

Child poverty in the EU's social inclusion agenda

Most Member States have identified child poverty as a strategic priority in the most recent round of national action plans on social inclusion. In fact we can thank the EU's Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion for increasing awareness about child poverty and getting it higher-up the political agenda. Organisations working with and for children in the EU welcome the fact that debate and exchange is now taking place about how best to improve the lives of millions of children across Europe.

Child poverty is important for several reasons. Firstly, the reality is that children are more likely to live in poverty than other population groups. In 2004, 20% of children under 16 and 21% aged 16-24 lived at risk of poverty, compared to 16% of adults. Secondly, it reflects a growing recognition that children have rights independent of adults or their parents. This is important because it means they are no longer considered as passive recipients of support, but rather active players who have control over their lives and influence over the policies and decisions that affect them. A child's right to be heard is a core principle of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which all Member States are signatory. Thirdly, tackling child poverty makes economic and political sense. Children growing up in poverty are more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty as adults. Breaking the recurring cycle of poverty requires that children are given every opportunity to participate and fulfil their potential in society.

Now that child poverty is higher on the political agenda, it is interesting to reflect how organisations working with disadvantaged children - and the children themselves - feel about the policy responses emerging. Eurochild – an umbrella NGO representing some 35 children's organisations across the EU – has been taking the temperature following the recent submission of the NAPs/Incl 2006-2008.

There is disappointment that children are still rarely recognised as actors in their own right. Despite all the efforts of Member States to implement children's rights – as enshrined in the UNCRC – few are building on this experience in their social inclusion strategies. None consulted directly with children and young people themselves, although good practice in this area exists. This not only disenfranchises children and young people but it also makes for less effective policies.

But there are encouraging signs that Member States are taking a more holistic approach to child poverty. Family income has, until now, been the main indicator of child poverty at EU level and hence the main target of policies. Whilst not denying the importance of income to a child's well-being and chances of success, the picture is of course more complex. Several countries are monitoring children's health, housing, education, access to services and leisure activities etc. And work is on-going at EU level to develop a primary indicator (or set of indicators) that better represent children's well-being – a development Eurochild, and others, have called for in the past.

Overall there are plenty of good ideas in the latest NAPs/Incl. What we are lacking is a policy-making approach that places children at the centre. It means viewing children not just as future workers, but as citizens now. It means giving them a voice and addressing the issues they consider important to their lives today.