

EU Alliance for Investing in Children Response to the public consultation on the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Introduction

Child poverty is unacceptable.

When the European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed in 2017, 24,9% of children in the EU were children growing up at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹. That is 1 in 4 children², in one of the world's wealthiest regions

Although there are no official data in place yet, it is expected that child poverty is likely to increase further, due to the severe socio-economic consequences brought by the COVID-19 pandemic across the EU³.

The need to invest in children and their families has been reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights under Principle 11 which calls EU Member States to develop actions that will support children's access to quality early childhood education and care and to protect children from poverty, and ensure that children have access to equal opportunities.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children welcomes the European Commission's prioritisation of child poverty reduction under Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

However, child and family poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon which is determined by an interlinked variety of factors such as parents' access to resources and their capacity to develop social capital, children's access to services and children's participation⁴. Hence, child poverty reduction touches also upon other Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights such as Principles 1 (education), 6 (fair wages), 9 (work life balance) 12 (social protection), 13 (unemployment benefits), 14 (minimum income), 16 (health care) , 19 (housing) and 20 (essential services) .

In this contribution, the EU Alliance for Investing in Children, proposes recommendations about:

- 1) Actions to implement Principle 11 on childcare and support to children and Principles 1, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the Pillar of Social Rights.
- 2) Ways to mainstream the rights of children who are growing up in poverty and social exclusion in Principles 1, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, 19 and 20 the European Pillar of Social Rights.

¹ Eurostat <https://epthinktank.eu/2019/10/16/international-day-for-the-eradication-of-poverty-2019-eu-contribution-to-the-fight-against-child-poverty/child-poverty/>

² For some children belonging to vulnerable groups, the rate is even higher, as for instance 1 in 3 Roma children goes to bed hungry. For more: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey - Roma, 2017 - https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf

³ It is also foreseen that the number of children at risk of separation from their families, in need of additional support, or in alternative care is likely to increase.

⁴ As reflected in the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation on Investing in Children <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H0112>

- 3) The development of an overarching Europe 2030 Strategy that will balance the EU's social, economic and environmental dimensions.

1) Actions to implement Principle 11 - Childcare and support to children and Principles 1, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- Actions to implement Principle 11: Children have the right to affordable, inclusive and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of good quality.

The first years of a child's life are vital for a child's development and well-being. Tackling disadvantage in early years is often the most effective way to ensure full inclusion in society at later stages in life. The Action Plan should thus pay particular attention to investing in early childhood development; it is the most critical stage, influencing greatly the extent to which a child meets his or her cognitive, social, physical and emotional potential.

In order to achieve this comprehensive approach, ECEC needs to be supplemented with services supporting the earliest of years, not just those from the age of three onwards. These include family planning, maternal health services such as pre- and post-natal services, including breastfeeding and mental health support, training for parents and health professionals in the area of preventive care home-visiting-programmes, healthy nutrition, psycho-social, language and cognitive stimulation activities for children.

Inclusion in education from primary age onwards will only be entirely successful when early childhood development needs are met through quality early stimulation and quality early childhood education and care services, as well as parental support. For this reason, the Action Plan should ensure that:

- Universal health, social and education services integrate non-discrimination measures and targeted programmes to ensure inclusivity, to reach communities at risk of deprivation, exclusion, segregation, and discrimination
- All parents and children have equal access to services which can stimulate the child's development and parents' empowerment
- Adequate, well-equipped nurseries, kindergartens, and child-minders settings⁵ are available, affordable and accessible in smaller localities, rural and remote areas. Attention should be given to children with disabilities' access to these settings⁶.

⁵ A popular concept in the Netherlands which gives the choice to the parents to put their children in a small-size child-minding setting; the groups are usually very small, between 3-5 children; the scheme is recognised and reimbursed by the social system, equivalent to the 'regular' institutional style scheme. In Ireland, the UK and the Czech Republic there are very successful home-visiting-programs in place to support young parents in child rearing also providing adequate playing and

⁶ Physical access to buildings and other spaces that are used by the public are often not accessible to children with disabilities and their families that accompany them. Physical access includes things like accessible routes, curb ramps, parking and passenger loading zones, elevators, signage, entrances, and restroom accommodations

- Access to healthcare and mental health, including pre- and post-natal services, affordable medicines, vaccination and preventive services (incl. dental care) are guaranteed to every child regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender
 - Public authorities are encouraged to involve all stakeholders, including children and their parents and civil society in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs. This will help better assess the needs of families and issue adapted measures for more adequately meeting the needs of parents and their children.
- Promoting children's rights to be protected from poverty through principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Commission plans to launch its proposal for a Child Guarantee Council Recommendation in 2021. The Child Guarantee is expected to ensure that all children in Europe who are at risk of poverty, social exclusion, or are otherwise disadvantaged, have access to essential services of good quality, such as early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, nutrition, housing and recently added, leisure and cultural activities⁷.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children sees the implementation of the Child Guarantee as a key instrument to turn into practice Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to address child poverty in the EU .

The EU Alliance calls on the European Commission to include the following actions in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

a) Set an ambitious target to reduce child poverty and inequality across the EU.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children has been calling the European Commission to adopt an EU target in line with targets of the Sustainable Development Goal 1⁸.

The target should aim to eliminate extreme child poverty and to half child poverty by 2030 as defined by the children (under 18) at risk of poverty or social exclusion composite indicator (AROPE).

The EU target should be then translated into national targets. The national targets should be based on the EU AROPE indicators; be set beyond GDP rate; and should look at the wellbeing of people not only at national level but specifically at regional and local levels. These targets should be further disaggregated by additional indicators, for example ethnicity or disability, to account for the specific needs and capture the realities of children facing the most hardship.

The European Commission should work with Member States to ensure that their targets are adequate and to establish national sub-targets for poverty reduction among groups most at risk, ensuring a just transition for these groups where Europe's shift to a low-carbon economy is concerned.

⁷ Roadmap for the Child Guarantee public consultation <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12565-European-Child-Guarantee->

⁸ <http://www.alliance4investinginchildren.eu/call-for-action-for-a-comprehensive-sustainable-europe-2030-strategy-with-a-strong-social-dimension/>

The multiannual strategies, the Child Guarantee Action Plans as well as the implementation of Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20 of the Pillar of Social Rights should be monitored against these targets.

- b) Call on EU Member States to adopt and implement the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation through the multiannual national strategies and Child Guarantee Action Plans, and use these strategies and action plans to implement Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.**

The European Commission, in its Roadmap description for the public consultation on the Child Guarantee proposed that the Child Guarantee will be launched as a Council Recommendation which will call on EU Member States to develop multiannual national strategies covering at least the period until 2030 and Child Guarantee Action Plans⁹. The EU Alliance for Investing in Children welcomes this proposal as it was also one of the Alliance's key claims during the last years. It calls upon the European Commission to reiterate the importance of the development and implementation of both the national strategies and the Child Guarantee action plans as integral part for the delivery of Principle 11 of the Action Plan of the Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Commission should call on EU Member States to:

- Build their multiannual national strategies around the three pillars of the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation¹⁰ and addressing Pillar Principles 6, 13, 14¹¹. This will support EU Member States in addressing child and family poverty in an integrated way.
- Develop Child Guarantee Action Plans that will outline the challenges children in or at risk of poverty face in their country, the groups of children that are in most vulnerable situations and should be further supported, the gaps in the system and the policies that should be adopted to tackle child and family poverty in their country. The Action Plans will outline the actions that Member States are going to take to ensure children's access to key service areas as well as how parents are going to be supported in providing for their children¹² and enable them to access the identified service areas. EU Member States should finally outline how they will use EU financial resources and national budgets to tackle child and family poverty.

- c) Use the reporting of the multiannual national strategies and Child Guarantee Action Plans to monitor the implementation of Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Semester.**

The European Commission should call on EU Member States to develop and submit their national strategies and action plans by the end of 2021. EU Member States should report on the implementation of the Action Plans annually. The Strategies should be mid-term reviewed and updated accordingly in 2025.

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12565-European-Child-Guarantee->

¹⁰ Calling for access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services, and children's right to participate.

¹¹ 6 (wages), 13 (unemployment benefits) and 14 (minimum income)

¹² E.g. parents' access to in-kind or financial support, home-visiting-programme, designing services that will enable parents finding a job or maintaining one etc.

The reporting of the Child Guarantee action plans and the review of the multiannual national strategies should feed in the monitoring of Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In addition, the European Semester needs to have a strong social dimension, underpinned by the European Pillar of Social Rights. Hence, the implementation of the Child Guarantee should be reflected in the European Semester reporting and monitoring process as of 2021.

- d) **Urge EU Member States to direct EU financial resources and national budgets at tackling child poverty and ensure that the monitoring of the allocation and use of EU financial resources feed into Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the Pillar of Social Rights .**

The European Parliament and the European Commission in their proposals for the European Social Fund Plus, have proposed that EU Member States allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty¹³. The EU Alliance for Investing in Children calls on EU Member States to agree and include the earmarking in the adopted ESF+.

However, this earmarking should not be considered as the only EU financial resource that can help tackle child poverty. The European Commission has already proposed that other EU financial resources such as the European Regional Development Fund, the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, the InvestEU, EU4Health, the Erasmus Plus, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the Recovery and Resilience Facility and funding available in the field of healthcare should be also used in tackling child poverty and more particularly in the delivery of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation at Member State level. The EU Alliance for Investing in Children has been calling for this as well.

In addition, the European Commission should urge EU Member States to use national budgets for the implementation of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation and to progress on structural reforms at national level.

The European Commission should monitor the allocation and use of EU funding through the reporting of EU Member States on the implementation of the Child Guarantee Action Plans and the monitoring results should feed into the monitoring of Principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- a) **Call for children's and parents' participation in decision-making that affects them, including in mechanisms in the Child Guarantee.**

The EU Alliance considers children's participation in decision making of significant importance, and thus regrets that child participation as well as engaging parents are not yet considered part of the proposed Child Guarantee¹⁴. The EU alliance recalls the European Pillar of Social Rights staff working document, which under Principle 11 calls on EU Member States to put in place "*national strategies on*

¹³ [Texts adopted - European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\) ***I - Thursday, 4 April 2019 \(europa.eu\)](#), [EUR-Lex - 52020PC0451 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁴ As the Child Guarantee was presented in the Roadmap description of the Child Guarantee public consultation.

*child participation to promote awareness on how to involve children in all actions and decisions that concern them*¹⁵.

To avoid the development of multiple strategies, the EU Alliance for Investing in Children calls on the European Commission to include child participation as a horizontal principle in the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation and to call on EU Member States to develop structures that will support the meaningful involvement of children who are harder to reach and children in vulnerable situations¹⁶ and their parents in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Child Guarantee action plans and the multi-annual national strategies.

2) Actions to mainstream children’s rights growing up in poverty and social exclusion in Principles 1, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 of the Pillar of Social Rights.

PRINCIPLE 1: Education, training and life-long learning

Equality in education has been defined as “the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes”¹⁷. Current indicators suggest that there are large differences in educational equity between and within EU Member States. Educational inequalities start early, already in pre-school period. These differences in turn impact people’s life-long capacities to acquire information, develop social capital and act on it in ways that improve their physical and mental health, and increase their chances on the labour market. Discrimination within school settings and segregated educational establishments breed a sectioned view of society, which fuels further inequalities and exclusion. Prioritising quality, inclusive and accessible early childhood education and care, and improving teaching quality in schools – and doing so, in ways that benefit children in vulnerable situations in particular, is key to ensuring more equal opportunities. Considering the increasingly digitalised childhoods, actions should be developed and implemented to invest in improved digital literacy. It is a vital time to address the digital divide affecting many children from vulnerable backgrounds, as well as to improve children’s online safety.

PRINCIPLES 6, 13 and 14: Wages, Unemployment Benefits, Minimum Income

Child poverty is strongly interconnected to parents’ access to resources. Although access to essential services for those children in need is important, parents should be also empowered in their caregiving role.

The 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children acknowledged this linkage and recommended to EU Member States to develop national strategies that will examine child poverty in an integrated way, also taking into account parents’ access to resources.

¹⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/staff-working-document-monitoring-implementation-european-pillar-social-rights-march2018.pdf>

¹⁶ Such as children with disabilities, children at risk of poverty, children in institutions, children in migration and children belonging to ethnic minorities, such as the Roma

¹⁷ European Commission. Efficiency and equity in EU education and training systems. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11095#:~:text=Equity%3A%20the%20extent%20to%20which,outcomes%20of%20education%20and%20training.>

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children calls on the European Commission to support parents' participation in the labour market and provide for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits as a means to implement the upcoming Child Guarantee.

In particular, the EC should call on EU Member States to take all appropriate measures to support parents' participation in the labour market and to support in particular those already at a distance of the labor market or households at particular risk such as single parent households. Education settings (from early childhood education and care until secondary education) should be developed in a way to support parents accessing the labour market.

Households should be also supported through adequate, coherent and efficient benefits (Eg family and child benefits, housing benefits, nutrition benefits) and minimum income schemes. In addition, households should be supported with in-kind benefits related to the service areas of the Child Guarantee Recommendation. Any kind of support should be provided in a non-stigmatising way and in an individualized approach.

PRINCIPLE 9: Work-life balance

The right to adequate, paid family leave, flexible working arrangements and access to childcare services benefit health and wellbeing of employees as well as their family members. Studies have shown positive correlation between the right to and the uptake of paid family leave on maternal health (e.g., reduced risk of post-partum depression) and child health and development (increased breastfeeding rate, reduced infant mortality). Quality, affordable childcare facilities, as well as other support services such as long-term care, must be made accessible to all, especially families having the hardest time accessing them – such as the Roma - because of poor territorial coverage, high costs, and institutionalised antigypsyism. Measures that enable people to strike a better work-life balance also lead to higher productivity rates and less sick leave amongst working parents and can contribute to family and social cohesion, improved fertility rates, and improved female participation in the labour market.

PRINCIPLE 12: Access to social protection

Adequate social protection is linked to our health and care needs from birth to old age. Social protection systems are safety nets, which help people meet needs in life and protect against risks. Those needs and risks can be associated with poverty and social exclusion of families and individuals. Citizens, including children, of countries that spend more on social protection and investment policies have better health, social and employment prospects and outcomes. Ensuring an adequate level and distribution of social protection over the life-course and according to need is an effective way to reduce structural inequalities such as poverty. This in turn improves outcomes in a broad range of human development areas, including health. Social protection includes regular and predictable cash transfers, such as child benefits, fiscal deductions, to shield families from the worst impacts of poverty, and to help the most vulnerable families and children – such as children living in precarious conditions, children living in institutional care, children without parental care, children living with health problems and disabilities, those from minority communities, such as the Roma, children of single-parent families and refugee and migrant children - access essential services and address daily needs.

PRINCIPLE 16: Health care

Available data at EU level reflects that overall people have good access to health care, but there are big differences amongst countries and between different groups of people in the extent of access. Those who are more vulnerable, like the Roma¹⁸ and undocumented migrants, have more difficulties in accessing care, including health promoting services, in receiving good quality care, and in making possible co-payments. In addition, the costs of certain services, like dental care, may not be subsidized. Better indicators and more regular monitoring are needed to capture realities on access to and the quality of care across the EU. This will also enable countries to learn from each other on how best to structure health systems and use available resources efficiently and effectively, to above all promote health, prevent disease, and provide good treatment when it does arise.

Integrated health and social services dedicated to the child population should prioritise prevention and health promotion and harm reduction actions addressing key factors behind unhealthy childhood (nutrition but also alcohol and tobacco use), family and community deprivation, domestic and gender violence, focus on mental health and obesity/overweight, but also parental support, skills and competences.

Health care services that are inclusive, equitable, adequate, available, accessible and affordable need to be ensured for every child and every family. The early years of life is a critical phase. Members must guarantee access to healthcare, affordable medicines, including pre- and post-natal services, vaccination and preventive services (incl. mental health and dental care) for every child regardless of social status, ethnicity, gender. This is particularly relevant for children from vulnerable groups - including Roma - which are more vulnerable to diseases, including child obesity and diabetes. Greater protection of children's rights to healthcare and preventive services from the very first months of life create opportunities to develop their full potential and live successful social and professional lives in adulthood. Furthermore, providing parents and children with a health-enabling physical and social environment will reduce health disparities from an early age and will contribute to tackling gender inequalities and social injustices in society.

PRINCIPLE 19: Housing and assistance for the homeless

Access to housing is one of the priorities of the Child Guarantee Recommendation. In the ongoing crisis avoiding further evictions and preventing an increase in family homelessness is the aim. Children growing up in poor families as well as single parent families, families belonging to ethnic minorities and families in migration often live in inadequate housing conditions and are at higher risk of becoming homeless. In addition, children with disabilities are also often growing up in inaccessible housing. Targeted financial and in-kind support should be provided to these families to improve their living conditions or to accommodate their homes to serve their children's needs. In addition, Member States should strengthen social housing and ensure that families with children in need are prioritised. When families with children are at risk of eviction, it should be ensured that families are not placed in homeless shelters but rather in settings that will resemble a family environment.

Particular attention should be given to children at risk of separation or already separated from their families. They should have access to quality community-based alternative care that allows children to live in a family setting within a community. Only in specific cases when it is in the child's best interests, and for the shortest possible period of time, it may be necessary to provide quality, temporary, specialised, care in a small group setting organised around the rights and needs of the child, in a setting

¹⁸ The life expectancy of Roma is 10-15 years lower than the general population, with high rates of both maternal and infant mortality

as close as possible to a family. When transitioning to independent living, children should be supported to access housing in the community and other essential services. This support should be provided together with guidance on living independently.

PRINCIPLE 20: Access to essential services

Too often, basic services like housing, and childcare are underfunded and difficult to access. In addition, while such essential services address interlinked needs, they are poorly connected, rendering them inaccessible to those who need them most and reflecting a poor use of available resources. More action is needed to design and implement human-centered approaches, that apply digital advancements to link services together to address an individual's specific needs, for a more effective and efficient provision of services.

In reference to accessing nutrition (as an essential service), actions should be strengthened for free/subsidised non-stigmatising meal schemes in educational settings (incl. over holidays), affordable/subsidised fresh fruit and vegetables schemes (in addition to the EU School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme), further financial incentives and adequate information and training for parents to provide healthy and sustainable diets for children and their families.

Considering the rights of children with disabilities, Member States should be encouraged to develop and ensure access to mainstream services (i.e. inclusive education and early childhood education and care, legal assistance, psychological support, leisure activities, affordable and accessible housing) and ensure access to specialised support. This should include, but not be limited to, legal assistance for the exercise of certain rights, training to support independent living skills, accessible housing and housing adaptations, technical aids and assistive technologies (e.g. wheelchairs, social alarms, hearing and visual aids, communication aids etc.), psychological support, personal assistance, day care centres, resource centres, parental support for sharing experiences, training for parents or educational assistance, inclusive education and early childhood education and care.

Considering the right to environment falling under this 'essential services' principle, investments in environmental determinants of children's health should be prioritized. This includes green spaces, safe play areas, active mobility schemes, inclusive and affordable physical activity actions and infrastructure, in particular in the most deprived neighborhoods and communities. The latest Health at a Glance Europe 2020 report highlights the catastrophic health and social toll poor air quality across all the regions of the EU takes. The most deprived communities, children living in urban and overcrowded dwellings with little opportunities and resources are the most affected.

3) Developing an overarching Europe 2030 Strategy that will balance the EU's social, economic and environmental dimensions.

Although the Action Plan on the Pillar of Social Rights represents a necessary political guidance to ensure a concrete and strategic implementation of the Social Pillar, an effective implementation of the latter will also depend on the coherence of the Action Plan within the overarching strategies developed by the EU. That is the reason why we believe the EU should set up an overarching Europe 2030 Strategy. The European Green Deal, although crucial to fight climate change and ensure a better future for all, is not integral enough to be considered as an overarching post-2020 strategic framework. The EU should thus launch a Europe 2030 Strategy that will balance the social, economic



and environmental dimensions and that will take into account the most pressing social needs. The Social Pillar and its Action Plan will thus represent the social backbone of this holistic framework.

The Council could thus ensure the coherence of European social, economic and climate and environmental policy in the European Semester by integrating the social indicators of the Europe 2030 Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights in the European Semester monitoring cycle. In addition, this Strategy should work in full synergy with thematic strategies for key groups, such as the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Participation and Inclusion, the Gender Equality Strategy, the new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion and the Disability Strategy.

Furthermore, the EU institutions should ensure the meaningful engagement of civil society, social partners, children and families in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Europe 2030 Strategy. Particular attention should be paid to the inclusion of children and families experiencing poverty and social exclusion and civil society organisations representing them

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
- ERGO 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 Parents’ Association
- European Public Health Alliance – EPHA
- European Social Network – ESN
- Inclusion Europe
- Lifelong Learning Platform
- Lumos
- Mental Health Europe
- Make Mothers Matter
- Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)
- Roma Education Fund
- Save the Children
- SOS Children’s Villages International.

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