

Child poverty in the EU's social inclusion agenda
EAPN interviews
Jana Hainsworth, Secretary General of Eurochild

EAPN: Why is it so important to address child poverty at an EU level?

Jana Hainsworth: Firstly, the reality is that children are more likely to live in poverty than other population groups. 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 (UN CRC), 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.

EAPN: How is the EU social inclusion agenda helping to address the issue?

Jana Hainsworth: 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 across the EU can be happy that the issue is finally getting the attention it deserves and that debate and exchange is taking place about the best way to improve the lives of millions of children across Europe.

EAPN: How do organisations working with disadvantaged children - and the children themselves - feel about the policy responses emerging in Member States?

Jana Hainsworth: Eurochild has been taking the temperature following the recent submission of the National Action Plans on social inclusion and social protection for 2006-2008 (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.

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EUROCHILD, WORKING FOR CHILDREN

Eurochild is an international umbrella NGO representing some 35 children's organisations across the EU to improve the quality of life of children and young people.

Eurochild's work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is funded by the European Commission within the Community Action Programme to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, to contribute to this objective through the Open Method of Coordination.

At the heart of Eurochild's activities is the Child Poverty Work Programme. Its key element is the assessment of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs/Incl.) from the perspective of children and young people.

Web site: www.eurochild.org