

Social Inclusion in Europe

One of the EU activities very relevant to children and young people is its Social Inclusion Process. It was established by EU leaders in 2000 with the intention of making an impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010. Through it the EU provided a framework to enable member states to co-ordinate policy relating to poverty and social exclusion.

This framework is provided through the Open Method of Coordination. Member States agree to identify and promote their most effective policies in the fields of social protection and social inclusion so that they can learn from each other's experiences. It involves agreeing to common objectives and common set of indicators, which measure progress towards these objectives. Member States then have to prepare national strategic reports setting out how they will meet the common objectives. The UK's report for 2008-2010 was delivered to the EC on 15 September 2008. Chapter 2 of the report, covers Social Inclusion and forms the fourth UK National Action Plan (NAP) on social exclusion. Chapter 2 is published separately as 'Working Together' United Kingdom National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2008-2010 and provides a broad and general reflection of the overall social situation of children in the UK and the devolved nations. It showcases where progress has been made over the past decade, but also recognises that real challenges remain, particularly in seeking to address the large numbers of children who remain in poverty and the wider causes of social exclusion.

The NAP was recognised as being holistic and multidimensional in that it considers a whole raft of areas aside from employment which remains the principal focus, and includes measures to address housing deprivation, transport needs, health and educational inequalities and outcomes, as well as childcare, play, participation and material deprivation. However, most recent Government figures show that 3.9 million children in the UK (30%) are living in low-income households after deducting housing costs, and though significant progress was made between 1998/99 and 2004/05, the number of children in poverty has been rising since then. Ambitious employment targets have been set in relation to lone parents and jobless individuals and it remains somewhat unclear how, in the present economic climate, such targets are to be met.

The European organisation, Eurochild, carried out an assessment of the 2008-10 NAPs on social exclusion submitted by the Governments of various European countries. Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. The assessment of the NAPs was carried out to enable them to inform and influence the EC and the EU Social Protection Committee.

The synthesis report which provided an overview from each separate analysis by country *Ending Child Poverty within the EU?* was launched on 12 February 2009. It demonstrates that there has been little change in child poverty levels in the EU since 2003 and poverty is likely to increase as a consequence of the current economic and financial crisis. Because of the timing of

the reporting process most countries did not take the likely impact of the crisis on the poverty and social exclusion of children into account and as a result their projections and plans are often too optimistic. Recent information from Eurochild members shows that budgets are already being cut, with social benefits being reduced.

The countries which are most successful in ensuring low levels of poverty and social exclusion have policies and programmes that cover all children and their families. However, universal policies need to be complemented by additional attention and resources focusing on children in the most vulnerable situations. However the report states that information is still missing on the most vulnerable groups, namely on children in alternative care, street children, separated children and migrant children. It is crucial that research is undertaken and data on these groups collected in order to be able to address correctly their specific needs.

Eurochild urges the European Commission to propose an overall EU target for the eradication of poverty, including a specific target relating to child poverty, in line with a recommendation from the European Parliament to reduce child poverty by 50% by 2012. It calls for an EC Recommendation on child poverty to be adopted in 2010, the “European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion”. The document also makes a range of other recommendations to improve co-ordination in this area.

Jana Hainsworth, Secretary General of Eurochild commented that “the EU’s Social OMC process has helped to put child poverty on the agenda and highlight good policy responses, but without high level political commitment in terms of quantified targets, it’s difficult to hold governments accountable and to ensure real progress. Clear targets and an EU Recommendation on child poverty would be a great political legacy for 2010”.

Child Poverty in Europe – the Figures

Ending Child Poverty within the EU? provides the following statistics on Child Poverty:

- Children in the EU have a risk of poverty of 19% which is 3% higher than that for adults (16%).
- Rates vary from 12% or less (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Cyprus, Slovenia and Germany) to those countries in the 22-24% range (Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom).
- Some countries show modest reductions in child poverty levels between 2005 and 2007. The biggest reductions (3-5%) being in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Ireland.
- Some countries showed small increases over the same period, rates in Greece and Sweden have increased the most (3-5%).