

Joint statement on protecting children and their families during and after the COVID19 crisis

Introduction

As COVID19 continues to spread across Europe, it is bringing havoc and devastation to people's lives, exposing weaknesses of European healthcare systems, and intensifying social inequalities. Although children are considered as a low-risk group, they will be hit hard by this public health crisis. The widening of already existing inequalities means that those who need most support – such as access to adequate healthcare and education – are not receiving it and will struggle most to deal with the catastrophic economic consequences of the pandemic.

In 2018, 23 million children were growing up at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU. This number was already unacceptably high for one of the wealthiest regions of the world.

Alarming, this number is now expected to increase considerably in the coming year(s) as the economic consequences of COVID19 in Europe take their toll. Various global and European bodies already estimate that the impact of the current pandemic on the European economy will be much more devastating than that of the 2008 recession. Its ultimate scope remains unknown. The fight against poverty and deprivation should not be dropped from the political agenda; on the contrary, investments in our future education, child protection, health and nutrition, will help Europe reduce the damage and avoid future crises.

Evidence and lessons learnt from previous economic crises show that it is people in vulnerable conditions that are the most affected, having fewer means, opportunities, and less resilience to withstand the shocks and observe public health guidelines.

There is no guarantee that this pandemic will be the last for the foreseeable future, nor for how long this virus will remain with us or the extent of our immunity to it. How we prepare ourselves now, strengthen our social protection and health systems, and public services of general interest, will be fundamental. The extent to which we will prioritise leaving no one behind, protecting children from negative economic impacts, and investing in the most disadvantaged in our societies, will be THE test for the EU's values, identity and democracy.

It is therefore more important than ever to put children at the heart of the EU's crisis de-escalation measures and recovery strategy. An overarching social and sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy, an ambitious EU long term budget and a holistic Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee are needed to support the EU's most vulnerable, including children and their parents in the long run. Meanwhile it is vital to model and keep monitoring both health and socio-economic impacts of mitigation measures impacting populations differently across society.

Eurofound¹, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency², the European Ombudsman³ and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child⁴ have already raised their concerns about the impact of the crisis on children. The partners of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children insist that evidence and data collected across Europe feed into the EU's policymaking now.

Measures to support children and families in the short term

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children strongly recommends the European Commission and EU Member States to provide emergency support to children and families in vulnerable situations by:

- a) **Giving children, in particular all children from disadvantaged families and backgrounds particular attention in the design of immediate response measures to the COVID19 crisis.**

EU Member States should use all possible measures to promote and protect children's rights in the current context of home confinement, physical distancing, discontinuity and no access to support services, schools, educators or peers. **Measures to mitigate experiences of increasing poverty and inequality should be put in place immediately.** For example, home schooling is not accessible to all and especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Where parents in front-line low paid jobs have to continue to work out-of-house or are struggling to work from home and support their children, children may lack the necessary parental support. Others simply do not have the necessary IT equipment and/or stable internet connections, because they cannot afford it. Children are going hungry in families that relied on free school meals, many of which now rely even more on (depleted) food banks who had to reduce their working hours. The children who are badly housed now spend more time indoors, negatively impacting their long-term health. The incomes of vulnerable families are likely to be impacted due to unemployment and lay-offs, particularly those families where parents work in precarious jobs, rely on the informal economy or receive inadequate financial support to meet their household expenses. A common EU-wide commitment to make health services truly accessible to all children from poor and marginalised groups could be taken as a clear indicator of the value of working towards full-inclusion within European society.

In addition, measures are urgently needed to lower the risks of increased psychosocial issues and growing domestic and sexual violence against children and women. The European Commission should support its Member States in a coordinated approach, including in the de-escalation and recovery strategies rolled out at (sub)national level with the aim of strengthening social protection systems and community care in the medium and long term.

- b) **Directing national budgets and unspent EU financial resources from the 2014-2020 EU funding period to support children and families in vulnerable situations**

National budgets across EU Member States have been redirected and stretched to support health and social protection systems.

¹ <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/customised-report/2020/the-covid-19-virus-some-implications-for-employment-and-working-life>

² <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2020/protect-human-rights-and-public-health-fighting-covid-19>

³ <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/speech/en/126521>

⁴ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf

At the same time, the European Commission has put forward its financial response towards the COVID19 pandemic⁵. Among other measures, the European Commission suggests a new funding programme, entitled “SURE”, to support EU Member States through loans to fight unemployment. In addition, the Fund for the European Aid to the Most Deprived will introduce the use of food and electronic vouchers to reduce the risk of contamination, as well as the possibility of buying protective equipment for those delivering the aid.

The European Commission also foresees in its proposal that all unspent Cohesion Policy Funds will be redirected towards the fight against the COVID19 crisis. Co-financing requirements will be abandoned as Member States are already using all their means to respond to the crisis and transfers between funds as well as between categories of regions and between policy objectives will be made possible.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children welcomes the European Commission’s measures to respond to the COVID19 pandemic and strongly recommends EU Member States to:

- ✓ Ensure that national as well as EU funding is being used to support children and families at risk by:
 - Ensuring access to timely and affordable health, educational and social services for all and access to targeted services for the most vulnerable.
 - Granting financial support to those families affected by the crisis, through increased cash transfers to meet rising costs, emergency payments, access to in-kind support including food/meals, support to pay/delay bills, prevention of evictions and energy cut-offs, enabling them to survive and meet their financial commitments. This should include specific measures to house and support homeless and migrant children and young people and support their opportunities for schooling and education.
 - Addressing issues of inclusion across the digital divide whereby children growing up in the poorest of families have no access to the internet nor to basic IT equipment and hence no access to online information and other resources. This issue is particularly felt when children need to follow online courses of compulsory education and are therefore excluded.
- ✓ Direct national budgets and EU funding support to civil society organisations running programmes supporting families that struggle to continue their operations due to the need for additional staff, protective equipment and financial resources;
- ✓ Ensure that the needed resources reach out to all actors supporting marginalised groups with minimal administrative requirements, including small, grass roots organisations that contribute by supporting the basic needs of families and children;
- ✓ Promote effective coordination and cooperation of all actors at the national, regional and local level, in order to guarantee effective resources allocation.
- ✓ Meaningfully consult children and families experiencing poverty and social exclusion and civil society organisations representing them in the design, implementation and monitoring of Cohesion Policy Funding, thus ensuring its re-direction to where it is mostly needed.

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_582

Measures to support children and families' wellbeing in the long term.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children calls on the EU institutions to adopt measures that will support children and their families in the years to come.

a) Adopt a comprehensive, social and sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy that will set a target to halve poverty and child poverty by 2030.

The Europe 2020 Strategy was introduced in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis that left millions of Europeans unemployed, at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The EU is currently on the verge of a new, perhaps deeper crisis that will have unprecedented financial impacts on European citizens.

The EU should now look forward and respond decisively to the COVID19 pandemic and to buffer the severe socio-economic consequences that the Union will face in the upcoming years.

Until now, the European Green Deal is the only long-term strategy the EU has presented. Alarming, it has not set out an overall post-2020 Strategy outlining the Union's vision for the upcoming decade. Although the fight against climate change is crucial, the EU should take into account the current challenges that the Union is facing and **propose a coherent multi-faceted Europe 2030 Strategy that brings together policy action related to the economy, social inclusion and environmental protection, and is aligned with the UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.**

Within this framework the EU should set an ambitious target to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion by 50%. This will lift at least 55 million people, among whom 10 million children, out of poverty and social exclusion by 2030, based on the multidimensional AROPE indicator that measures poverty in all its forms in the EU. This target should also take into account the furthest left behind, which could be monitored additionally by the relative median at-risk-of-poverty gap or the AROP with a threshold of 40% of median income.

b) Adopt a Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee that has an integrated approach and includes access to financial resources, children's access to services, and their participation.

The European Commission has committed to reduce child poverty in the EU by launching a European Child Guarantee to support children's access to essential services.

The spread of COVID19 clearly shows why all vulnerable people need to be able to access affordable, quality and inclusive services. It has shown that EU Member States should ensure access of all people to health protection and treatment regardless of their financial means or their residence status, but according to their need. At the same time, this crisis has also demonstrated the importance of children's access to adequate nutrition. In addition, the isolation measures emphasize the significance of access to decent housing, as many families that inhabit in overcrowded accommodations and living areas (eg. Roma settlements, slums and squats) homeless families living in homeless shelters, as well as the families in migration living in overcrowded camps, hotspots or in detention centres find it more difficult to socially distance, or self-isolate putting in danger themselves as well as their co-habitants. Finally, this crisis has stressed the importance of children's access to education and the preparedness of governments to offer equal access to learning to all children. Although some governments have developed platforms to help children access distance learning, this is not the case everywhere or does not reach all children. Moreover, children in poverty, living in care, in shelters or reception centres often do not have the means to access distance learning platforms. Equally, protection of children's rights and privacy online should be ensured.

Although children’s access to essential services is absolutely critical for children’s wellbeing and development, this measure by itself will not reduce child poverty in the EU.

Taking into account the foreseeable socio-economic consequences that the COVID19 pandemic will bring across the EU, it is essential that families are supported holistically as child poverty is very much related to parents in low paid employment or being unemployed or having limited access to social benefits.

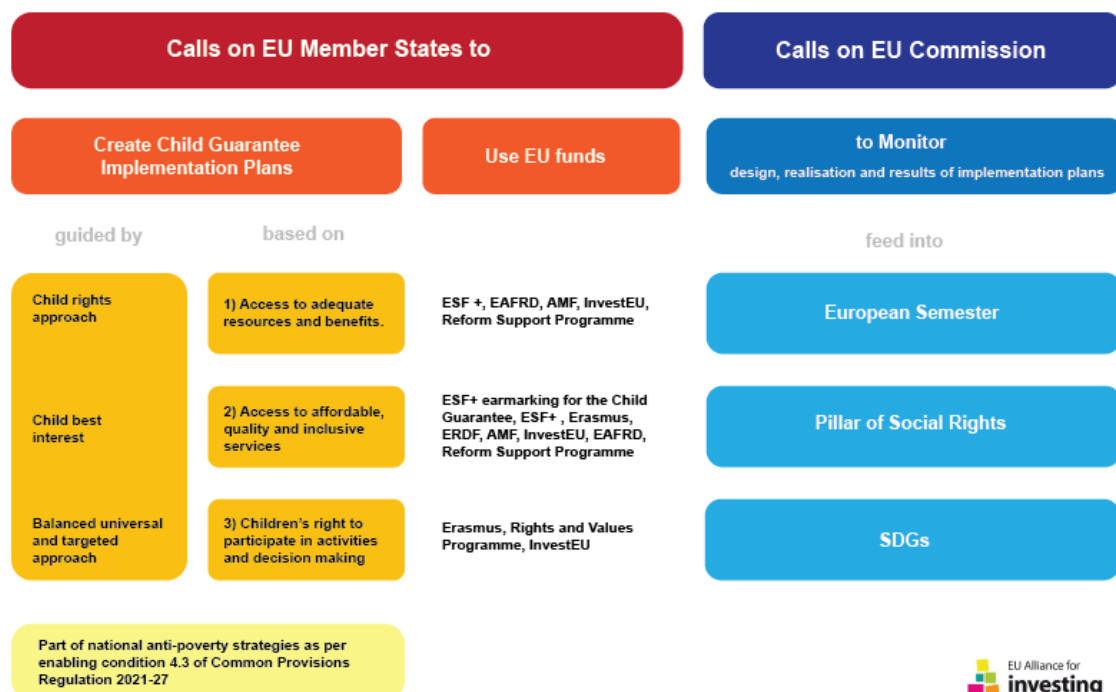
This crisis causes an urgent need to adopt a systemic approach to tackling child poverty and protection against economic shocks. Strong social protection systems, multi-sectoral cooperation and child participation embedded in family, community and policy-making settings will be pivotal to making this happen.

The 2013 European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children was an ambitious policy framework that took a comprehensive approach on tackling child poverty. It called on EU Member States to develop national child poverty reduction strategies that would ensure -

- a) parents’ access to resources,
- b) children’s access to affordable and quality services and
- c) children’s right to participate in cultural and sport activities and decision making.

Given the foreseen impacts of the COVID19 crisis on children and their families, this holistic and comprehensive approach should be retained and reinforced in a form of a Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee.

Key elements of the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee



- c) **Adopt an ambitious EU budget for the 2021-2027 EU funding period to support child poverty reduction and social inclusion.**



The European Parliament in its proposal for the 2021-2027 European Social Fund Plus called for an increased EU budget by 5,9 billion Euros and demanded from EU Member States to earmark 5% of their ESF+ resources to implement the European Child Guarantee.

In addition, the European Parliament increased the ESF+ earmarking for social inclusion to 27% and the earmarking to support the most deprived to 3%.

The COVID19 pandemic is expected to leave millions of Europeans unemployed or in low paid employment. It is also expected to test social and child protection systems. The European Social Fund Plus will be the instrument that EU Member States will need and will use the most in the upcoming years to complement national social security instruments and prevent exclusion.

The European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen has stated that for the EU to recover from the COVID19 crisis a powerful new budget should be adopted which invests money in a smart and sustainable manner.

Therefore, the EU Alliance for Investing in Children strongly recommends to:

- ✓ **the European Commission to update its proposal for ESF+ with a substantial increase of resources, in line with the European Parliament's proposal, including an earmarking of 5% for the establishment of a European Child Guarantee**
- ✓ **EU Member States to agree on an increase of the resources proposed for the ESF+, in line with the European Parliament's proposal, including dedicated funding for the implementation of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation.**

Endnote

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children has been advocating for a multidimensional, rights-based approach to tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being since 2014.

This statement was endorsed by the following partner organisations of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children:

Alliance for Childhood European Network Group;
ATD Quart Monde;
Caritas Europa;
COFACE Families Europe;
Don Bosco International;
Dynamo International – Street Workers Network;
Eurochild;
Eurodiaconia;
EuroHealthNet;
European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities – EASPD;
European Anti-Poverty Network – EAPN;
European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless - FEANTSA;
European Public Health Alliance – EPHA;
European Social Network – ESN;
Lifelong Learning Platform;
Make Mothers Matter;



Mental Health Europe;
Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM);
Roma Education Fund;
Save the Children;
SOS Children's Villages International;

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