



CONCEPT NOTE

CHILD WELL-BEING FROM A DIACONAL PERSPECTIVE

February 2016

Context of child well-being in the EU

Why this document?

Eurodiaconia members as diaconal service providers have extensive experience in supporting child well-being at national, regional and local level, running among others kindergartens, schools and facilities for children requiring special care. In the preceding years, Eurodiaconia and its members have used this experience to exchange best practices and views on how child well-being can be ensured.

Based on this work, the concept note will examine how members see child well-being from a diaconal perspective, and how both members and Eurodiaconia can be engaged in the discussion on a European level. This is especially relevant now as the discussion around child well-being on a European level has been renewed by certain events again, among others by the recent refugee movements which bring many more children in need of help, and by the European Parliament who issued a written declaration to bring child well-being back on the agenda of the EU in general. The following concept note will outline the context of child well-being in the EU, the work of Eurodiaconia and its members on the topic, the added value of the diaconal approach and next potential steps to be pursued.

Why is the topic important?

Child poverty has for long been a severe issue in the European Union, and since the financial crisis, the numbers are still on the rise. Nowadays, **one in four children** in the European Union (27,7%) are **at risk of poverty and social exclusion**, which amounts up to 26 million children in total¹. Children experiencing poverty or social exclusion have to suffer from a range of **disadvantages as compared to other children**: They are restricted in performing well at school, enjoying good health and realizing their full potential in later life, as the European Commission recommendation 'Investing in Children- Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' has outlined². The refugee crisis has **increased the number of children at risk of poverty** and in urgent need of help even more: In 2015, more than **250,000 children applied for asylum** in the EU³, with **more than 10,000 unaccompanied minors**⁴.

These developments have not only a severe impact on the future of the children, but also on the future of the European Union which wastes potential and misses the chance to prevent that poverty is passed from one generation to the next.

What does the EU do?

The EU has made major improvements in expanding its scope to address child well-being in Europe. The most important development is the **incorporation of children's rights into the Treaty on the Functioning of the**

¹ Eurostat (2015). *People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex*. Brussels: European Commission

² European Commission (2013). *Commission recommendation of 20.02.2013. Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. Brussels: European Commission

³ Eurostat (2015). *Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex Monthly data (rounded)*. Brussels: European Commission

⁴ DG Migration and Home Affairs (2015). *Unaccompanied minors in the EU*. Brussels: European Commission





European Union (Article 3), mentioning the protection of children's rights as a major aim. Furthermore, the **European Charter of Fundamental Rights** was integrated into the EU legal framework, thereby receiving a binding character⁵. As a result, all EU policies must be developed and implemented considering the child's best interests. In addition, all EU member states have ratified the **UN Convention on the rights of the child**. Although the EU itself is not a party to the convention, the European Court of Justice requires EU law to take account of the UN Convention. Furthermore, there are initiatives of the Council of Europe supporting children's rights, for example the **Convention on the Exercise of Children's rights**⁶ which presents measures to help children exercise their procedural rights, and the **Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms**⁷ which includes several provisions relevant for children.

Next to legal considerations, the EU furthermore adopted several operational initiatives, such as the **Alliance for Children**⁸ which was created to promote the mainstreaming of children's well-being in the legislative procedures of the European Parliament. The EU also **targets children within its overall strategies**, such as Europe 2020 which includes education as well as fight against poverty and social exclusion in its main targets. In order to achieve these aims, **EU funding is made available to specifically benefit children**, and further funding schemes such as the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) and the European Social Fund (ESF) can be used to finance projects improving children's lives. The European Commission developed a recommendation in 2013 to monitor and give advice on how to best use EU funding to support children, called '**Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage**'⁹. Country-specific reports and recommendations are produced in line with the recommendation which aim to support Member States with the implementation. The Commission furthermore established an online platform to collect and disseminate innovative practices, called **European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC)**.

Just recently, the recommendation was pulled back into the spotlight when members of the **European Parliament issued a written declaration on investing in children**, calling for greater attention to address child poverty and implementing the Commission recommendation on investing in children. The declaration was closed with majority and will be forwarded to the Council and Commission for consideration in the near future, thereby **renewing the attention to child poverty in the EU**.

Why is it crucial to address this issue as Eurodiaconia?

Child well-being is an **inherent part of all of Eurodiaconia's policy themes**, ranging from Roma inclusion to financial inclusion and homelessness. Many of Eurodiaconia's members provide services on child well-being and pursue advocacy efforts on behalf of children, reflecting their interest in working on this topic. Furthermore, Eurodiaconia is **well-connected on the European level** with other actors active on the topic of child well-being and thus has considerable opportunities for exchanging knowledge and pursuing joint efforts.

Eurodiaconia furthermore bears a **great potential in supporting child well-being at a European level**, especially with regard to the European Commission's recommendation 'Investing and children' and the related platform EPIC: It is experienced in encouraging the exchange of best practices, it has a wide network of members on the local level who know what works best and what does not, and most importantly who can judge the developments in their member states with regard to the implementation of the recommendation on investing in children. Thus, **Eurodiaconia could effectively support the Commission's fight against child poverty** by sharing best practice examples of members and channeling information and progress of the recommendation's implementation by member states to the Commission. For its members, Eurodiaconia could in return **monitor and follow-up on the developments of the Commission on child well-being** and keep members informed about funding opportunities

⁵ Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Luxembourg: European Union

⁶ Council of Europe (1996). European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

⁷ European Court of Human Rights (1950). European Convention on Human Rights. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

⁸ European Parliament (2011). EP alliance to protect children in Europe and beyond. Strasbourg: European Parliament

⁹ European Commission (2013). Commission recommendation of 20.02.2013. Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Brussels: European Commission



within the framework of investing in children. The members can furthermore use the recommendation and exchange of information about its implementation in different countries to pressure their own governments.

Eurodiaconia and Members' work on child well-being

Eurodiaconia works on the topic of child well-being on a European level. One field of action is **advocacy work**: Eurodiaconia cooperates with other NGOs in the sector to **encourage the adoption of more child-friendly policies by the European Union**. One of the most recent examples is the co-signing of a letter to European decision-makers to ensure the consideration of child well-being in migration policies. Furthermore, Eurodiaconia is part of the '**EU Alliance for Investing in Children**', a coalition of over 20 European organisations fighting for the end of child poverty, with the specific target to encourage member states to adopt the Commission recommendation 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'. In cooperation with the Alliance, **press releases and toolkits** were produced, for example an **advocacy and implementation toolkit**. Eurodiaconia was also active in promoting the recommendation prior to 2013 by writing briefings and participating in stakeholder consultations. Next to direct advocacy work, Eurodiaconia publishes **reports and mappings** related to child well-being. On a final note, **child well-being is a recurrent scheme within other specialised networks**, such as Roma inclusion or marginalisation and exclusion. Several meetings in the past have discussed these themes with a focus on children and families.

Eurodiaconia **members provide a wide range of services to ensure child well-being** in their countries, including the provision of **basic services** in forms of kindergartens and schools, the provision of **specialised help for marginalised groups** such as Roma and migrant children, **emergency support** in form of housing and food as well as services indirectly supporting children and **families**, such as marriage and debt counselling. Members of **Diakonie Deutschland** for example ran 545.717 child care services, 9.200 day care centres, and more than a thousand facilities for family aid in Germany already in 2013. Next to **specialised help** for children, Diakonie Deutschland furthermore is active in support for disabled people and medical care of which children benefit as well¹⁰. The knowledge and expertise of child care services and the national political situation is used for **advocacy work** in form of position papers.

Another example is the **Church of Sweden** which offers a wide range of activities and services for children as well, including pre-school activities and nursery schools. In 2013, 1.9 million children aged 0 to 19 were able to benefit from the Church of Sweden's **drop-in activities** alone¹¹. The Church of Sweden furthermore ensures quality work by arranging network meetings for committed employees and by preparing them with a **child impact assessment**. This assessment was included into the general synod of the church and serves as a tool to evaluate and inform persons in authority of their decisions' consequences for children. Thereby, the **best interest of children** is considered and worked towards in all related areas of work. Another important area of work is the **advocacy for children's rights** on a national and international level.

A further example of a member organisation active in the field of child well-being is the **City Mission Gothenburg** which offers a **variety of services for children**, including short-term economic support and long-term social and family programs. A special target **are children growing up in vulnerable environments**. In Sweden, it is a common experience that young parents visit open pre-schools only to a limited extent, being so much younger and more often having a higher exposure in the form of lack of education, uncertain economy and insecure housing. Therefore, it can be difficult to identify with parents being 10 to 15 years older who often have a more stable external situation. The City Mission Gothenburg in reaction initiated a project which brings together **young parents and their children in a pre-school** in Gothenburg, offering them a safe place where they can meet others in the same situation and age. Furthermore, a **separate meeting space for children and their fathers** was opened as fathers are a neglected group within family structures, to the detriment of themselves, their children and the child's mother.

¹⁰ Diakonie Deutschland (2013). Diakonie Deutschland at a glance. Berlin: Diakonie Deutschland: Evangelischer Bundesverband

¹¹ Church of Sweden (2013). AR Review and financial summary 2013. The national level of the Church of Sweden. Uppsala: Church of Sweden



Added value of the diaconal approach

There are different ways to support children and many initiatives in place by a wide range of actors, including governmental and non-governmental, church-based and non-church based, for-profit and not-for-profit as well as specialized organizations on children's rights as opposed to more diversified organizations in the social sphere. This raises the question what the added value of the diaconal approach is, and why recommendations and input from diaconal actors are specifically valuable when discussing child well-being. Although Eurodiaconia members pursue different approaches and projects to help children, several common characteristics can be drawn out which highlight the specificities of the diaconal approach:

Inclusive and unconditional services in the spirit of God

First of all, the diaconal approach is pursued in the spirit of God and unconditional love and thus makes no difference between people, independent of their wealth, origin, status or religion. They provide services based on **values and not on financial incentives**. The project of the City Mission Gothenburg is a good example of how people at the outskirts of society are specifically targeted and included, **representing a way church-based and diaconal services offer places of protection and warmth without asking anything back**. Unconditional help is especially important for children who mostly have no control over their situation and are completely dependent on their parents and outside help. As the Church of Sweden has recalled, “[t]he idea that children have a special status is strongly anchored in Christian faith. ‘Let the children come to me,’ says Jesus”¹².

Integrated approach to child well-being

Diaconal services are often part of a **wide network** which provides a range of different social services as opposed to only providing specialized help for children, targeting for example parents and family life as well as other issues related to children such as inclusion and over-indebtedness. This **allows diaconal actors to consider child well-being throughout all these areas** and thereby not only provide direct help for the child, but also to provide them with a safe environment to grow up in. A great example of this is the Church of Sweden who applies a child impact assessment throughout all its work areas in order to ensure that the best interest of the child is always considered. This enables a **more comprehensive and long-term support** to child well-being. As the participants of the Marginalization & Exclusion network meeting 2012 have noted, “[i]t is easier for people to speak about ‘helping children’ than about changing the way society works and the tax system, but it is necessary to work with the families as well because children can’t develop and live well if the mother and family are not supported. **Child poverty is a symptom of a bigger problem.**”¹³ Another factor which contributes to a comprehensive approach to child well-being is the fact that diaconal service providers **not only offer economic, but also social support** to children in need. The church-based environment can provide a feeling of belonging and an established place in the community where **children can experience the affection and attention they need**; material things such as food or clothing are never enough to ensure child well-being.

In-depth knowledge about the situation in the community

Church and diaconal actors usually have a long history in their country and could develop knowledge and networks over a long time span; they thus are **deeply rooted within the community** and local level and have direct contact to people in need of help. They know about the situation and dynamics on the ground and **can adapt their services to these specific needs and demands**. This enables them to provide tailor-made, long-term support for individuals and the community as opposed to limited, one-size-fits-all projects which less rooted organisations tend to provide. The City Mission Gothenburg provided a good example of how this works in practice: The very specific knowledge on the lack of support for young parents and single fathers inspired them to set up a project for this target group only. These **tailor-made approaches** are especially important for children as they often have very specific needs which need to be addressed in order to ensure that they can **develop their full potentials**.

¹² Church of Sweden (2013). AR Review and financial summary 2013. The national level of the Church of Sweden. Uppsala: Church of Sweden

¹³ Eurodiaconia (2012). Marginalization and Exclusion Network meeting. Brussels: Eurodiaconia



Unbiased advocacy on behalf of children

Diaconal service providers **operate independently and across all political parties** which allows them to pursue unbiased advocacy work. Furthermore, the in-depth knowledge of the local and national political context in combination with long-term, specialised work in different areas enables diaconal actors to see **how and if policies and recommendations are implemented** and can evaluate what needs to be changed. This knowledge is used for the formulation of position papers and advocacy efforts. One example of a strong advocating actor is Diakonie Deutschland which combines the specialised knowledge on child well-being and the national political landscape to advocate for policy change. **Giving voice to concerns of children is especially important as (mainly young-aged) children cannot do so by themselves.** They have to rely on others to know and claim their rights, and diaconal service providers, having an independent, informed and selfless stance, therefore have the best requirements to advocate for the most vulnerable in society.

Next potential steps

Eurodiaconia could use the renewed debate around child well-being and the implementation of the **Commission recommendation** to follow-up on its work on the topic as well, thereby joining in on the pressure sent out by the Parliament to make member states implement the recommendation. The last comprehensive input of members and Eurodiaconia on the recommendation was in 2012, prior to the official release of the document. Now that the recommendation is out for several years, a **tracking and evaluation of the progress** would be interesting in order to see what has been changed and what still needs to be changed. Eurodiaconia members are especially suitable for providing such feedback due to the added value of their specialised expertise on child care, child-related services and the national and local context (as mentioned above).

Key questions to be asked could be:

- What are the **most pressing issues** with regard to child well-being in your country and does the recommendation on investing in children mention these issues?
- (How) are the respective member states implementing the recommendation on investing in children?
- What has changed since the launch of the recommendation and what still needs to change?
- Were the **country-specific recommendations (CSRs)**¹⁴ addressed and implemented? (The input of diaconal actors on these would be especially valuable as the CSRs address gaps of overall policy fields influencing child well-being, and thus can be best judged by diaconal actors who have a broad knowledge about different areas of social work as well as the specific national context.)
- How do you evaluate the situation described in the **country reports** produced by the European Social Policy Network? Can you, based on your organisation's experience, verify the information in the reports¹⁵?

Furthermore, a renewed consideration of handing in best practice examples for the **EPIC platform** to which Eurodiaconia is a partner could be fostered, and **advocacy efforts** on behalf of the members could be encouraged, presenting them the EU Alliance toolkits on advocacy and implementation.

¹⁴ Country-specific recommendations are part of the European Semester process of the European Commission which analyse the recent state of play of member states' policy, for chosen states also in the field of child well-being.

¹⁵ The European Social Policy Network is a network which monitors progress towards the EU's social protection and inclusion agenda, including goals on child well-being. They produce reports on the state of play of policies affecting social inclusion for different countries and policy areas.