* and *Wales*, the NRP mentions existing strategies with commitments to engage with children and young people. All other contributors noted that there is no mention of such measures, intentions or practice in the NRPs to improve child participation.

2015 CSRs

Child participation is not mentioned in any Country Specific Recommendation.

Eurochild alternative CSRs for 2016

Some of the alternative CSRs chose to highlight the importance of child participation – often in the context of a specific area of work:

- **Poland:** “make specific efforts to consult with children in the preparation of its NRP, implementing children's right to participate. Emphasis should be put to widespread understanding of children as a social category in the macrostructure instead of dependent members of a family.”
- **Luxembourg** “take action to carry out an in-depth revision of the youth protection act (1992), which defines disciplinary measures for minors having committed acts considered as criminal under the Penal Code, in order to adapt it to international standards such as the ICRC and the Commission's Investing in Children Recommendation. The act currently lacks participatory principles for minors and parents, and the right of the minor to go to court.”
- **Hungary:** “Better remuneration and training, supervision for professionals working with children based on the EU Child Rights Agenda and ensuring the active participation of children in all decisions and actions affecting them.”



Children from Spain speak at European Platform against Poverty Convention side event.



6. Are EU Funds Investing in Children?

To put children at the heart of policy making and really tackle child poverty and social exclusion, an integrated approach and alignment between EU policy priorities and the allocation of EU funding is needed.

For successful implementation of the Investing in Children Recommendation, particular opportunities are provided by the European Structural and Investment funds (ESIF or ESI Funds) 2014-2020. The Recommendation itself encourages Member States (MS) to use ESIF for its implementation at national level.

Furthermore, the Common Strategic Framework for all ESI Funds includes a provision requiring that MS plan the use of the Funds to take into account the NRPs and “most relevant” CSRs from the Semester process.

To successfully align the policies and the funding, it is crucial that policies for children are prioritised in the Operational Programmes (OPs) of the ESI Funds and budgets are allocated accordingly.

The emphasis in the new EU budgetary period (2014-2020) on using the ESIF to promote social inclusion and tackle poverty, as well as on the importance of deinstitutionalisation, is potentially very important, but ex ante conditionalities requiring an established anti-poverty strategy must be met.

6.1 Using the ESIF to invest in Children

The European Structural and Investment Funds have an available budget of 325 billion euros for 2014-2020. Strategic alignment of the disbursement of these funds with the policy priorities of the European Commission's Investing in Children Recommendation will be key to its successful implementation in practice.

Eurochild members provide many and varied examples of how ESI Funds are used to invest in children and where children are explicitly mentioned in the Operational Programmes. Nevertheless, the main message is that the strategic links between ESIF spending and the Investing in Children Recommendation are insufficiently developed.

None of the Eurochild respondents were satisfied with the level of appropriation from the ESIF to projects aimed at investing in children.

The responses highlight four issues in particular:

- **Not enough money programmed for (vulnerable) children**
- **Lack of clear targets and a monitoring & evaluation framework**
- **Lack of information on budget allocations**
- **Lack of transparency in selecting projects**

Although many respondents highlighted concerns with a lack of access to information and transparency of the decision-making processes, some respondents identified good practice in their country on ensuring transparent processes for the allocation of ESIF.

Opportunities exist to focus ESIF spending on children

Children can be targeted by the Operational Programmes of the European Structural and Investment Funds in various contexts. Eurochild members have highlighted many individual examples of this happening successfully in practice. However, the lack of integrated strategies and practices holds back the potential benefits of these 'isolated' initiatives.

Examples of ESI Funding directly benefiting children:

- As a target group for anti-poverty and social exclusion measures (e.g. **Croatia; Wales (UK); Romania; Slovenia**)
- Increased participation in education – from ECEC to secondary (e.g. **Romania, Hungary**)
- Education programmes to improve quality (e.g. **Croatia, Germany**)
- Preventing early school drop-outs (e.g. **Hungary, Ireland**)

- Support for special education services (e.g. **Greece, Slovakia**)
- Improving access to services – including health care and social services of general interest - for vulnerable children (e.g. **Croatia, Greece**)
- Improvement of child-specific health services (e.g. **Croatia**)
- Supporting deinstitutionalisation – including support for high quality community-based childcare services (e.g. **Croatia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovakia**)
- Where priority is given to youth employment (e.g. **Poland, Scotland (UK), Slovakia, Spain**)
- More support for children in conflict with the law (e.g. **Bulgaria**)
- Services that empower or build capacity of young people to participate (e.g. **Northern Ireland (UK); Germany**)

Further examples of ESI Funding indirectly benefiting children, including through measures aimed at vulnerable people in general and vulnerable parents and families in particular:

- Support to single-parent families (e.g. **Luxembourg**)
- Support for victims of domestic violence and their children (e.g. **Greece**)
- Financial support to vulnerable families (e.g. **Ireland**)
- Distribution of food aid to vulnerable families (e.g. **Estonia**)
- Services targeting vulnerable families (e.g. **Portugal**)
- Support for working parents to access ECEC services for their children (e.g. **Greece, Poland, Romania, Scotland**)
- Road safety measures aimed at vulnerable people (e.g. **Croatia**)
- Supporting NGO consultation and involvement - including those representing children (e.g. **Slovakia**)
- Infrastructure investments to support transport and communications links (e.g. **Estonia, Hungary**)



Commissioner Cretu talks about structural funds at Eurochild Conference, Bucharest 2014

Not enough money is programmed for (vulnerable) children

Despite the many possible ways that ESI Funds can be used to invest in children, none of the Eurochild respondents indicated being satisfied with the level of appropriation from ESIF to projects aimed at investing in children.

While there is an earmarked budget for spending on social inclusion for the European Social Fund (ESF), respondents felt that **ESF is not sufficiently spent on children but disproportionately invested in higher education and training for the labour market**. In some cases, the target for spending on social inclusion was not even met.

In many cases, children are correctly identified as a priority group for anti-poverty and social exclusion strategies and measures, but **this prioritisation does not obviously or clearly translate into clear spending plans or budget allocations**.

In another common area for spending related to children, **many early childhood education and care services are supported with a focus on labour market objectives** for parents without clear commitments to quality outcomes for children. This means that this spending does not necessarily contribute effectively to the Investing in Children Recommendation.

Spending to address youth unemployment is welcome, but it is not clear to what extent it will benefit the under-18s and it needs to be part of wider intervention to reflect the Investing in Children Recommendation's message about investing early to break the cycle of disadvantage. On its own, it is addressing some of the symptoms of inadequate investment in children rather than the causes.

The principle that the Funds can be used to support deinstitutionalisation (DI) is clear. However, even within this key area, **the allocation of funding to DI is not as clear and explicit as it might be**. For example, in **Romania**, there is no specific budgetary allowance to ensure adequate access to quality

basic services able to foster DI or the prevention of child separation, monitoring or the prevention of child abuse, neglect or the situation of children who are dropping out of school at the local level.

Another issue is the **sustainability of projects given initial support by ESIF**. A respondent from **Slovenia** highlights that in the programming period 2007-2013, ESIF resources made a positive contribution in several areas e.g. launching the process of DI, health field workers, etc. However, the strong instability of such projects after initial successes – with a lack of resources to continue - is a strong negative in strategic terms.

“ *The priority given to tackling child poverty often does not translate into clear spending plans or budget allocations* ”

Programmes lack clear targets and monitoring frameworks

An additional issue is the lack of clear targets for investments targeting children and an associated lack of monitoring and evaluation. Crucially, this leads, among others, to a lack of sustainability of funding.

Programmes are often scheduled in a **fragmentary and short-term way**. Funds end up being appropriated on an ad hoc and piecemeal basis, rather than on the basis of a proper plan and priorities to support the implementation of the state policy and structural reforms.

For example, even where children are an explicit target group of anti-poverty strategies investments are weakened by the **lack of clear targets to alleviate child poverty** (e.g. **Romania**).

Another weakness is where there is **no institutional framework**, nor sufficient and substantial staff training to support projects using the funds. Under those terms there is **no follow-up and no continuity**

and there is no ground for further future plans and investment targets (e.g. **Greece**).

Lack of information on budget allocations

Almost half of respondents were not aware of the budget set aside for investing in children. Many go on to highlight particular issues with the lack of clarity and transparency in the allocation of ESIF budgets and the processes and criteria for obtaining ESIF funding.

Only eight respondents indicated that the processes were clear and fully (**Bulgaria, Croatia, Luxembourg, Poland, Wales** - UK), reasonably (**Latvia, Scotland** - UK) or to some extent (**Greece**) transparent.

Eight respondents indicated that the processes were not transparent in their country (**Austria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Spain, Northern Ireland - UK**).

A further seven respondents were not aware of the processes and criteria in their country (**Denmark, France, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia**), which in itself might suggest a lack of transparency.

- It is very difficult to understand the process for allocating funding and the means to obtain funding. (**Spain**)
- It is difficult to find information on the allocation of funding on the website. (**Northern Ireland** – UK)
- There is no clear communication, no transparency. A lot of ideological statement, but no clarity. (**Hungary**)
- The allocation is made in non-transparent ways. Indeed, information on funds comes mainly through European networks rather than at national level. (**Greece**)

6.2 Civil society access to ESI Funds



A young person speaks at the European Parliament about his participation in decision making activities, November 2015.

The Investing in Children Recommendation highlights the importance of promoting “partnership in the programming of and access to Structural Funds by involving relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, in particular the relevant public authorities, social partners and non-governmental organisations, in order to mobilise action to combat child poverty.”

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play a key role in implementing the Investing in Children Recommendation by providing services and support to vulnerable children and their families on the ground.

However, formal (e.g. eligibility criteria) and informal (e.g. access to information) barriers can prevent CSOs from accessing the funding that could support greater investment in children.

In a majority of countries, our respondents report that there are no significant formal barriers to accessing ESI Funding for CSOs. Nevertheless, there are a considerable number of countries where

informal barriers are definitely present, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

CSOs often face formal barriers preventing access to ESI Funds

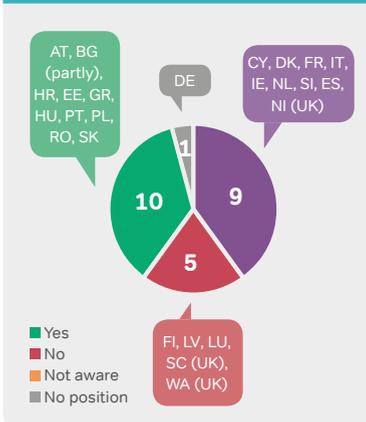
Respondents highlighted examples of approaches to disbursing ESI Funds which formally exclude NGOs and CSOs from accessing the Funds to support the delivery of services. Typically, the Funds are ring-fenced for public providers.

In **Croatia**, there are a number of CSOs that have significant expertise in a number of fields relevant to children’s well-being that do not meet sometimes strict eligibility criteria for accessing ESI Funds.

In **Bulgaria**, NGOs are excluded from certain operations and schemes which are designed in a way to benefit state authorities. For example, in the previous programming period, civil society was excluded as beneficiary from certain projects related to the deinstitutionalisation process. This can create a conflict of interest as the State is not only developing the policies,

“ *Informal barriers - such as lack of access to information - can prevent CSOs from accessing funding that could support greater investment in children.* ”

Are there any barriers for civil society to access the funding from European Structural and Investment Funds?



but also implementing and then monitoring and evaluating them.

Respondents in **Portugal, Cyprus** and **Estonia** highlight that a very large part of the Funds are exclusively allocated to public services with very limited eligibility of CSOs to apply.

Informal barriers to ESIF can be equally impossible to overcome

The most common informal barrier that prevent CSOs from accessing ESI Funds is an excessive administrative burden, along with a lack of information and transparency in the selection criteria of projects and unfair competition with private sector companies.

The response from **Croatia** provides a very detailed outline of some of the problems that CSOs can face when trying to access ESIF based on their experiences with the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development (2007-2013):

- some of the contracting authorities have demands for tracking project costs that are not in line with the existing laws;
 - different contracting authorities have different interpretations of the rules for working hours and demand too much administration;
 - some rules as well as project managers in contracting authorities are often changed during the implementation period resulting in constant insecurity
 - too detailed planning of some costs (travel, venue...);
 - some contracting authorities do not allow engagement of experts that are employed in institutions financed by the state resulting in difficulties in connecting with experts, especially academics;
 - contracting authorities do not allow additional engagement of experts already employed in the organisation that is implementing the project, thus preventing experts from these organisations from giving their contribution and engagement in these projects in which often they are the only or one of the few experienced in a specific field;
 - some of the contracting authorities demand approval of public releases (visibility check) in advance causing unnecessary administration and preventing ad hoc reactions;
 - different practices and rules in financial reporting cause financial insecurity and delay in implementation;
 - contracting authorities do not give advice or answer ques-
- tions ahead about the process of the secondary procurement procedure;
- demands for redundant documentation and procedures;
 - problems with different implementation systems;
 - illogical and environmentally insensitive obligation that forms, reports and all supporting documentation are sent electronically and in paper form;
 - forms for tracking users (“General personal data” and “anonymous questionnaire to collect sensitive data” and “Summary table”) which project leaders and partner organisations must fill out violate privacy and anonymity principles – which are often basic principles of some of the organisations;
 - indicative timelines for the process of application and selection are not respected.



Vlad from Moldova and MEP Nathalie Griesbeck, European Parliament, Brussels, November 2015.

Excessive administrative burden

In **Slovakia** conditions for obtaining support limit the availability of resources for most NGOs, particularly the administrative burden, including non-harmonised procedures across operational programmes administered by different ministries, high portion of co-financing, very late (more than 1 year) costs reimbursements and a lack of advance payments. Also, the mechanism of global grants is not feasible for most foundations because they must be liable for any errors that grant beneficiaries make during the programme. This is an unrealistic and discriminatory criterion for foundations that do not have such resources available.

The respondent from **France** highlights the report of a parliamentary investigation committee that has identified the “terrible bureaucratic machine of European funding” which limits access for associations and NGOs, which could otherwise offer solutions to achieving the objectives of the ESIF.⁷ It stresses in particular the excessive administrative controls and delays

in payments, which mean only the largest associations can take part.

Lack of information and transparency

In **Slovakia**, there is poor information about evaluators, evaluation committee, and evaluation procedures of projects available on websites of managing and implementing bodies. NGOs very often have to use the Freedom of Information Act to get information.

In **Greece**, representatives from civil society have reported to the Child Ombudsman that the system is not transparent and is too complicated. They explain that one needs to have personal contacts or access to ministries or European level sources to understand the processes and access the Funds.

Good practices in ESIF project selection

Eurochild members highlight some good practices in ESIF project selection which centre around the core principles of open and accessible information and clear selection criteria. In addition, an example of targeted support to potential applicants was particularly welcomed.

In **Luxembourg**, respondents report the good practice of transparent selection criteria supervised by a support committee. Specifically, a decree of 30 April 2015⁸ presents the selection criteria for ESF projects. These criteria are overseen by a Support Committee, which is transparently composed of:

- Five Ministries
- Two Trade Unions
- One employers' organisation
- The union of municipalities
- The Luxembourg Union of the Social Economy and Solidarity
- The Luxembourg Anti-Poverty Network (NGO)

7 p.49: www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enq/r2383-tl.asp#P926_117046

8 More information here <http://www.fonds-europeens.public.lu/fr/acteurs/comite-suivi/index.html>

Respondents in **Bulgaria** report that information is much more widely shared and disseminated than in the previous programme period. Monitoring Committees have been formed and NGOs are invited to be members of these. All decisions are taken/approved by the Monitoring Committees.

Comprehensive up-to-date websites are a key tool highlighted as good practice in terms of making information clear and accessible:

The **Luxembourg** ESF webpage⁹ explicitly states that a call for tender is launched at least once per year. ESF calls are published on the webpage, in the ESF newsletter and in daily and weekly newspapers. A tripartite Committee selects submissions with all projects awarded financing published on the ESF webpage.

In **Croatia**, all data about allocation of funds is available via the web page for ESIF¹⁰ - where one can find all necessary EU and national policies, but also all tenders and calls.

The **Welsh** Government's dedicated website is comprehensive, full of resources and information.

Open application processes and support to prospective applicants are reported as key success factors for helping CSOs deal with the lack of information on and the complexities of applying for ESF Funds.

The **Welsh** Government has a **dedicated team who provide support** to prospective applicants, including through publicity, workshops and seminars. There is also a dedicated officer at the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) to provide voluntary organisations with support, information and advice.

Unfair competition

In **Romania**, according to the NRP there is an interest to encourage private for-profit companies to enter the social services market although there are no clear procedures for their accreditation or licencing (both required from the NGOs). Therefore civil society organisations are subject to **unfair competition** from the for-profit providers who have no set standards for the creation and provision of social services.



National Partners networks meet in Brussels to share on the ground developments

⁹ <http://www.fonds-europeens.public.lu/fr/fonds-europeens/fse/index.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.strukturturnifond-ovi.hr/>

6.3 Ex-ante conditionalities

'Ex ante conditionalities' are conditions that Member States have to comply with in their programming to be eligible for funding. If an ex ante conditionality is not fulfilled, the EC can technically suspend payment.

Two ex-ante conditionalities for ESIF disbursements are particularly relevant in the context of the Investing in Children Recommendation:

1. There is an ear-marked budget of 20% of the ESF for spending on social inclusion. An 'ex ante conditionality' on social inclusion and the fight against poverty requires that **a national anti-poverty strategy, or a timeline for producing one**, is in place.
2. For a number of countries the European Commission also identified a need to include **deinstitutionalisation reforms** in the national strategy for poverty reduction.

Integrated anti-poverty strategies still missing

Despite the ex ante conditionality for the ESF requiring a national anti-poverty strategy, not every EU Member State has approved such a strategy.

Out of the 24 respondents, 15 were able to say that there was an anti-poverty strategy in their country: **Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Scotland (UK) & Wales (UK)**

Others reported that such strategies were being developed. **Northern Ireland (UK)** had developed a strategy, which just remained to be officially approved, whilst anti-poverty strategies for **Greece** and for **Estonia** were being elaborated at the time of the survey.

In **Slovenia** there are relevant strategic elements in different parts of law, but there is no anti-poverty strategy as such.

Respondents from three countries said there was no national strategy for poverty reduction in place: **Denmark, Italy & Latvia**. Of these, the Italian Government declared the development of a structural plan for poverty reduction an urgent priority in 2015, leading to the expectation that a strategy will be developed in 2016.

Respondents from **the Netherlands, Portugal** and **Germany** were unable to provide a certain answer.

Positive aspects of existing anti-poverty strategies include:

- **Croatia:** including a snapshot of current situation (baseline) tracing causes, social and economic projection as basis for action, common systemic approach including all stakeholder & minimum standards for the most vulnerable.
- **Finland & Ireland:** Specific targets set (even though in Ireland: revised downwards in light of the recession in 2012).

Negative aspects of existing anti-poverty strategies include:

- **Austria:** families will get slightly more money but not enough to alleviate poverty in the opinion of the respondent.
- **Hungary:** poverty reduction mainly through getting parents to join the workforce, but jobs provided are low quality (short term, badly paid, etc.) and based on a punitive approach, which threatens benefits.
- **Cyprus:** Children are not mentioned as a group and there is no specific target for child poverty reduction.

“ *The financial and economic crisis is working against full implementation of anti-poverty strategies* ”

Implementation of existing anti-poverty strategies remains problematic

Even in those Member States where an anti-poverty strategy is in place, implementation remains a major challenge.

Only ten respondents were able to say that they were confident the anti-poverty strategy was being implemented at least partly, for example via an Action Plan: **Croatia, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Scotland, Wales, Finland, France.**

For some countries it was too early to assess: **Northern Ireland** (strategy still to be approved at time of survey); **Romania** (strategy just adopted in May 2015); **Austria** (Action Plan to be implemented

in 2016); **Bulgaria** (Action Plan in development for 2015-16)

Positive aspects of implementing an anti-poverty strategy:

Poland: number of systemic measures being taken, including instruments supporting vocational activation for those most excluded from the labour market, improvements to the coverage of the social insurance system, changes to the social assistance scheme (on hold due to financial implications), increases to carer's allowance and additional financial aid for carers of disabled children, tax credit system for children and other means to lower tax wedge for low-income families with many children, improved government programme with benefits for families with multiple children, valuation of certain benefits to result in higher increases of lowest benefits to improve situation of the poorest households in terms of income.

Finland: systemic approach, temporary provisions on tax exempted income now made permanent as well as changes to some other

fiscal measures to make acquisition from small incomes more meaningful, as well as indexation of certain benefits – all in view of breaking transgenerational cycle of disadvantage.

Wales: procedural elements for quality of implementation such as regular reporting mechanisms and inclusion of milestone, performance measures and targets.

Scotland: numerical and time-bound targets underpinned by law, plus impact of strategy of past years can be felt – lower levels of child poverty than for **the UK** overall.

Slovakia: number of different strategies (children, youth, disability, deinstitutionalisation, violence prevention) covering different aspects.

Luxembourg: focus on single parents due to high risk of poverty – measures including free child care, awareness raising, education and training measures for women, to increase workforce participation of single parents – several measures exist since some years.

Concerns about implementation of existing anti-poverty strategies:

Croatia: implementation mainly passes through projects by CSOs. However, there are regions – often with the greatest need – where there is no CSO coverage to implement projects.

Scotland (UK): The Scottish Government has taken some actions but is constrained by its funding mechanisms.

France: the financial and economic crisis is working against full implementation.

Cyprus: imposed budget cuts and measures for fiscal consolidation are limiting implementation.

Northern Ireland (UK): inadequate funding.

Poland: approval of some documents delayed due to impact on public finances.

“ A child-centred investment strategy will reduce the long-term burden on public budgets

6.4 European Fund for Strategic Investment

The European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) is a newly established guarantee fund backing the Investment Plan for Europe¹¹. It encourages governments to invest more when there is fiscal space, to “pursue the necessary structural reforms” and invites private capital to join large-scale investments.

While EFSI is not a Structural Fund and different rules apply for projects, **the challenge is similar in ensuring that a better use of public resources are made**, channelled to projects of added value. The objectives include investing in human capital, specifically naming education and health care.

However, the vast majority of the project funding will likely go to more obvious areas of private investment such as transport and infrastructure, falling in line with the push for higher growth at EU level.

Eurochild argues in a separate working paper¹² that a **child-centred investment strategy will reduce the long-term burden on public budgets**. Such a strategy

looks beyond the short-term and invests in more equal societies.

Education has already been identified as a priority under EFSI and, if used effectively, this can contribute to implementation of the Investing in Children Recommendation and tackling child poverty and social exclusion.

More specifically, **Eurochild members highlighted the following areas for strategic investment from EFSI:**

- Inclusive education, special education and promoting equality and diversity
- Quality education and lifelong learning
- Infrastructure and access to schools
- Early childhood education and care (ECEC)
- Early intervention and prevention
- Social inclusion, disadvantaged and migrant children
- Youth employment and training
- Prevention of early school leaving
- Child participation
- Teacher training

11 COM/2014/0903 An Investment Plan for Europe

12 Eurochild Working Paper A *child-centred investment strategy, Why the Investment Plan for Europe needs to prioritise children*, 2015





7. Are stakeholders effectively engaged?

Meaningful stakeholder engagement improves the quality of policies and their chances of being successfully implemented. It is also necessary to ensure the transparent and effective use of EU funds.

The Integrated Guidelines¹³ (for the Semester) and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (for the ESIF programming cycle) set out provisions and criteria for cooperation and partnership between public authorities and, among others, civil society organisations in development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Our respondent from Germany calls for “*the involvement of the Child and Youth Welfare at the start of the consultations on the national level in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. Hereby, it is needed to involve service providers in child and youth welfare as well as different topic-specific target groups. In this way it will be possible to support the targets set by the Europe 2020 strategy and to balance out economic and socio-political targets/needs.*”

The point is not that every stakeholder should be part of the Monitoring Committee, but rather that there should be an openness to the range of stakeholder groups and a transparent procedure of selecting the most representative stakeholders.

However, there are no accompanying enforcement mechanisms which means that there is no guarantee that civil society organisations (CSOs) working with and for children are directly consulted, and if they are, their level of involvement can be very limited. Equally, there are absolutely no guarantees for meaningful involvement or consultation of children and young people themselves in these processes.

7.1 Stakeholder involvement in the Semester process

The European Commission developed Integrated Guidelines to help Member States implement the overarching targets of the Europe 2020 strategy. They require that implementation, monitoring and evaluation should be done in partnership and that representatives of civil society can contribute to the elaboration and implementation of the National Reform Programmes (Recital 16).

Stakeholders are rarely engaged in developing the NRPs

Only one of the Eurochild members who responded to the survey was both invited and able to participate in the development of the 2015 NRP. The vast majority were not even invited.

Invited/involved

From the respondents to the Eurochild survey only the organisation in **Denmark** was both invited and able to attend a consultation event on the development of the NRP.

Our member in **Scotland (UK)** was invited, but was unfortunately not able to attend the specific consultation event they were invited to for 2015.

The **German** member was not involved, however knew of other German CSOs that were.

Not involved

The **Bulgarian** member was consulted by the Commission as part of their monitoring visit but not by the Government on the NRP.

Some respondents state that no organisations they are aware of have been involved in preparing

the NRP, whilst others are not sure if other organisations have been involved. A fairly typical example is provided by **Portugal**, where none of the main children's NGOs were involved by the state, but written positions were sent by them anyway.

The respondent from **Ireland** intends to make a submission in advance of the drafting of CSRs and NRP and hopes to consult the EC country desk through Eurochild or the Semester officer in Dublin as part of the process. They have also contributed through their membership of Social Partnership in **Ireland** on the Community and Voluntary Pillar's submission in 2015.

According to the **Estonian** member, their government normally does include some CSOs when drafting the NRP, however this year it was not the case, supposedly because of the stress due to a new government and elections.

Good practice from Scotland (UK)

The Scottish government generally holds at least one stakeholder event each year regarding the NRP.

The Scottish member highlights the political context in **Scotland** where the Scottish Government's anti-austerity approach is notably different to that of **the UK** Westminster government. **Scotland** is therefore pleased to include civil society groups and these are, in the main, largely supportive of the Scottish Government's policy position.

The complexity and lack of clarity around engaging in the Semester process can demotivate CSOs from developing an advocacy strategy, allocating resources and building capacity in this area.

The **French** response specifies that some associations of regional and local authorities, and national councils, were consulted; however none that specialises in children.

In **Greece**, the NRP seems to be seen as a rather bureaucratic and European-level process from which civil society is excluded.

Even though the **Cypriot** member is invited to participate in different Ministerial (Demographic Committee, Child, Labour etc.) and Parliamentary Committees (Labour and Social Issues, Education etc.), since 2013 they are not consulted in what regards the Semester process.

Stakeholders are rarely engaged in monitoring implementation

Again, only one Eurochild member who responded to the survey was able to talk about already being involved in monitoring the implementation of the NRP in any formal capacity.

Officially involved

The **Bulgarian** respondent is involved in several official working groups: one related to the development of an Action plan for the Poverty Reduction Strategy; a DI expert group; a group on the revision of the National Strategy on the child, etc. They are also members of three Operational Programmes – human resources, education, good governance and the fund for the most deprived. In addition, they are in close contact with the European Commission country desk and the Semester officer.

In **Greece** representatives from civil society are reported to be involved in respective Monitoring Committees. Nevertheless, the invitation and selection criteria are not transparent.

Trying to be involved

Several members, although not officially involved in the monitoring or reporting, nevertheless intend to monitor actions and programmes for children, and/or submit their comments, views and suggestions separately. Several members expressed an interest in being more involved in the future.

The **Romanian** respondent notes that the initiative was taken to create an independent working group to monitor the NRP. However, the effectiveness and impact of the group was limited since it was not officially recognised by the national authorities. They do not yet know of any official monitoring and evaluation process for the NRP.

The respondent from **Latvia** hopes to be involved and will most likely be in consultations by the EC country desk.

The respondent from **Estonia** is a member of the working group of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), and they monitor the process as well.

Not involved

The survey response from **Slovakia** noted that none of the members of the coalition were approached or involved in any part of the NRP/CSR process.

The respondent from **Finland** considers the user value for NGO involvement to be low because of the lack of topics concerning children in the NRP/CSRs.

The process is not transparent enough

With two exceptions, the respondents to the survey either said that stakeholder involvement during the Semester processes was not transparent enough or that they were not aware if they were transparent or not – this latter response is, in itself, a proxy indicator of an overall lack of transparency.

Good transparency

Denmark and **Scotland** are the only ones that consider the process as transparent, although **Scotland** adds “*though not necessarily having major impact*”.

Not transparent

Of the respondents, seven members reply that the process is not transparent (**Austria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Spain, Wales**). Lack of information and external and/or clear communication from the government, no involvement of or consultations with CSOs, no systematic approach are the main issues mentioned. **Wales** adds that

no engagement took place in **Wales** as far as they are aware, and no reference is made in the NRP to any external engagement, aside from in **Scotland** (see above).

Lack of clarity

Most members consider that they are unable to judge whether the process is transparent or not, which could indicate a lack of knowledge and information about the Semester process in Member States. **This in itself seems to indicate that the process is not transparent enough.**

In some countries, such as **Latvia**, organisations feel a long way from these processes or even fully aware of what is being planned.

In **Greece**, decisions, invitations and selection criteria for consultations/programmes etc. are not transparent. It seems as though only a few organisations are repeatedly involved in consultations and procedures such as monitoring committees. Information is scarce and often acquired through European networks in which CSOs are members, and not from the government.

The member in **Cyprus** also considers that their main involvement has been through Eurochild and through the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partnership.

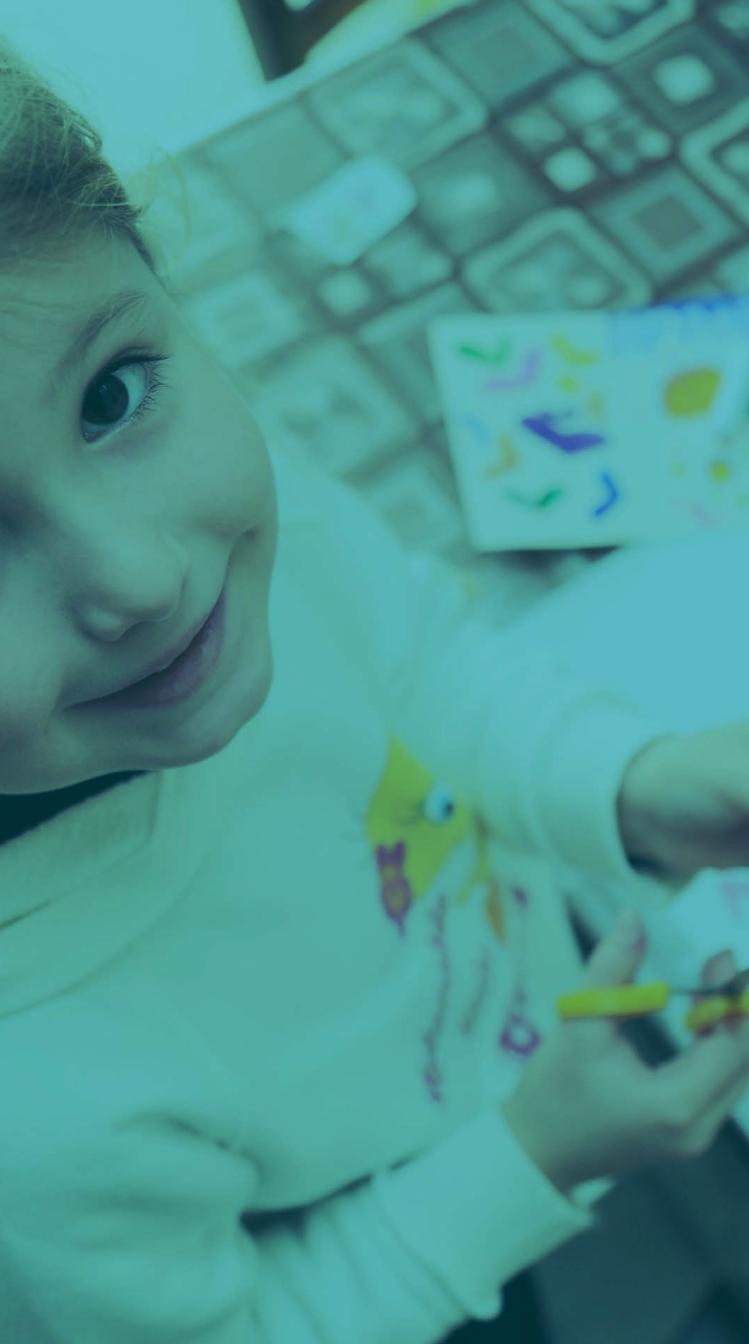
The respondent from **Ireland** stresses that organisations are not given sufficient time to write up submissions never mind consult with members or service users.

Important barriers exist to CSO engagement in the process

Many practical examples were given of formal or informal barriers preventing full and effective CSO engagement in the Semester process. Many Eurochild members lack the time or resources to overcome the complexity and closed doors that surround the Semester process. Many also lack the motivation given the little clarity around how engagement can support improved outcomes for children.



Children and young people listen intently to discussions, European Parliament, Brussels, November 2015.



Lack of openness to engagement from the government

Several respondents highlighted the fact that governments do not actively involve civil society in the process – for example in **Portugal** or **Slovakia**.

Of even greater concern is the example of **Cyprus** where CSOs have managed to fully engage in past processes, but have seen a shift in the government's willingness to involve NGOs and other partners because of their perceived "incapacity" to really react on "imposed" measures that affect people's – especially children's – standard of living and well-being.

Lack of information and transparency from the government

This issue was highlighted by eight respondents. For example, in **Hungary**, the lack of information on how CSOs can get involved makes it hard for members to assess their own capacity to engage in the process.

In **Estonia**, many NGOs are unaware of the process.

The respondent from **the Netherlands** highlighted the complexity of the process which makes it hard for CSOs to know how

and when to get involved. It demotivates CSOs from developing an effective advocacy/lobby strategy and allocating resources and building capacity in the area.

The respondent from **Greece** highlights that the whole process is too bureaucratic and complicated, which makes involvement very difficult in practice.

Lack of CSO capacity to overcome the external obstacles

Many Eurochild members mentioned a lack of time, resources or capacity to fully engage in the Semester process. They also mention a lack of motivation given the lack of clarity around how engagement can support improved outcomes for children.

Even in the good practice example of **Scotland** where the government holds annual stakeholder meetings on the NRP (see box on page 57), the Eurochild member was unable to attend because of a lack of resources and capacity.

The **Luxembourg** respondent highlights that even if they had been asked they would still have faced the barrier of lack of human resources.

7.2 Stakeholder involvement in the programming cycle for ESIF

To ensure that budget allocations and priorities meet the needs on the ground, the Code of Conduct on Partnership requires that civil society organisations are consulted during the development of the Operational Programmes for the ESIF and during the monitoring and evaluation of their implementation.

Many countries see no civil society engagement in ESIF programming

Most survey responses either reflected a lack of civil society engagement in ESIF programming, or a lack of awareness of what engagement might be taking place.

In **Cyprus**, the Operational Programmes are not put under consultation. The targets are set solely by the relevant Ministry and Development Bureau and they are “presented” to the public. The Government seems to consider that it is complying with the Code of Con-

duct on Partnership by involving local authorities.

In **Portugal**, the only engagement of non-governmental actors is through the Social Consultation Committee, which includes trade unions, big confederations etc.

Even where CSOs are involved their impact is not clear

A common challenge for effective CSO involvement in the ESIF programming processes is that CSO messages and expertise are not picked up and taken into account.

In **Romania**, NGOs have been called for consultation but their opinion was not taken into account. The NGOs form one coalition to advocate but without visible result.

In **Croatia**, although some members of civil society organisations are involved in various aspects of the programming cycle for the European Structural and Investment Funds since 2014, this involvement has been scarce, with very few CSO representatives being members of various working groups, and their real level of influence in those working groups is virtually non-existent.

In **Hungary**, the government is not formally consulting and taking on board external civil society voices. They limit consultations to a small group of loyal NGOs with whom they work closely.

A few good practice examples exist

Some good practice examples of NGO involvement in the programming cycle for ESIF do emerge from the survey responses.

UK

In both **Scotland** and **Wales**, extensive consultations, meetings and opportunities to campaign and influence have taken place.

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, there are clear rules which are adhered to and now there are civil society representatives as **full members of the Monitoring Committees** in all Operational Programmes (rather than only acting as observers).

The Eurochild member is involved in the Social Inclusion Monitoring Sub-Committee and this is where **the work is much more operational**,

focused on the specific theme and expertise of the organisations/experts involved and thus much more effective and efficient in terms of involvement of stakeholders. This engagement prevents CSOs from having to rely on making negative statements from outside the process.

The respondent also highlights that **information is much more regularly uploaded** on the sites and there are regular memos/minutes sent to participants.

Slovakia

In Slovakia, the **Governmental Council for NGOs nominated representatives of NGOs to working groups of individual Operational Programmes** with the aim to actively participate in preparation of OPs 2014-2020. NGO representatives had opportunities to engage in the programming processes and submit their comments and proposals to OPs.

The relationships between the state and NGOs started moving to a new dimension when the Office of Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development (CSD Office) was established in 2011. To better frame the rela-

tionship with NGOs, the CSD Office presented a long term **Strategy for Civil Society Development in Slovakia** (until 2020). The Office launched the **Action Plan Open Governance 2015**, which aims at improvement of stakeholder involvement, availability of information and access to R&D results.

During 2014, the cooperation improved when the CSD Office introduced a new approach to the composition of Monitoring Committees (MCs). **One third of MC members are now 'socio-economic partners', mainly NGOs.**

A significant problem that remains is the low capacities of NGOs, both expert and administrative, to actively participate in these processes. The Office contacted NGO representatives frequently to receive feedback from non-state actors but they lack the capacity to provide the competent or on time answer. They also lack finances to invest their efforts in policy preparation.

Stakeholder involvement project in Slovakia

The CDS Office - in cooperation with NGO representatives - elaborated a draft national project within the OP Effective Public Administration which will be financed by the ESIF during 2014-2020. The project "Support for partnership and dialogue between public administration, citizens and NGOs at national, regional, and local level in field of participatory approach to public policy creation" was approved by the monitoring committee of the OP EPA on 21 May 2015.

The objectives of the project are:

- a. analysis of the processes (including legislation) of stakeholder involvement in public policy creation and good practices in Slovakia at all levels (national, regional, and local);
- b. establishment of innovative methodical frameworks of effective stakeholder participation.

Although the national project does not aim at children directly, it can improve the advocacy capacities of NGOs working with children as well as their access to public authorities. Twelve NGOs are planned to be directly involved.

Other recent Eurochild publications

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>

Are European Structural and Investment Funds opening doors for Europe's institutionalised children in the 2014-2020 programming period? An assessment of the attention for deinstitutionalisation for children and the involvement of children's organisations in the ESIF implementation process across eight EU Member States, 2015 <http://bit.ly/1Tgl67y>

Building an economic case for a child-friendly justice, 2015 <http://bit.ly/21hs6Gy>

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/1Y4r7oT>

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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