



POLICY PAPER ON CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Child poverty in Europe today

According to a recent report by UNICEF, more than 13 million children are living in poverty in the European Union (including Norway and Iceland)¹. Furthermore, children in Europe are at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion than the rest of the population (27% against 23% for the total population). According to Eurodiaconia members as well as European Commission's data, children most at risk are from single parent households and large families (3 children and more)². Other children at risk include children from jobless households, underemployed parents or parents' in-work poverty, children with a disability as well as children from a migrant background and ethnic minorities.

Child poverty has increased following the financial and economic crisis in a number of countries, where children have been hit particularly badly by the crisis. This is confirmed by the European Commission data's which reveals that the risk of poverty or social exclusion for children increased by 0.9 % between 2008 and 2010, while it decreased by 0.1% for the total population³. **As the whole population is threatened by persisting unfavourable labour market conditions, accompanied by a decrease in social protection expenditure and a rise in material deprivation⁴, the situation of children in Europe is a genuine urgent concern.**

This concern has recently been highlighted once again at the highest decision making level when the Council of the European Union issued in the summer 2012 a Country Specific Recommendation to the UK and Spain referring specifically to child poverty. There is therefore an urgent need to act now.

Eurodiaconia therefore welcomes the upcoming Recommendation on Child Poverty which will bring a very necessary political momentum and which will set in stone the objective of tackling child poverty, at a time of austerity and when many social safeguards are being sacrificed. **Such a European initiative will also contribute to reaching 3 out of 5 of the Europe 2020 targets for employment, education and poverty and constitutes an investment at European level by strengthening social cohesion, particularly important in the context of the significant demographic challenges.** However, a Recommendation is not enough to tackle child poverty; the Member States must respond with commitment and must put into practice the actions they promise in Council Conclusions. The European Commission must in turn ensure the implementation is effectively monitored.

In this policy paper, we outline some of the main challenges of child poverty based on the experience of our members as providers of social and health services as well as our recommendations for tackling child

¹ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2012), 'Measuring Child Poverty: New league tables of child poverty in the world's rich countries', Innocenti Report Card 10, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.

² Eurodiaconia's marginalisation and exclusion network meeting, April 2012, Stockholm. and European Commission European Employment and social situation quarterly review, March 2012, page72

³ European Employment and social situation quarterly review, March 2012, page71

⁴ European Employment and social situation quarterly review, June 2012





poverty. Our recommendations are based on our belief that all humans are created in the image of God with equal worth and dignity and that each child has God given potential.

What the members say

Eurodiaconia members provide services to hundreds of thousands of people in need across Europe. Amongst them they provide a wide range of child-related services such as families support centres, children's homes, youth work services, after-school programmes, child protection, counselling and many other social services impacting on children and families. They are thus very aware of the realities and causes of poverty and social exclusion among Europe's children.

Eurodiaconia members experience diverse realities of poverty, depending on their local and national contexts. For example Eurodiaconia's member in Armenia would say that one of its main priorities is to provide a safety net for families and children, such as access to basic social and health services, to help lift them out of poverty, whereas in Sweden, the safety net already exists due to a strong welfare state, so integration and inclusion policies are more important.

Our members have witnessed an increase in the demand for social services, in particular for emergency services to meet very basic needs such as food banks which can be described as a "return to poverty". In the context of this 'return to poverty', clearly linked to the economic and financial crisis, it is imperative that measures are taken to ensure the full development of the future and potential of a whole generation of children.

Our members also report that children and families with a migrant background are particularly at risk of poverty and social exclusion. For example in Spain, a few years ago our member saw a clear need to provide courses for social integration of migrants, whereas now the priority need is to provide humanitarian and emergency aid to migrants instead such as providing food and clothes. In Serbia on the other hand, Roma children, and especially girls, are particularly at risk of poverty and exclusion.

Many of our Scandinavian members, in particular in Sweden and Denmark link the issue of child poverty to the broader challenge of integration policies. By helping the child to integrate, Eurodiaconia members in these countries see that the integration of the family also improves and that the impact of poverty can have on the child and his or her family can be mitigated.

Our members also observe the clear link between poverty and social exclusion and that one can lead to the other. In some countries such as Iceland, there may not be children living on the street, but there are families where parents can't afford for their children to participate in extra-curricular activities or leisure pursuits. Disadvantages and unequal opportunities such as these at an early age can lead to future exclusion and can foster an intergenerational poverty cycle. For this reason, Eurodiaconia members support families to enable their children to participate in society, to feel included from a young age, and have the same opportunities as other children in their school or community. Our members also know that beyond the school walls there are gaps to be filled where children need support. After-school clubs to help children with homework when the parents cannot or the youth club that prevents young people from becoming isolated and excluded are invaluable services and need to be recognised.

Recommendations

Eurodiaconia welcomes the Commission's Recommendation on Child Poverty to be proposed by the end of 2012. A specific EU initiative at this time would encourage Member States to address child poverty as a



priority. Therefore in light of the upcoming EU recommendation, Eurodiaconia supports the structure proposed by the European Union and most recently by the Social Protection Committee⁵, of:

1. "Access to adequate resources" that Eurodiaconia understand particularly as access to adequate income support (to families, in particular access to labour market for parents, income support);
2. "Access to quality services" that Eurodiaconia understands as access to quality and affordable services (childcare, education, healthcare, housing, social services)
3. "Children's participation" that Eurodiaconia understands as particularly as social inclusion of children through the enhancing of their participation in leisure and cultural activities.

In particular we want to recommend the EU recommendation to address also the following areas.

1. Access to adequate resources

✓ Support children and Families

Children are not poor by themselves. One of the first determining factors of a child's wellbeing will be the family in which they grow up. A child will struggle to develop or fully participate in life if their family is not supported and is in any way excluded from society. This means that support to children must primarily come from a direct support to the family. Not only is financial support needed, early intervention support and prevention services for families are vital for parents to develop better coping strategies and to learn about good parenting skills. Effective support also requires measures such as an adequate child allowance for every child, which would ensure that children are not disadvantaged by low wages or incomes of the parents or parent, and that larger families in particular are not disadvantaged due to the number of children they have.

Eurodiaconia believes that single parent households and larger families in particular will need supportive measures. However other families need specific support. These include:

- **Families in debt.** Eurodiaconia members have reported that the challenges of everyday life in EU Member States have become too high for some, in particular for families with children. They claim that low levels of income, complexities of the social security systems and inflexible working conditions often appear as causes of the over-indebtedness of families.

- Parents who experience **in-work poverty also need financial support.** Whilst one or both parents may be employed, they can lack sufficient resources to fully support their children. For this reason social transfers should ensure an adequate minimum income for parents and their children.

-Whilst employment is one effective way out of poverty, **for some parents finding work is not an option**, for instance if they have to care for a dependant relative, or if they themselves have a specific disability which prevents them from working. Therefore interventions such as parent support, strengthening family networks or peer support can encourage parents and empower them to continue to support and care for their children.

-Families with **working parents** also need to be able to reconcile family and work life so as not to deprive children of quality time with the parents and to create a secure home environment.

Therefore we recommend that the European Commission:

⁵ [SPC advisory report to the European Commission on tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well being](#), June 2012



- *Expand research and analysis on the advantages and development of family friendly work policies that help to reconcile work and family life*
- *Support the elaboration of a common definition on “adequate minimum income” and the adoption of a Directive on guaranteeing adequate minimum income for all. Building on the 24th June 1992 Recommendation and on the 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation, this directive would ensure universal income support throughout life cycle, enhancing protection against social risk.*

We also recommend that the Member States:

- *Prioritise the introduction/protection of an adequate child allowance for every child and global family support through a balanced mix of social transfers and targeted policies*
- *Ensure that equal access to child care is not dependent on the employment status of the parent.*
- *Support NGOs providing services for families and parenting support.*
- *Implement the active inclusion principles including an adequate minimum income, access to quality services, and inclusive labour markets.*
- *Invest in training, employment schemes and parenting support programmes that can raise not only parents’ qualifications and employability but also help build their parenting skills⁶.*
- *Support family friendly work policies that help to reconcile work and family life.*
- *Simplify access to social security support for families in need in terms of facilitating access to information and reducing administrative hurdles, in order to ensure that all families can access the existing mechanisms of “social safety nets” in their country, despite their income, situation or level of education.*

✓ **A specific focus on particularly vulnerable groups such as migrants and Roma children**

Children with a migrant background who tend to have lower levels of education and health are more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion and will be more likely to have difficulty entering the labour market later in life. Furthermore migrant families have been harder hit by the financial and economic crisis in terms of unemployment. To prevent today’s generation of children from future exclusion, extra measures will be required to ensure social inclusion and safeguards are put in place and to ensure access to their social rights. Member States must prioritise early childhood education and care, as well as addressing early school dropout. The same priorities remain for Roma children in particular who tend to have much lower levels of education and health, low employment rates and severe discrimination in all these areas. Furthermore, participation and dialogue with migrant communities, including children is paramount if we want to build socially cohesive societies.

Therefore we recommend the European Commission:

- *Carries out a European comparative analysis of the impact of integration policies of families and children.*

We also recommend that the Member States:

- *Support local civil society and NGOs who provide integration services for families and children with a migrant background.*
- *Prioritise early childhood education and care and the prevention of early school drop-out among migrant families.*
- *Prioritise bridging the gap between education and employment of migrant families and children*

⁶ Eurochild overall assessment of the SPC advisory report to the EC on “Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being” & suggestions for future actions



2. Access to affordable and quality services

Cuts that we are seeing today in social services are short-sighted and self-defeating. Social services are an essential element of a healthy and functioning society; ensuring children and families can fully participate in society and therefore they need supporting for the well-being of all. Eurodiaconia believes that access to social services is necessary to uphold human dignity and is a fundamental right. This is supported by Part 1 article 14 of the European Social Charter¹ and Article 34 1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights². The European Commission has also recognised the importance of social services in promoting social inclusion and cohesion³. If not addressed through social and health services, child poverty and social exclusion will bear a human cost in terms of lost potential and well-being. Whilst Eurodiaconia understands the needs of governments to take action for budget consolidation, it should not be at the cost of the most vulnerable in our society today as it would lead to more vulnerable people tomorrow.

The Member States should invest in social and health care services and in particular, high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services which are vital to reduce poverty and address development delays among children growing up in families where the parents are struggling to fully meet children's needs. Accessible, affordable and quality ECEC also give parents and single parent families the opportunity to enter the labour market. Again, given the interrelated causes of poverty, access to decent housing services and health care services will certainly impact on a child's success at school and the general wellbeing of the child.

Ensuring all children have equal access to good quality services is key to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Therefore we recommend the European Commission:

- *Includes investment in social and health services and infrastructure in its investment to promote growth*
- *Earmarks part of EU structural funds for investment in social and health services and infrastructure*
- *Improves monitoring at national and EU level of member states' use of EU funds to ensure that projects benefit those they are meant to target*

We also recommend the Member States

- *Invest in high quality ECEC and after-school services*
- *Earmark part of EU structural funds for investment in social and health services and infrastructure*

3. Child's participation and well being

Participation beyond school is essential for a child's development and confidence. Children have the right to enjoy cultural, social, sporting and leisure activities to ensure equal opportunities from a young age and to prevent social exclusion. For this reason, services such as high-quality after-school services, youth clubs and community work should be supported and invested in. It is essential to tap into full potential of all young people, and enable them to discover their skills and interests from an early age.

It is also important to remember that children are part of civil society and are often engaged in and influenced by civil society organisations such as churches, youth clubs, community centres, and sports clubs for example. The European Commission therefore should encourage member states to facilitate cooperation between NGOs, local authorities, schools and other civil society working with and for children. This would enable NGOs to maximise the impact of their work. This is not the current situation in all countries where these bodies are not allowed to exchange information or there is a lack of interdisciplinary teams. Such as administrative barriers which impair the work of all actors (NGOs, schools, local authorities, etc) trying to join their efforts to work with and for children, on an individually tailor based approach, and trying to respond to



their interlinked needs such as education, housing, and health, etc. These difficulties have particularly been highlighted by Eurodiaconia members in Serbia and Finland. Following the principle of user empowerment in services, we also believe children should, when possible and appropriate be encouraged to participate actively in decision making processes concerning their welfare. This also encourages children to think and act responsibly and to take ownership of the services and support they receive.

Child well-being is more than just about meeting material needs; children also have social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual needs. New ways of thinking about well-being are currently being developed and are known as “beyond GDP” measures or indicators, which take into account social and environmental dimensions. Eurodiaconia believes that there are more social and inclusive indicators for measuring “progress” in the EU than GDP which should be considered when measuring child poverty and well-being.

Therefore we recommend that the European Commission:

- *Continues to look at measuring progress with indicators which go “beyond GDP”*

We also recommend that the Member States

- *Foster dialogue and cooperation between local authorities, public institutions and civil society*
- *Where appropriate, children should be involved in shaping policies that concerns their welfare*

4. Active inclusion: the guarantee of an integrated approach

Eurodiaconia believes that the **active inclusion** strategy has real potential for ensuring an integrated approach to addressing child and family poverty, based on the three pillars of adequate minimum income, access to quality services, and inclusive labour markets. However, based on research carried out among our members in 2012⁷, we see that many countries in the EU are not yet managing to implement the principles in an *integrated* way.

Given the multi-dimensional and interrelated nature of child poverty (health, housing, education) on a child’s wellbeing, Eurodiaconia stresses the need for an integrated and holistic approach. It is important to have an integrated approach and communication at ministerial level. Often the ministry of social affairs is separated from ministry of health, but often social and health issues are strongly interrelated. For example, a health mediator such as a nurse who visits a Roma settlement also needs to be a trained social worker who can give greater support and advice to Roma families for example. A multi-dimensional approach would also mean that housing policy must work to break down ghettos where marginalisation festers and school segregation persists.

Therefore we recommend that the European Commission:

- *Ensures that the Member States implement the Active Inclusion strategy to support families and children to be better integrated in society through efficient monitoring and political incentive.*
- *Continues to look at measuring progress with indicators which go “beyond GDP”*
- *Continue to monitor the evolution of child poverty in the European Union through the European Platform against Poverty, and make Member States accountable for these developments.*

We also recommend that the Member States

- *Identify child poverty as a particular priority in their National Reform Programmes*
- *Implement the principles of the Active Inclusion strategy*

⁷ [Eurodiaconia’s assessment of the implementation of the Active Inclusion Recommendation](#)



Conclusion

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty can only happen through an integrated policy approach and by tackling the structural barriers which create social inequalities that persist across Europe. The prioritisation of child poverty is decisive at EU level not only as a means of **protecting vulnerable** children today but also an **investment** for tomorrow's Europe as we break the cycle of poverty and increase the social return on investment for society. Research shows that the cost of non-inclusion is higher than that of inclusion, and that NOT investing on the most vulnerable has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. Member States must understand that investing in children is an investment for everyone and the benefits will outweigh the initial costs. The prioritisation of child poverty is thus decisive across Europe not only as a means of protecting vulnerable children today but also both an investment for the future.