

Children and the crisis – how are they affected and what needs to be done

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The picture of how this economic crisis – the deepest since World War II - is affecting the lives of families and children across the EU is only now beginning to emerge. Job losses are the tip of the iceberg, but the impact on the lives of family dependents is less well documented. Still more worrying is the situation of those who were worst off *before* the crisis hit. With a shift in focus and resources to those who have lost jobs due to the crisis, the most vulnerable in society risk being forgotten.

Eurochild members are primarily organisations which deliver services to families and children and/or advocating on behalf of children's rights. Their jobs are becoming more difficult. NGOs themselves are having to reign in resources, despite an increasing demand for their work. Governments are reneging on promises to invest in efforts to reduce child poverty and promote children's rights. There is little or no scrutiny how budgetary cuts are impacting on social rights – and this in the wake of billion Euro bail outs of the banking sector.

Children were already more vulnerable to poverty before the crisis struck, with almost one in five children living in poverty. Now those figures are likely to be much higher. The need to focus policy attention specifically on children – within a global anti-poverty strategy – has always been a major concern of Eurochild. This is because children have too often been ignored as a group, addressing their needs solely within frame of family policy. But children are full EU citizens and deserve to have their own views and experiences taken into account. Furthermore childhood is a particularly sensitive period of change. Effective and early intervention during this phase of life can have a long-term impact on outcomes and, potentially, break inter-generational patterns of poverty and disadvantage.

The experience of this crisis is likely to have long-lasting impacts on the social, emotional, moral and educational development of children. This will include both direct impacts in more extreme cases – such as, in the case of Latvia, the news of school closures or the inability of parents to pay for transport costs to school and kindergarten, – and more subtle impacts related to how children manage family stress or make decisions about their future according to perceived prospects and opportunities.

Whilst difficult to relate directly to the crisis, some Eurochild members report an increase in the number of child protection referrals and cases of domestic violence. What is clear - and proven through past research¹ – is the critical importance of parenting in buffering the effects of the crisis on children's well-being. Children's ability to understand, adjust and cope with the situation depends heavily on the quality of parenting – which in turn is deeply dependent on resources and circumstances. Economic stress inevitably has an impact on family relations. Parents may not have

the time, emotional or physical health to guide and nurture their children in a way that sets clear boundaries, monitors progress and gives positive response to children's development. This is critical for building children's self-esteem and sense of identity.

From the perspective of Eurochild, child poverty and well-being must be kept at the top of the political agenda as part of a long-term sustainable strategy to eradicate poverty within the EU. There must be no compromise of commitments. Through the EU's Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion there has been a growing understanding of good practice in tackling child povertyⁱⁱ. The parallel development of an EU strategy on the rights of the childⁱⁱⁱ provides a clear framework for a rights-based approach to poverty reduction. But until now, government commitment is voluntary and political will is of course wavering under the pressure of the crisis. But delaying implementation of policy reforms will only create problems in the future. Investment in children cannot wait. The burden will be inherited by the next generation.

Eurochild is therefore calling on EU governments to use the opportunity of the 2010 European Year against poverty and social exclusion to adopt concrete quantified targets to reduce poverty, as well as an EU Recommendation on child poverty and social exclusion to which Member States can be held accountable. The Recommendation should include a commitment to tackle child poverty within a child-rights framework, as well as clear guidance on good practice and appropriate targets in the fields of early years' services, education, health, child protection, employment, social services, family support, housing, sport and leisure.

Finally the EU needs to apply pressure on Member States to ensure the rights of the most vulnerable children are protected. Some groups of children are particularly exposed to poverty and social exclusion such as those living in institutions, unaccompanied minors, children with disabilities, children of migrant background, Roma children – among others. Targeted measures are needed to take account of the additional challenges they face, and non-discrimination needs to be applied across all policies.

The effects of the crisis will be felt in society long after the economy has started to recover. By investing wisely in children today we can hopefully mitigate the long-term negative impact and build a more sustainable future for the European Union.

ⁱ *Leinonen, Jenni, Families in Struggle, Child Mental Health and Family Well-being in Finland – During the Economic Recession of the 1990s: The importance of parenting, STAKES Research Report 143, 2004*

ⁱⁱ *Child poverty and well-being in the EU – current status and way forward, Social Protection Committee, January 2008*

ⁱⁱⁱ *The 2006 Communication – Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (COM(2006) 367) anticipates the eventual adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child following further analysis and public consultation. The recent Stockholm Communication COM(2009) 262 on the future work of DG Justice, Freedom and Security (DG JLS) re-commits the EU to adopting "an ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child" as a matter of priority (p. 30).*

