

« *Today's children are tomorrow's parents* »

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL NETWORK FOR  
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„TODAY'S CHILDREN ARE  
TOMORROW'S  
PARENTS”



**Child poverty under scrutiny**

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*The picture on the cover page of the journal was drawn by Adi Holzer, from Denmark, and given as a logo for the national conference with international participation "Today's children are tomorrow's Parents", which took place in Baile Herculane, Romania, in 1996.*



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# EU SOCIAL AGENDA CONTRIBUTION TO STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, FIGHTING AGAINST CHILD POVERTY AND PROMOTING CHILD WELL- BEING



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## **Abstract**

*Eurochild is an international network of over 90 children's organisations working across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Eurochild is one of the largest advocacy organisations on children's issues at European Union (EU) level whose work is underpinned by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Eurochild campaigns for the realisation of children's rights across Europe. We focus particularly on those children at risk of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. Poverty prevents children and young people from achieving their full potential and autonomy, adversely affecting their health, inhibiting their personal development, education and their general well-being. This contribution focuses on the child poverty situation in Europe and how the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child well-being can be addressed. It will then look at the added value of EU action and 2020 strategy as well as the potential risk factors.*

**Keywords:** *child poverty; risk of poverty; EU Policies; support services; child-rights approach*

## **Rezumat**

*Eurochild este o rețea internațională de peste 90 de organizații care lucrează în toată Europa cu scopul îmbunătățirii calității vieții copiilor și a tinerilor. Eurochild este una dintre cele mai largi organizații militante (de advocacy) în domeniul drepturilor copiilor la nivelul Uniunii Europene (UE), având ca fundament Convenția Națiunilor Unite privind Drepturile Copiilor (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNCRC). Eurochild organizează campanii pentru implementarea drepturilor copiilor în toate țările Europei. Ne concentrăm atenția în special asupra copiilor aflați în sărăcie, excluziune socială și marginalizare. Sărăcia este o piedică în realizarea deplină a potențialului și autonomiei copiilor și tinerilor, având efecte negative asupra sănătății lor, inhibând dezvoltarea lor personală, educația și bunăstarea generală. Acest articol se concentrează asupra sărăciei*



*copilor în Europa și asupra modului în care se poate acționa pentru reducerea sărăciei și promovarea bunăstării. De asemenea, el discută valoarea adăugată a acțiunilor UE, precum și oportunitățile și factorii de risc potențial pe care-i creează strategia Europa 2020.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *sărăcia copiilor; risc de sărăcie; politici europene; servicii de sprijin; punctul de vedere al drepturilor copiilor.*

### **1. Child poverty in Europe – the situation**

In 2007, the latest official data we have from Eurostat on relative poverty rates across the EU, 16% of the population was living at risk of poverty – but 20% of children under the age of 18. That is one in five children living at risk of poverty. Children are among the groups most exposed to poverty.

Due to specific situations or characteristics, some children face greater risk of poverty (Eurochild, 2010a):

- Children in lone-parent households => 1 in 3 children living in lone-parent households are at risk of poverty (Source: Eurostat);
- Children in large families => 1 in 4 children living in families with 3 or more dependent children are at risk of poverty (Source: Eurostat);
- Children living in households where nobody works => 1 in 10 children in the EU live in jobless households (Source: Eurostat);
- Children with parents born outside the EU => 1 in 3 children with parents born outside the EU are at risk of poverty (EU-15 data) (Source: Lelkes O., Platt L. & Ward T. (2009), page 95);
- Young people who drop out of school early => 15% of young people (aged 18-24) in the EU have no more than a secondary education and are not in education or training (Source: Eurostat).

The situation is clearly deteriorating and insecurity is growing as a result of the economic crisis which took hold across much of Europe and government responses. We know

from our members that families and children are being disproportionately hit by the effects of the crisis and the austerity measures taken by several Member States in the face of soaring public debt (Eurochild, forthcoming in 2011).

Vital support services from families and children are threatened by cuts, whilst protection tends to be ring-fenced. Strained local authorities are pulling resources precisely from the sectors that will save money in the long-term and make most difference. Dealing with problems resulting from family breakdown, abuse or neglect are much more costly.

It is essential that governments at all levels recognize this challenge and ensure that budget cuts do not compromise the well-being of families and children. Investment in prevention and early intervention services is a major concern. It means reach out to families before problems arise, provide support that is non-judgmental and empowering (D'Addato A., 2010), enable families to find their own routes out of poverty and social exclusion. It means a long-term investment in accommodation and support, through family centres, children's centres, out-reach work - including health visitors, parent advisors attached to schools, parents supporting other parents, and community schools. This requires a long-term vision as well as funding.

### **2. A child-rights approach to address child poverty and improve children's quality of life**

Eurochild believes a child-rights approach is the most effective way of tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being in the long-term (Eurochild, 2007). Children must be recognized as citizens in their own right. All EU Member States have ratified the UN-CRC, which should be seen as the foundation for all policies affecting children and young people. The promotion of children's rights is now embedded in the Lisbon Treaty and the Europe 2020 strategy is the first opportunity to take account of this new development,



mainstream child rights into EU policies and get a systematic, comprehensive approach to children's rights as a political priority.

There must be a recognition of children's own right to grow up in an environment that nurtures their full potential. It means supporting the family as carrying the principal responsibility for the child, but it also acknowledges the importance of a whole host of other services centered around the child (Eurochild, 2010b). This includes:

- Promoting early childhood services that are focused on the child's development and needs, rather than being conceived as a "parking place" for children of parents who work (D'Addato A., 2008);
- Ensuring that free, high-quality education is provided to all children and that schools provide the best possible learning environment for children, harnessing children's potential, supporting children's growing autonomy, giving children the confidence and skills to develop and express their own views and opinions;
- Ensuring adequate play spaces and safe communities with a range of non-formal learning opportunities – including access to leisure, civic, cultural and sporting activities;
- Promoting a joined-up thinking and an integrated approach to children's well-being across different policy areas, enhancing coordination between and within ministries as well as at local and regional level, and bridging gaps between the measures taken at national and international level, namely with regard to the use of EU structural funds.

### **3. How can the EU agenda contribute to fight child poverty and promote child well-being?**

The local authorities are certainly at the frontline of ensuring children and families have

access to the high quality of services and a healthy environment. But the policy framework at national level also matters a great deal – employment, taxation, access to education, training of professionals working with and for children play a crucial role.

What is the role of the EU? Whilst the EU has no legal competence, the leadership it sets in the social policy arena is an important driver of policy reforms at national, regional and local level. Over the last 10 years of the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) – which is the mechanism through which EU Member States and the European Commission have been cooperating in the field of social policy since 2000 (Eurochild, 2009) –, all Member States recognize child poverty as an issue and many have identified it as a particular policy priority. The Social OMC has provided a framework for benchmarking and mutual learning, but also allowing convergence of policy principles and achieving considerable consensus on the best policy responses. We need now to move forward with this agenda.

We stand at a cross-road. The financial and economic crisis and the social consequences of it have generated a consensus that economic and employment goals cannot be pursued to the neglect of social and environmental goals. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty introduces a transversal social clause requiring that all EU policies and activities take into account their impact on social inclusion. The social pillar of the new Europe 2020 agenda provides an important opportunity to adopt a systematic, coherent and comprehensive EU approach to tackling child poverty and child well-being as a key political priority for the Union. In the Europe 2020 strategy, a headline target on poverty reduction was approved. The poverty target – consisting in lowering the number of people in the EU who are at risk of poverty and/or materially deprived and/or living in jobless households – puts poverty and social inclusion among the core objectives of the Union.



The strengthening of the social dimension of the EU, and in particular the delivery of the poverty target will depend significantly on the proposed flagship initiative, the “European Platform Against Poverty” (Eurochild, 2010c; European Commission, 2010). With these ingredients, the European Commission can surely be very ambitious in its agenda for the EU coordination in the social field.

In the frame of Europe 2020, this is how Eurochild envisages the development of EU level work on child poverty: that the European Platform Against Poverty will create a space for Member States to report regularly back on their strategies for tackling child poverty and we will have a clear, transparent system for comparing outcomes for children across Member States using a broad

range of child well-being indicators. Child poverty and well-being has been repeatedly recognized as a top political priority by EU leaders. Most recently a Declaration calling for the EU to give particular priority to child poverty and well-being, especially in this period of economic crisis, was signed by the EU Trio Presidency (Spain, Belgium and Hungary) at the Belgian Presidency conference on 2-3rd September 2010<sup>3</sup>. Eurochild – with the Belgian Presidency of the EU – are calling for a Recommendation on child poverty and well-being, which will formalize the existing policy consensus on what works to tackle child poverty and provide a framework for monitoring mechanisms to measure progress across the EU27 and follow-up action (Belgian Presidency of the EU, 2010). We hope this call will be heard and acted upon by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the forthcoming Hungarian and Polish Presidencies of the EU.

On 16 November 2010 in the intergovernmental group “L’Europe de l’enfance” led by the Belgian Presidency of the EU, Member States adopted a Declaration calling for coun-

tries to keep their commitment to the Barcelona targets on child care (or adopt more ambitious targets where they have already been achieved), and to develop and monitor quality criteria such as staff-child ratios, pedagogical approach, accessibility, affordability. At the same time, a European Commission Communication on early years and education is expected in early February 2011, which will include guidelines on accessibility (in its broadest sense, i.e. inclusivity), affordability (including the discussion on universal vs. targeted services), and pedagogical approach. This process should culminate in Council Conclusions. This will launch a EU process of Member State involvement in setting standards, agreeing policy objectives and exchange of good practices.

A European Commission Communication on a EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is also expected to be launched early in 2012, which will hopefully set a framework for EU policies and actions that bring added value and support Member States action to promote and protect children’s rights (Eurochild, 2010d). By doing this the EU can have a direct effect on the quality of life of every child in Europe.

To conclude, we believe that action at EU level has been paramount to gather consensus on the need to prioritise the fight against child poverty and promote child well-being as well as driving reforms at national, regional and local level. However, follow-up action is crucial for a breakthrough in the fight against child poverty.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

Child poverty needs to be a ‘Number 1’ priority across the EU. Poverty in childhood can have lifelong consequences. It is therefore a huge cost to society in the long-term. Especially during this period of economic crisis, politicians need to think long-term and boost investment in children – in particular in education including early years services, health, housing, culture and leisure, social services.

<sup>3</sup> The signed declaration by the Trio Presidencies is available at Eurochild website: <http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/Events/2010/09%20BE%20Presidency/%20Child%20Poverty/Signed%20Declaration.pdf>.



Brighter futures for many children in Europe are under threat. Decisions taken by governments' across the EU in response to the crisis, risk jeopardizing millions of children's quality of life and their overall life chances. In this era of austerity measures it is more important than ever that organisations committed to children's rights and welfare work in partnership and promote a common message. As an outcome of Eurochild's Annual Conference "Brighter futures - Building effective partnerships to end child poverty" (Örebro - Sweden, 3-5 November 2010), recommendations to the three main groups of actors were formulated<sup>4</sup>.

- The European Union needs to adopt a comprehensive and ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child, and a Recommendation on child poverty and well-being. The EU policy framework to fight child poverty must promote a multi-dimensional approach based on a clear understanding of children's rights.
- Member States have to protect and even increase budgets for children and families. Member States should strengthen cooperation and exchange at an EU level on child poverty and well-being. National action to address child poverty and social exclusion must support partnership and cooperation with different stakeholders.
- Eurochild and its members will work on raising awareness of the UNCRC and its influence on decision-making among policy makers, practitioners, parents and children. Our work on the UNCRC creates a uniting force that brings together stakeholders across all sectors and professions. Eurochild has an obligation to ensure the voices and concerns of children and young people themselves are heard and taken into account.

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