Event report: How the EU can support governments to ensure quality alternative care for children in migration

Introduction

On 3 April Eurochild, with the support of our member Fondazione l’Albero della Vita which is the coordinator of the EU funded project “FORUM for unaccompanied minors”¹, organised a roundtable discussion to examine how EU policies and funding can support national governments to ensure quality alternative care for children in migration. The event was hosted by MEP Miriam Dalli and MEP Cécile Kyenge and welcomed child rights experts from EU and national level as well as Members of European Parliament and European Commission officials. The event capitalised on existing EU commitments on the issue of protection of children in migration to examine how EU policies and funding will shape these commitments in the years to come. Representatives from civil society at national level shared their practice and expertise of delivering quality care alternatives to attendees. The purpose of this event was to demonstrate the inter-connectivity and importance of effective policies and funding at EU level, and how this can create pathways to effective practice and change at national level. This ultimately ensures that unaccompanied children in migration are given the best chance to grow up in inclusive societies where their rights are protected and they are respected. In her opening address, MEP Miriam Dalli captured this purpose:

“The effective protection of children in migration means that not only do we provide appropriate housing, timely appointment of guardians, it means that we make sure that their education is provided for and make sure that there is timely integration of these children into our societies.”

¹ See the FORUM project website for more information
Panel 1: How EU policies can support quality alternative care for children in migration both at reception and integration

Panelists: Isabela Atanasiu, European Commission DG for Migration and Home Affairs, Lilana Keith, PICUM and Initiative for Children in Migration and MEP Jean Lambert (Group of the Greens/Europe Free Alliance)

The first panel of the day examined how policies are integral to supporting quality alternative care for children in migration. Ms Atanasiu noted that at a policy level, the European Commission is supporting the transition to alternative care options for unaccompanied children from institutional facilities, in line with evidence proving that it is more beneficial for the development of a child. Alternative based care settings include foster care and independent living schemes. To facilitate this change, the Commission is encouraging and supporting the exchange of good practices around alternative care – such as the work of UNICEF and UNHRC in Greece. However, challenges persist around the quality and consistency of reception facilities. Some of the Member States are still struggling to provide basic reception needs, and this ‘emergency intervention mode’ needs to be overcome before alternative care reforms can be established.

Speaking on behalf of the European Parliament, MEP Lambert said that while there had been progress on raising awareness of politicians around the issue, there remains work to be done. Specifically, she called for cross-committee attention to address the cross-cutting challenges around statelessness and the lack of transitional support for unaccompanied children when they turn 18 and become legal adults. Currently, only the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) has responsibility for this issue.

In response to these challenges, Ms Keith from PICUM called for a more holistic policy response to working with undocumented children in migration. This response treats children first and foremost as children. PICUM referred to 3 fundamental international frameworks to guide this work at EU and national level: the UNCRC, the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration and the Global Compact on refugees. These frameworks hold governments to account based on their commitments.

to upholding the rights of the child. Ms Keith noted specific policy areas that require immediate attention:

- finding alternative care options to detention
- awareness of how the current migration systems affects the overall care of children and their families; and
- preventing situations where undocumented children can be removed from their families due to economic reasons rather than child protection reasons.

Panel 2: challenges and opportunities around EU funding and how the next MFF can support quality alternative care for children in migration

Panelists: Ari Valila, European Commission DG for Migration and Home Affairs, Shane Murphy (personal capacity), Policy Advisor from the Socialists and Democrats Party, Andor Urmos, European Commission DG Regional and Urban Policy, Marie Anne Paraskevas, European Commission, DG Employment, Social and Inclusion Affairs, and MEP Brando Benifei, Socialists and Democrats Party and rapporteur for the ESF+ in the EP

In opening the session, Mr Valila overviewed what the European Union has funded for children in migration through the current multiannual funding period of 2014-2020. The EU co-funds projects involving migration in Member States from several funding sources such as external instruments and European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund, but principally through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). This came to a total of 208 funded projects from the AMIF over the period of 2014-2017, with payments up to 45 million Euro (with a further 103 million Euro committed). However, when the numbers of migrants entering the European Union surged in 2015 and 2016, most of the budget for the period had already been allocated, with only a small re-allocation made possible during the midterm review in 2017. Therefore the Commission has responded as best as it could with a revised EU Migration Policy including higher budget flexibility and increased funding levels. Without appropriately flexible funding tools, the Commission was not able to support financially new policy initiatives and needs in the 2014-2020 period to help sufficiently integration of third country nationals into European society. The European Commission has made proposals to address needs of children in next MFF. For instance, the next Asylum Migration Fund will have two specific sub-indicators on vulnerable groups including children and possibility for 90% co-financing rate instead of standard 75%. As regards budget allocation, only 50% of funding for migration policy

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3 For links, see the UN’s (2018) Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, the (2018) Global compact on Refugees.
4 See PICUM and Eurochild’s joint publication on alternative care to detention (2019).
5 EU 2021-2027 Budget on Migration: Supporting a robust, realistic and fair EU Policy (2018).
will allocated up front. The rest being tied to emerging ‘thematic priorities’ (40%) over the MFF period and demands that arise during the next midterm review in 2024 (10%).

Mr Murphy complimented Mr Valila’s presentation with the European Parliament’s recommendations to the new migration policy. These recommendations were co-created with civil society partners and aim to improve the quality and commitment to alternative care options for children in migration. First and foremost, the European Parliament is calling for the re-introduction of the term ‘integration’ into the title of the Asylum and Migration Fund to ensure the integration of people in migration in both EU Member States and third countries. Other recommendations include:

- re-introducing the term “unaccompanied minor”
- child friendly facilities available at EU borders
- ensuring strong child protection systems in third countries
- establishing minimum funding floors for local and regional authorities
- reinstating the partnership principle for civil society organisations
- discretionary funding of 10,000 Euro to the care of each unaccompanied minors in a Member State.
- Alternatives to both detention and institutional care to both EU Member States and third countries

With the above proposals in mind, the remaining panellists examined how the next EU multiannual financial framework (2021-2027) and Structural Funds will impact on children in migration.

Regarding the European Regional Development Fund, Mr Urmos stated that the Commission has recognised that local and regional authorities are better placed to provide quality alternative care for children in migration, and so the Commission intends to expand their role to do so effectively. The Commission’s recently published ‘Toolkit on the use of EU funds for the integration of people with a migrant background’ will assist authorities in this process. Deinstitutionalisation reforms are important for achieving this goal, but there are challenges around the need to make the meaning and value of community- and alternative-based care for children in migration.

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9 Eurochild’s [Opening Doors](https://www.eurochild.org/) campaign is working hard on tackling these challenges.
Ms Paraskevas outlined how the Commission will use the new European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to support children in migration. The ESF+ will bring together a number of social focused funding programmes to make the EU funding process easier for applicants\textsuperscript{10}. It includes the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived, which has in itself proven very useful for supporting children and families in migration. Ms Paraskevas also stated that the Country Specific Recommendations from this year’s European Semester process will play an important role in the use of the ESF+ for the next multiannual financial framework. In the 2019 Country Reports that precede these recommendations, the Commission has called for the integration of children from a migrant background as an investment priority in many of the Member States\textsuperscript{11}. These prioritisation should be translated into national programmes in the next EU funding period.

MEP Benifei detailed how the Child Guarantee will make use of these Structural Funds to achieve integration for children in migration. Requested by the European Parliament in 2017, the Commission has commissioned a study to investigate the feasibility of a guarantee for vulnerable children. According to MEP Benifei, this Child Guarantee can make a reality through which the European Pillar of Social Rights can be implemented. The Child Guarantee will establish a holistic framework, linking EU policies and funding, to target the 24.8 million children at risk of poverty or social exclusion identified in 2016. Children in migration are one of four target groups that are examined in relation to their access to education and early childhood education and care, healthcare, adequate nutrition and housing in the feasibility study for the Child Guarantee.

Panel 3: How EU Member States have leveraged EU policy and funding to ensure quality alternative care for children in migration

Panellists: Claudia Cui, Fondazione l’Albero della Vita and Giovanni Giulio Valtolina, Catholic University of Milan and ISMU Foundation, Italy, and Tin Verstegen, NIDOS, The Netherlands

In the final panel of the day, two organisations delivering exemplary practice for unaccompanied children in migration - Fondazione l’Albero della Vita from Italy and NIDOS from the Netherlands - presented their work. In doing so, these organisations demonstrated the challenges faced by service deliverers working directly with children in migration, and the importance of effective policy and funding to provide quality care to unaccompanied children. Ms Cui and Mr Valtolina started the panel by presenting the FORUM project. The project ran for two years across six Member States - Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia and Spain. These countries were selected based on three factors, namely: the number of unaccompanied migrant children; experience on foster care; and the lack of practices in foster care. According to Ms Cui, while official figures state that 30% of asylum applications in Europe in 2015-2016 came from children, the reality was that many more


\textsuperscript{11} Investment priorities explicitly referring to the integration of people from a migrant background was 70%. See [here](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/yearbook-2019_en) for the 2019 Country Reports.
undocumented children reached Europe during this period. With the support of EU funds, Fondazione l’Albero della Vita set up the FORUM project. The project focused on improving understanding among services about the drivers of migration, as well as developing standards and guidelines of best practice for the provision of foster care. Qualitative research with 66 unaccompanied children in the project was also undertaken. The interviewees viewed alternative care systems preferable to institutional ones. Some of the children viewed foster care as better for children under 15 years old, and semi-independent living for 15-18 years old but in general all the participants were enthusiastic and motivated to integrate into their new homes and identified education, language and relationships with foster families as key pathways to do so.

Mr Verstegen presented the work of NIDOS, a Dutch guardianship organisation that is responsible for coordinating guardianship of the approximate 4,000 unaccompanied children in the Netherlands. All registered arriving unaccompanied children in the Netherlands are entitled to a guardian. NIDOS works to ensure that the child’s best interests and needs are prioritised, and that they have are consulted and listened to in decisions that affect them, particularly when it comes to the transition to adulthood. With EU funding, NIDOS launched the European Network of Guardianship Institutions in 2008, which provides contact between guardianship institutions, guardians and policy makers responsible for guardianship.

12 See the guidelines produced by the FORUM project here (2018)
In closing the roundtable discussion, MEP Kyenge pointed to the previous progress of the European Union, with reference to the adoption of a resolution to protect all children irrespective of their migration or refugee status last year in the Parliament. To continue progressing the cause of children in migration, MEP Kyenge called for political representatives to listen to civil society organisations to help them understand how tackle the multidimensional challenges around children in migration. According to MEP Kyenge, “children are our future and we need a common and comprehensive strategy to invest in them”.

This report was prepared by Eurochild on 19 April 2019. For more information, please contact Agata.DAddato@eurochild.org

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