

# Child poverty in Europe – did 2010 make a difference?

**A new report on the impact of the economic crisis reveals a double blow for families and children – already directly affected by the economic downturn, they now face government spending cuts. Jana Hainsworth asks if the rhetoric of the European Year Against Poverty will really have an influence**

With much pomp and ceremony, EU leaders closed the 2010 European Year Against Poverty (EY2010) on 17 December, applauding its wide reach and impact. The question remains whether the rhetoric and increased political attention will make a difference to policy making, especially in the face of government spending cuts that are affecting millions of children and families across Europe.

The year did mobilise wide support and action and gave greater visibility to poverty and social exclusion. Among the actions of different non-governmental organisations, Eurochild led a campaign, *End Child Poverty*, involving children and young people directly in the debate. Some children presented their messages and experiences to members of the European Parliament, and President Barroso and the European Commissioner for social affairs, last month, bringing home the importance of giving children a voice.

The year also benefited from two 'favourable' EU presidencies in Spain and Belgium – both of them supportive of a stronger social Europe. Belgium in particular prioritised child poverty and pushed hard for the EU to agree a Recommendation which could eventually see more convergence among member states in policy approaches and mechanisms to monitor child poverty and wellbeing. Unfortunately this was not achieved during Belgium's tenure of the presidency, but the Commission has committed to its adoption in 2012.

Agreement of a 'poverty target' among the five key objectives of the EU 2020 strategy can also be considered progress – an achievement attributable in part to the political attention resulting from the European Year 2010. Whereas the previous 10-year strategy of the EU (the famous Lisbon Strategy) committed only to make "a decisive impact" on poverty with notoriously little result, this time round EU leaders were bold enough to put a figure on poverty reduction: to lift 20 million people out of poverty by 2020. All member states are obliged now to set their own national targets to reach the overall EU goal, giving considerable leverage for lobbying for national and regional level action.

In Eurochild we believe a positive EU framework for cooperation and political leadership can and does make a difference to policy making at national and regional level. Through its policy steering group – in which Children in Scotland is an active member – we use the tools and

mechanisms available through the EU to influence and persuade governments where they can make the greatest difference to children's lives. A commitment to a Recommendation might sound like bureaucracy but in the long term it can influence how politicians make, implement and monitor policy change. We have lobbied for a 'scorecard' on child wellbeing which will help member states benchmark how they are performing on different aspects of wellbeing. Such a monitoring mechanism would be an integral part of the Recommendation.

The target can also make a difference, if used intelligently by all stakeholders (civil society, professionals, academics, people themselves experiencing poverty) to hold governments to account. And almost all member states have acknowledged that to eradicate poverty in the long term, particular priority must be given to children and families. Many member states have already committed (or are expected to commit) to specific targets to reduce child poverty.

The softer aspects of EU cooperation can help too. In areas where the EU has no legal competence, member states agreed to devise a tool called the Open Method of Coordination. Basically it encourages policy convergence through peer pressure (common objectives and indicators) and creating a framework for member states to learn from each other what works and what doesn't. It has proved remarkably helpful in several areas – for example, member states improving family policies or early years education and care.

At the end of 2010, the European Commission published their Communication on the Platform against Poverty, which sets the framework for cooperation on poverty and social exclusion for the next 10 years. In many aspects there is notable progress on previous policy cooperation: for example, much greater attention is given to how other policy areas – particularly economics and employment – contribute to, or contradict, efforts to eradicate poverty. There are also moves to couple EU funding provided through the structural funds to social objectives, which hasn't been the case in the past.

So we do see achievements within the European Year 2010 as being positive overall, and as providing important opportunities in the years to come. However, perhaps our greatest challenge is making them relevant and important in national and regional policy making. In mid January we released a report on the impact of the economic crisis on children and families across

Europe, drawn from reports from across our membership. And the picture it paints is bleak. Not only are families and children being directly affected by the impact of the economic downturn, but they are now facing a double blow from the austerity measures imposed by governments that are cutting social expenditures. Family services and education are being squeezed. Efforts to involve children and young people in participation work are now seen as superfluous. For all the nice words at EU level, convincing local and national politicians to increase investment in children's services is not easy.

Child poverty and exclusion exists to a greater or lesser degree in all member states and the crisis is exacerbating the problem. Child poverty is widely recognised to be a major drain on resources and waste of human potential. The moral duty on governments to respect and implement children's rights is also gaining credence. But despite this understanding, investment does not necessarily follow, and most countries are using the crisis as an excuse to cut spending. The EU policy framework can help to highlight the gaps between rhetoric and policy and

the risk this poses to millions of children's overall chances in life.

*Jana Hainsworth is Secretary General of Eurochild, a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life for children and young people. Their report How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children and young people in Europe is available on the Eurochild website at [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)*

How early childhood education and care and its workforce can help Europe's youngest citizens is the theme of the final report from the cross-European programme *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*. To view the report and other findings from the programme, go to [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi)



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## A Conservative view

Annabel Goldie on policies for children and families