

EUROCHILD POLICY BRIEFING¹

Indicators: an important tool for advancing child well-being

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1. What are the latest policy developments at EU level?

a) *Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC)*

Action at EU level in the field of social protection and social inclusion policies takes place within the framework of the Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC), with legal competences remaining with European Union (EU) Member States.

To coordinate their action, EU countries have adopted common objectives for the Social OMC. Through a collective and consensual process, they have also identified commonly agreed indicators to better monitor EU and national progress towards the EU objectives, and also to ease the comparison of practices and outcomes and improve policy learning across the Union.

Indicators are increasingly valued as a means to interpret and present statistical data, monitor policy implementation, and provide the ground for evidence-based policies and increased accountability.

Following the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 and Member States' subsequent agreement on common objectives for the Social OMC, the Indicators Sub-Group (ISG) of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) was set up. It gathers representatives of all EU countries. A first set of 18 EU indicators to measure poverty and social exclusion – the so-called *Laeken indicators* – was approved by the European Council in 2001.

In 2006 the Social OMC was '*streamlined*', bringing together its three strands - social inclusion, pensions, and healthcare and long-term care - within an overarching framework. The accompanying EU analytical and monitoring framework consists of 4 "portfolios" of indicators: one for the overarching objectives and one to address the objectives of each of the three strands². These indicators cover the main dimensions of the defined objectives, namely income poverty, health, education, employment and housing.

¹ Eurochild policy briefings are prepared by the Eurochild secretariat to support the advocacy work of its members. They provide an outline of key policy developments at EU level and their relevance to national and regional action aimed at promoting the rights and welfare of children and young people. They suggest specific follow-up actions to be taken by member organisations. This policy briefing was prepared by Agata D'Addato (Policy Officer). The author wishes to express her thanks to Eric Marlier for his insightful comments to the previous drafts.

² The definitions of indicators are available at: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/common_indicators_en.htm.

The aim of the social inclusion strand is to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion. Its specific objectives are:

(a) “access for all to the resources, rights and services needed for participation in society, preventing and addressing exclusion, and fighting all forms of discrimination leading to exclusion”;

(b) “the active social inclusion of all, both by promoting participation in the labour market and by fighting poverty and exclusion”; and

(c) the need for social inclusion policies to be “well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty, (and to be) efficient and effective and mainstreamed into all relevant public policies, including economic, budgetary, education and training policies and structural funds (notably ESF) programmes”.

The EU social inclusion indicators portfolio focuses on the first two objectives. It was significantly enriched in 2009 and now includes 11 lead (‘primary’) indicators, 6 supporting (‘secondary’) indicators and 13 ‘context information’ statistics.

PRIMARY INDICATORS OF THE SOCIAL INCLUSION PORTFOLIO:
1. at-risk-of poverty rate and national poverty thresholds;
2. persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate (3 out of 4 years in poverty);
3. relative median poverty risk gap;
4. long-term unemployment rate;
5. population living in jobless households;
6. early school leavers;
7. employment gap of immigrants;
8. material deprivation (adopted in 2009);
9. <i>housing (to be developed)</i> ³ ;
10. self-reported unmet need for medical care;
11. <i>child well-being (to be developed)</i> .

Data are mostly gathered from EU-SILC (Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions; an annual household based survey with a four year rotational panel component) and from LFS (Labour Force Survey). These surveys are coordinated by EUROSTAT, the Statistical Office of the European Communities.

Data collected through EU-SILC and LFS focus on the adult population (16 years and above for EU-SILC and 15 years and over for LFS) so child-specific indicators are virtually non-existent⁴. Furthermore, as these surveys only cover people living in private households, they miss an important part of the children particularly at risk of poverty and social exclusion (e.g. those living in institutions).

Over recent years, child poverty has emerged as a top political priority at EU level. In March 2005 the European Council stated that “*social inclusion policy should be pursued by the Union and by*

³ Two secondary indicators of housing were adopted in 2009. The adoption of a primary indicator of housing remains on the EU agenda but will apparently require further data and methodological work.

⁴ An important breakthrough ought to be mentioned in this respect: the 2009 wave of EU-SILC includes a specific module on material deprivation which includes 20 child-specific material deprivation items.

Member States, with its multifaceted approach, focusing on target groups such as children in poverty". Also in 2005, the EU Luxembourg Presidency organised a major conference on "Taking forward the EU Social Inclusion Process"; the independent academic report prepared for supporting this conference called explicitly for *children mainstreaming* and for the adoption of at least one child well-being indicator at EU level⁵.

In the 2006 Spring Summit, EU Heads of state and government concluded that EU Member States should take measures to "*rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty*". The 2007 Spring Summit stressed "*the need to fight poverty, especially child poverty*".

Child poverty and well-being was the first thematic priority selected for detailed analysis under the Social OMC in 2007. An EU Task-Force was set up to prepare an in-depth report on *Child poverty and well-being in the EU*. This report gives a comprehensive overview of the current status and provides important recommendations for follow-up and implementation⁶. It was adopted by Member States and the European Commission (EC) in 2008 and is thus now part of the *EU acquis*. On behalf of the EC, an international study is being carried out to follow-up the Task-Force report. The study, which is expected to be finalised by the beginning of 2010, will *inter alia* identify a set of comparative social indicators that best reflect the multi-dimensional nature of child well-being and that are available in all (or at least most) EU countries. This important input will feed into the work of the ISG with a double objective: a) fill in the "child well-being" slot in the EU social inclusion portfolio (see above) with a limited number of indicators; and b) agree a larger set of indicators which the EC and Member States will be able to use for in-depth national or EU reporting on the situation of children.

An expert consultation co-organised by the EC, UNICEF and OECD held in May 2009 resulted in recommendations for the development of indicators on child well-being. These will be summarised in a report which will come out soon with an associated research agenda.

b) Children's rights

Following the 2006 EC Communication *Towards a Strategy on the Rights of the Child*, the Commission asked the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) to develop indicators to measure how children's rights are implemented, protected, respected and promoted across the EU. FRA has developed a series of indicators for the protection, respect and promotion of the rights of the child in the EU on the basis of EU competence in this area⁷. Indicators are proposed by the Agency in the following key areas, which are in line with existing EU provisions of direct relevance to children: family environment and alternative care; protection from exploitation and violence; education, citizenship and cultural activities; and adequate standard of living.

⁵ In 2007, a fully updated and revised version of the conference report appeared in Marlier, E., A.B. Atkinson, B. Cantillon and B. Nolan (2007), *The EU and social inclusion: Facing the challenges*, The Policy Press. The book takes "investment in children" as the recurring case study and strongly argues in favour of children mainstreaming which they explain as follows: "We have used the word *mainstreaming* advisedly, rather than the words *target groups* (...). Our purpose is not to single out a particular priority group; poverty and social exclusion are unacceptable for all groups in society. Rather, our aim is to suggest, as with gender mainstreaming, a perspective to approaching the general problem of poverty and social exclusion. For us *children mainstreaming* involves viewing social inclusion from a child's perspective and implies integrating a concern with the well-being and social inclusion of children into all areas of policy making."

⁶ Social Protection Committee (2008), *Child poverty & well-being - Current status and way forward*, Report of the EU Task-Force on "Child poverty and well-being": http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_inclusion/2008/child_poverty_en.pdf.

⁷ FRA (2009), *Developing indicators for the protection, respect and promotion of the rights of the child in the European Union*: http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/products/publications_reports/pub-rightsofchild-summary_en.htm.

c) Lisbon strategy and beyond GDP

A recent EC Communication highlighted the need to develop robust direct measures of the quality of life and well-being of citizens – including children – that go beyond the standard measurement of GDP, and also the importance of evaluating progress towards socially sustainable development⁸.

The latest report of the SPC⁹ investigates the extent to which past growth and employment achievements since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in March 2000 have had an impact on the social adequacy and social inclusion, and vice versa. It also tries to draw lessons from the previous evaluation of the social impact of the crisis.

d) Other cross-country analyses

Recent years have brought new and growing attention to the importance of measuring and monitoring children's well-being and important work has been done by researchers and organisations¹⁰. This is in part due to a gradual shift towards more evidence-based public policy, which requires reliable information on and accurate measures of the conditions of children.

UNICEF Innocenti Centre commissioned a research to develop an index of child well-being covering OECD countries¹¹. Report Card 7 drew upon existing data sets that reflect child well-being in a broader perspective including family relationships, relationships with peers as well as subjective measures of well-being.

However, there is still a lack of indicators covering some domains important to child well-being, such as what children think about their housing and neighbourhoods, or their access to transport, play space, recreation and other services.

Children and/or families have been consulted directly through some Flash Eurobarometer¹² surveys and in the context of Kidscreen project¹³. However, the contribution of children and young people to the development of child-specific indicators remains largely insufficient. How can children be involved in a more systematic way, particularly in the development of the forthcoming EU child well-being indicator(s), is still an open question. Some have claimed that the emergence and rapid development of the child indicators movement might lead to the creation of a new role for children in measuring and monitoring their own well-being and that including children and their own perspectives would be a natural evolution¹⁴. Indeed, incorporating children's subjective perceptions is both a prerequisite and a consequence of the changing field of measuring and monitoring child well-being. This in turn will lead to children becoming more "active participants" in efforts to measure and monitor their own well-being rather than simply "objects" of these efforts.

⁸ COM(2009), 433 final, *GDP and beyond. Measuring progress in a changing world*: <http://www.beyond-gdp.eu/EUroadmap.html>.

⁹ Social Protection Committee (2009), *Growth, jobs and social progress in the EU. A contribution to the evaluation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Strategy*.

¹⁰ See for example: Ben-Arieh, A., Kaufman, H.N., Andrews, B.A., Goerge, R., Lee, B.J. and Aber, J.L. (2001), *Measuring and monitoring children's well-being*, Kluwer Academic; Land, K., Lamb, V. and Kahler Mustillo, S. (2001), *Child and youth well-being in the United States, 1975-1998. Some findings from a new index*, Social Indicators Research, 56(3); Bradshaw, J., Hoelscher, P. and Richardson, D. (2007), *An index of child well-being in the European Union*, Social Indicators Research, 80(1); Lippman, L. (2007), *Indicators and indices of child well-being: A brief American history*, Social Indicators Research, 83(1); UNICEF (2007), *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7; Ben-Arieh, A. (2008), *Indicators and Indices of Children's Well-being: towards a more policy-oriented perspective*, European Journal of Education, 43(1); Lohmann, H., Frauke H.P., Rostgaard, T. and Spiess, C.K. (2009), *Towards a Framework for Assessing Family Policies in the EU*, OECD Social Employment and Migration Working Papers, 88; OECD (2009), *Doing Better for Children*.

¹¹ UNICEF (2007), *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7.

¹² European Commission (2008), *The rights of the child*, Flash Eurobarometer 235, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_235_en.pdf; European Commission (2009), *Parents' views on the mental health of their child*, Eurobarometer Flash 246, http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/eb_246_en.pdf.

¹³ See Kidscreen project: <http://kidscreen.diehauptstadt.de/kidscreen/master/project/index.html>.

¹⁴ Ben-Arieh A. (2008), *The Child Indicators Movement: Past, Present, and Future*, Child indicators research, 1.

The development of indicators - and of child well-being indicators in particular - poses many challenges, including:

- quality, accessibility and timeliness of data (time gap between data collection and analysis);
- lack of adequate comparable data across the EU and over time - there are indicators at national level which cannot be used for international comparisons because they are not sufficiently homogeneous;
- presentation of data – e.g. the policy risks associated to aggregating data into composite indices (even though such indices can be appealing, as they seek to summarise performance in various dimensions with a single measure, policy is however much better served with a portfolio of indicators that is balanced across the different dimensions of concern¹⁵);
- measurements of outcomes as opposed to policy inputs/outputs, meaning measurements of social results actually achieved rather than policy efforts;
- gaps in the existing data which do not allow to cover satisfactorily all relevant domains of child well-being identified by the UNCRC;
- problems for general sample surveys to represent the circumstances of children in minority groups (ethnic, refugees/asylum seekers), disabled children, children living in institutions, homeless children, young carers, etc.;
- strong focus on education outcomes at the older end of childhood in the currently available internationally comparable data (namely PISA and HBSC surveys)¹⁶. Regularly available and internationally comparable well-being data for early childhood and the early parts of middle childhood are too limited;
- difficulties in capturing the views and experiences of children themselves.

Despite these constraints, progress has been made in describing child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and in relating it to child well-being outcomes. There is a considerable body of good quality and comparable data on child well-being covering European countries and political commitment to further explore this area. However, insufficient progress has been made regarding an important role for indicators: indicators should also be employed to help shape policies and services, which requires that they are devised and used in ways that would extend their impact beyond simply building knowledge. Indicators of children's well-being should be used in a way that contributes to improving the lives of children throughout the EU.

2. Why is it important for the rights and welfare of children & young people at national, regional and local level?

To improve something you first need to measure it. Over the long term, child well-being indicators can help in redefining, monitoring and evaluating policy. Developing specific indicators on children's well-being will provide the much needed information for the making of policy by helping to keep

¹⁵ For a discussion of the technical and political issues raised by composite indicators, see Marlier et al., 2007, pages 182-5.

¹⁶ The OECD *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* is a system of international assessments that focus on 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy. PISA also includes measures of general or cross-curricular competencies such as learning strategies. With regards to the WHO *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC)* survey, it is a cross-national research survey which aims to gain new insight into, and increase the understanding of young people's health and well-being, their health behaviours, and their social context.

efforts on track towards goals, encouraging sustained attention, giving early warning of failure or success, fuelling advocacy, sharpening accountability, helping to allocate resources more effectively, and shaping services that respond to children's needs, thereby reinforcing their rights.

International comparisons are important and can boost changes in Member States but the parallel development of indicators at national, regional and local level is fundamental if the specific needs and circumstances of children living in specific geographical areas are to be assessed, as well as taking into account cultural traditions. A vertical coordination between different governance levels is needed for a better monitoring of children's well-being.

Indicators on children's development should be informed by data from a national data collection system and coordinated by appropriate government agencies to ensure proper aggregation. Active participation of and collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on child welfare, childcare agencies both private and public, and any other groups participating in the formal care system are critical to the design of an information system as well as its implementation. However, the indicators and measurement approaches can be used at the sub-national and municipal level even where national information systems are not yet in place¹⁷.

A crucial issue for the development of indicators on children's well-being based on the UNCRC is the involvement of children. A participatory dimension needs therefore to be taken into account, as signalled by some researchers: "*the development of effective child poverty indicators must include poor children's experiences*"¹⁸.

3. What are we advocating for?

- **More child-centred indicators and subjective measures of well-being**

Despite progress, child-specific data are still limited and the little information available is not used to the full and is too often not sufficiently (if at all) accessible to potential data users. It is essential that the portfolio of indicators used for monitoring the Social OMC includes a whole range of non-material indicators covering the various aspects of child well-being. More child-centred indicators (for which the child is the primary unit of observation) and more analysis of child-specific data are needed to give a more holistic picture of children's rights and the realities that shape their lives.

Eurochild also advocates to involve and engage with children and young people themselves in the development of indicators and in ensuring that indicators can include information on children's views and perception. The "*potential interest of interviewing directly children on their own experience and perceptions of poverty and well-being*" was already highlighted in Recommendation 13 of the report prepared by the EU Task-Force on child poverty and well-being; the Task-Force called for more exchange of good practice and know-how in this field.

Furthermore, well-being data for early childhood and pre-school age as well as data on the transition to adolescence are either thin or non-existent at the moment. All stages of child development need to be covered.

- **Evidence-based targets**

¹⁷ UNICEF Better Care Network (2009), *Manual for the Measurement of Indicators for Children in Formal Care*.

¹⁸ Ben-Arieh, A. and Goerge, R. (eds.) (2006), *Indicators of Children's Well-Being: Understanding Their Role, Usage, and Policy Influence*, Springer.

Identifying quantified objectives and setting targets help to define concrete goals against a clear timeline for their achievement. This view is fully supported by Recommendation 1 of the Task-Force report.

Governments need to be held accountable to their commitment to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion in general, and child poverty and social exclusion in particular. Targets can serve to embed child well-being into the policy process, since politicians and public servants can be held to account for their success or failure in meeting them. To be useful, child poverty targets must be systematically linked to well-being indicators of a good quality. The framing of targets also needs to be carefully thought through and requires that the most in need are taken into account. To work, targets need to be clearly stated and well-being outcomes regularly and transparently measured. Ill-thought out targets may arguably create less than appropriate policy responses. A target is enhanced when all levels of government participate. A poverty target – at EU, national or local level – can be an important tool in shaping a shared vision and leading to policies and programs that can make progress toward achieving the goal. A target can be a key tool for catalyzing action.

An EU target on reducing child poverty and social exclusion would provide the framework for the development of national targets in each Member State. National overall targets on the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion should be accompanied by sub-targets for the poverty gap, in-work poverty, children in jobless households as well as regional targets to ensure that child poverty is reduced across the EU.

- **Annual publicised scoreboard on child poverty and well-being**

Eurochild supports the development of an annual scoreboard on child poverty and well-being to give greater visibility to the indicators, to keep track of developments, to help assess progress and to provide comparative analysis. This is aligned with Recommendations 3-5 of the Task-Force report. It would provide an overview of the concrete policies and measures put in place by Member States, the achievement of targets, as well as identifying the role and responsibility of the actors involved. Links with the UNCRC reporting process should be made whenever possible. The scoreboard should be regularly reviewed in order to reflect progress and determine future action both at EU and national level.

- **Regular monitoring and reporting on child well-being**

Developing a stronger framework for EU-level monitoring and evaluation regarding child poverty and social exclusion would help benchmarking and mutual learning.

Of crucial importance in making better policy to support child well-being is the co-ordination and collection of internationally comparable data on child well-being as well as their accessibility. These data need to be collected at all stages of the child's life cycle and across all dimensions of well-being. As stated in the Task-Force report (Recommendation 10), there is a particular need to collect data and monitor the situation of the most vulnerable children who, due to their circumstances (living in institutions, separated from parents, leaving care, caring for sick or disabled parents) or characteristics (children with disabilities, children from migrant and ethnic minority families), are most at risk of falling into poverty.

The collection of high-quality, internationally comparable information on child well-being must be buttressed by regular reporting on child outcomes. In order to improve data quality and also to allow for in-depth independent analysis of the data, it is important to ensure a wide data access to core international micro-datasets covering the material and/or non-material aspects of child well-being.

- **Applying more extensive social inclusion indicators for the structural funds**

Structural funds should be instrumental in meeting the EU's social inclusion objectives: applying more extensive social inclusion indicators would serve this scope.

It means moving from quantitative indicators to qualitative indicators which put less emphasis on numbers (inputs, outputs and outcomes) and more on the quality of the intervention. It also means changes in methods. Indicators to date tend to rely on counting numbers and ticking boxes, but here, more sophistication will be required. Participation indicators suggest methodologies including the use of interviews and survey work.

Social inclusion indicators are most commonly found in European Social Fund (ESF) and labour market measures, but they should be found in a wider range of measures across the structural funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Structural funds are the most important tool for promoting cohesion in Europe. As the Lisbon strategy has been set on "growth and jobs" the Structural Funds have mainly covered economic objectives. In order to move towards an EU strategy which delivers more on the social pillar and environmental sustainability, we must make sure that broader objectives are integrated in the Structural Funds.

- **Setting new strategic goals for the post-2010 Lisbon architecture**

The reflections on indicators should contribute to setting new strategic goals for the post-2010 Lisbon strategy and shifting the focus from "growth and jobs" to "sustainable and social" priorities. It is well established that economic growth does not automatically lead to reduce social exclusion and poverty.

4. What actions can be taken by members?

It is crucial that those working in the field with children and their families understand and exploit the interrelations between measures, indicators, and child policy – not as a goal in itself but as a step towards improving children's well-being. Child well-being indicators have the potential to improve the lives of children, but they need to be the right set of indicators, they need to be effectively communicated and used in policy monitoring and evaluation.

Members of Eurochild have an important role in:

- supporting the adoption of a set of child well-being indicators as part of the EU social inclusion portfolio. The National Strategic Reports on Social Inclusion and Social Protection are an important reporting process within the OMC framework. Reporting could, however, be improved with the provision of more detailed information on specific measures, namely through the scoreboard previously mentioned, which would allow a systematic follow-up of the progress achieved;
- strengthening the links between the Social OMC and the monitoring and reporting process linked to the UNCRC. Action to fight poverty should be integrated into national strategies for children that Member States are called on to produce as a key requirement of the UNCRC implementation;
- putting pressure on policy-makers to improve data collection – particularly by highlighting gaps in information related to the most vulnerable children such as those in care, Roma, children with disabilities, young carers, etc.;

- translating indicators into language, formats and media that convey clear messages to policy-makers and the general public. To be effective, policy makers should be held accountable on the basis of indicators. Civil society has a crucial role to play here.

5. Further reading

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