In April 2018 the current government announced that it would begin preparing a national child strategy. This was a welcome step as child and family policy in Finland lacks comprehensiveness and perseverance. Reforms and adjustments are made on a rather ad-hoc basis, and lack an overall assessment. The regional dimension is crucial for reaching children and their families, yet there is a lack of coordination between relevant bodies and institutions at different levels of administrations. Impact assessments with a view to children or child budgeting are not commonly used by the public sector (neither by central government nor municipalities).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has long been concerned that Finland still lacks a comprehensive policy and plan of action for the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it ratified in 1991 (see Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention. Concluding
Observations: Finland, CRC/C/FIN/CO/4).

Central Union for Child Welfare calls for a national human rights-based child strategy that would guide decision-making and action on children and families in municipalities and provinces in addition to central government administration, which the European Semester should encourage Finland to develop.

**Children’s well-being**

Unfortunately, child and family benefits and services have suffered various setbacks in recent years. The cuts have an impact especially on the everyday lives of families with low incomes. The proportion of income transfers is three-fold in low-income families compared to other families. Therefore, cuts in family benefit have impacted especially on financial resources of low-income families.

During the last year, the government has made some improvements on family benefits. For instance, childcare fees were reduced for low- and middle-income families and guardian supplement of student allowance was restored. However, those improvements have been sporadic and there has not been an overall assessment of how numerous amendments have affected different kinds of families. The government has not addressed the negative impact of measures on child and family services and benefits during the past years. From a child rights perspective, it was also unfortunate that the government did not reach consensus concerning the reform of family leave system it had started to prepare in August 2017. The reform is not expected to take place during this parliamentary term, as stated in the Country Report of Finland (2018).

It is noteworthy that the 2018 Country Report has missed some important elements in this regard. According to the Country Report of Finland the risk of poverty has continued to decline since its peak in 2011. The risk of poverty and social exclusion is among the lowest in the EU, and Finland has one of the lowest income inequality rates. However, the report does not mention that the number of children and families with children (especially under the age of three) living in poverty has more than doubled in the last ten years, and that the amount of child and parental benefits has de facto been reduced. According to income distribution statistics there are 101,000 deprived children in Finland, which means nearly one in ten children is living in poverty.

The overall impression is that not just the CSRs but also the Country Report of Finland focus primarily on macroeconomic policies. For instance, the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children is not mentioned in the report and the situation of children is not analysed comprehensively. This might result from the fact that Finland did not receive any recommendation concerning the well-being of children or families with children in 2017.

**Services**

The government continued preparatory work around social and health care reform (SOTE) and the national programme for child and family services (LAPE) last year. The Finnish government is carrying out a national programme for child and family services as part of 26 key projects which were initiated in 2016, with the aim of pooling all services for children, adolescents and families into a set of child- and family-oriented services. The focus is on preventive services and early support and care, and where services can effectively reach those most in need. The changes also serve to curb the rise in costs for remedial services and, over a longer term, to reduce costs.

The aims of the programme are positive but though it has been running for almost three years, it is still in the pilot phase. The European Semester could be a catalyst to encourage detailed nation-wide implementation.

Finland is also preparing a broad reform of its social and health care systems, linked to the reform of regional government. The government has presented large parts of the draft legislation on the reform in Parliament and the formal adoption of the reform will take place in 2018. Child impact
assessments have not been carried out during the drafting phase, even though the reform impacts on child and family services. Central Union for Child Welfare is concerned that the government’s proposition to increase clients’ freedom of choice as part of the reform will increase health and well-being disparities among citizens and risk the equal availability of basic services. The freedom of choice model is problematic especially for children in vulnerable situations (e.g. children who need child welfare services, children with disabilities) and children and families who have various needs for services.

**Education**

The 2018 Country Report correctly notes that the education system has been subject to considerable public spending cuts. It is worrying that education outcomes in Finland are weakening and divergence between different groups has been detected. The latest PISA results show a growing gap in performance between the genders, and the largest among the OECD countries.\(^1\) As the right to education is guaranteed for children as their basic (human) right, the Country Report should include an assessment and evaluation of how those negative trends will affect children’s development and the fulfilment of their rights.

*For more information, please consult the 2018 Eurochild Report on the European Semester or contact Reka.Tunyogi@eurochild.org.*

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