

Taking stock of the European
Commission recommendation
‘Investing in children: breaking
the cycle of disadvantage’
(2013/112/EU)

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Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic**, Europe-wide **community** of organisations founded in the **Christian faith** and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of **solidarity**, **equality** and **justice**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.



We bring members together to **share practices**, **impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

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Eurodiaconia takes stock of the “Investing in Children” recommendation

State of play of the implementation of the European Commission recommendation “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage” (2013/112/EU) in 2017

Who are we?

Eurodiaconia is a European network of 46 member organisations active in over 30 European countries, including churches, non-profit welfare organisations and NGOs. Eurodiaconia members provide services to hundreds of thousands of people across Europe aimed at enabling inclusion, care and empowerment of the most vulnerable, including a wide range of child-related services. These encompass kindergartens, kids clubs and homework support, family support, debt counselling, children’s homes, youth work services, after-school programmes, and care facilities for children with special needs as well as emergency support in the form of housing and food aid. Eurodiaconia members play an important part in tackling child poverty by supporting child well-being at the national, regional and local level.

Unequal opportunities at an early age translate into unequal lifelong outcomes, as they are likely to lead to future social exclusion by fostering an intergenerational poverty cycle. For this reason, Eurodiaconia members enable families to help their children participate in society and enjoy equal opportunities from a very young age.

Why this stocktaking?

Eurodiaconia has contributed to the adoption of the Investing in Children recommendation and is currently working with our members to monitor its implementation by identifying effective policies and practices addressing child and family poverty.

At the European level, Eurodiaconia is also a member of the “EU Alliance for Investing in Children,” which brings together 23 European networks sharing a commitment to end child poverty and to promote child well-being across Europe. As such, Eurodiaconia supported the adoption of the 2015 European Parliament Written Declaration on Investing in Children (No. 0042/2015), which calls the European Commission to introduce specific indicators on children at risk of poverty and urges EU Member States to use EU funding to implement the Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. Child well-being is mainstreamed also in Eurodiaconia’s policy work, for instance as far as Roma inclusion, financial inclusion, migrant integration and the European Pillar of Social Rights are concerned.

What is Eurodiaconia's specific approach?

Eurodiaconia members share common values through their work as service providers and active advocates of children's rights and child well-being. This specific approach is the base for high-quality social services provision and advocacy principles calling for a policy framework centered on child well-being¹:

1. *Equality and non-discrimination*

The diaconal approach, based on shared Christian origins and beliefs, regards all humans as being equal in dignity and value, without regard to wealth, age, origin, status, religion or belief. Diaconal organisations provide services based on personal values and rights and not on financial incentives. Providing unconditional support to all individuals is especially important for children, as they are completely dependent on their parents and external aid.

2. *Integrated approach to child well-being*

Our members offer a wide range of social services to children instead of a limited number of specialized ones. In doing so, they empower families and therefore children, by tackling a variety of issues that ultimately impact children. For instance, Eurodiaconia members provide debt-related services to help families become debt free and support to prevent early school leaving. They also assist children who leave school early. They provide both emergency support (e.g. housing and food aid) and long-term integration services (e.g. language courses or advice on how to access the labour market) to

migrants and refugees. This allows diaconal actors to contribute to child well-being across all these areas and thereby not only to help children directly, but also to provide them with a safe environment to grow up in. For this purpose, diaconal organisations work with families because they believe children cannot develop their full potential if their families are not supported. Diaconal service providers do not only offer economic, but also social support.

3. *Tailor-made support to the community*

Churches and diaconal actors usually have an in-depth knowledge of their country and community, which has enabled them to build strong networks over a long time span. Therefore, they are deeply rooted within the community at the local level, which allows them to maintain direct contacts with people in need. As they have a sound understanding of the local context, they are able to adapt their services to those specific needs and demands. This enables them to provide tailor-made, long-term support for individuals and the community at the grassroots level.

4. *Unbiased advocacy on behalf of children*

Diaconal service providers operate independently and across the political spectrum to pursue unbiased advocacy strategies. Their extensive knowledge of the local and national political context, in combination with a long-term, specialized approach, enables diaconal actors to monitor policy implementation, and to evaluate what needs to be changed. This knowledge nourishes the formulation of position papers and advocacy efforts.

¹ Eurodiaconia's concept note on child well-being from a diaconal perspective, 2016

State of Play as of January 2017, by country

Eurodiaconia members were asked to evaluate key developments in their national legislative framework in relation to the three pillars listed in the recommendation:

- **Access to adequate resources** (in terms of supporting parents' participation in the labour market and providing for adequate living standards through a combination of benefits);
- **Access to affordable quality services** (to reduce inequalities through early childhood education and care, to improve the impact of education on enhancing equal opportunities, to improve the responsiveness of the healthcare system in addressing the needs of disadvantaged children, to provide children with a safe and adequate housing and living environment).
- **Children's right to participate** (in terms of supporting children's participation in leisure, recreational, sport and cultural activities, and enabling them to participate in the decision-making affecting their lives).

Key messages: some positive steps but more to be done

In Eurodiaconia members' experience, the European Commission Recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" (2013/112/EU) has generally had a positive if limited impact. Important gaps remain and more efforts and investment are

crucial for a better implementation of the recommendation.

- **Access to adequate resources**
Some Eurodiaconia members have referred to the improvement of financial support to children and families (Romania, Poland and Germany for single parent families) as well as measures that are more effective for children with disabilities (Czech Republic)
- **Access to affordable quality services**
Eurodiaconia members remain positive as to the implementation of the second pillar of the recommendation, especially concerning free health care for children (Poland, Romania), and better support for pre-school care (Poland, Sweden).
- **Children's right to participate**
Eurodiaconia members report different realities. Some members insist on the need for better public investment, e.g. in extracurricular activities enabling access to sport and cultural activities (Spain, Sweden, Poland). Others highlight the inequalities and difficulties faced by children in accessing leisure and recreational activities (Germany).

However, members also highlight some of the shortcomings of the recommendation in addressing the need to support parents in balancing their work and family roles. On this point, the implementation of the recommendation is more contested. For instance, Czech Republic and Poland have developed new and successful forms of parental leave. However, Poland is facing the emerging issue of "Euro-orphans" that is not addressed by the recommendation. Similarly, many Member States have achieved

some progress as regards the development of pre-school care, even though it remains circumscribed.

Finally yet importantly, Eurodiaconia members have highlighted the shortcomings of their national policies in reaching out to most vulnerable children. They reiterated the need for increasing and more effective political efforts and financial investment aimed to support children from the most unprivileged backgrounds (France, Germany, Sweden, Spain).

Czech Republic (Slezska Diakonie)

“There are some improvements in the support of disadvantaged children, but certain processes are rather slow or constrained”

According to Slezska Diakonie, support for children with disabilities is a priority topic at national level. The Czech Parliament held meetings to discuss early intervention measures, the role of social services and the need for a stronger role of the education system.

1- Access to adequate resources

- The Czech Parliament has proposed a new legislation on parental leave enabling fathers to stay home with the mother and child for 7 days during the first 6 weeks after birth.
- As the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs recognized the benefits of part-time jobs for mothers. Part-time contracts will now be encouraged to ensure working conditions similar to those enjoyed under full-time jobs.
- Pre-school education is now compulsory (attendance in the kindergarten is compulsory for children in the last year before going to school).
- A reform of the child protection law (2013) supports development of foster care, so that children at risk do not have to be placed in institutions. The priority goes to placement into foster families. Slezska Diakonie is one of

Eurodiaconia Czech members and works with 170 foster families, with the support of government funding.

2- Access to affordable quality services

- On regional level, policies support early intervention services, but this is not backed up by funding, therefore service providers are struggling.
- The eastern regional authority (Ostrava) is running a project granting support and education to families with a disabled child. The project is financed by the EU Structural Funds and focuses on professional and informal caregivers' education, as well as on early care intervention and self-helping groups' education and support.
- Early intervention services are systemically valued and prioritized.
- There is an ongoing debate in Czech Republic about inclusion into the mainstream educational systems. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports launched a legislation for mainstream schools to enable children with disabilities to attend the school. However, schools are not ready for this step yet. This situation brings a crucial debate in Czech Republic.
- Cooperation between families and early intervention services (within health care services) remains a challenge. The families do not maintain contacts with social service providers, so in the early stage. Eurodiaconia is working on promoting cooperation with the health care system, but the process is rather slow.

Sweden (Church of Sweden)

“Increasing gaps between different income groups”

Sweden has a well-developed welfare state that has contributed to its position as one of the most equal countries in the world in terms of economic, social and cultural equality.

According to the church of Sweden, there are large government transfer systems supporting families, such as financial compensation to children's illness, parental leave after the childbirth and child allowances. In addition, free municipal childcare is accessible to all children, which aims at ensuring them a good upbringing and equal opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background.

On the other hand, the Church of Sweden experience has often confirmed existing research findings (e.g. Malmö University, Professor Tapio Salonen) that over the last thirty years, economic inequality has largely affected those groups where parents are either long-term sick, unemployed or were born abroad and arrived later to the Swedish labour market, as compared to more advantaged groups. This situation, which has become increasingly evident in the suburbs of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, shows the insufficient policy efficiency and the limits of the European Commission Recommendation in reaching out to some of the most excluded.

Spain (Diaconia España)

“The efforts made in favor of families are insufficient, therefore there is a need to invest more financial resources in the fight against child poverty”

Diaconia España voices its experience as member of the “**Plataforma de Organizaciones de Infancia**” (www.plataformadeinfancia.org), which comments on specific legislative initiatives addressing children and their families. On the other hand, Diaconia España report that since the economic crisis has hit hard many low and middle-class families, the issue of intergenerational transmission of poverty is an increasingly serious concern in the country. The efforts made in favor of families are insufficient, and as mentioned in the EC 2016 Country Report on Spain, children represent the **largest group at risk of poverty**. For this reason, **there is a need to invest more financial resources to fight child poverty and to endorse a State Pact for Children (Pacto de Estado por la Infancia)**. The hope is to have the **Pacto de Estado por la Infancia** endorsed by the new Spanish government by the end of 2017.

Diaconia España has identified the following documents and legislations as the most relevant in implementing the principles laid down in the Investing in Children recommendation:

1. Access to adequate resources

The reform the system of child and adolescent protection is based on legislative innovation (Ley Orgánica 8/2015, 22 July) and the modification of the system of protection of childhood and adolescence, (BOE of 23 July 2015), and law 26/2015 of 28 July, and the modification of the system of protection of childhood and adolescence (July 29, 2015 BOE). This is complemented by the “Social support and services for families 2016 guide” published by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, containing information on family benefits from Social Security, and employment

benefits (pages 36-41). Other key documents are the National Childhood and Adolescence 2013-2016 Strategic Plan presented by the Ministry and the “Information about living conditions in Spain” **by the National Statistics Institute (INE)**.

2. Access to quality affordable services

The 2016 social support and services for families guide published by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality refers to services related to health and housing, as well as scholarships and study grants (pages 73-104).

3. Children’s right to participate

Spain has various initiatives in favour of child participation, such as the resources provided in **the aforementioned point 1, guide of social support and resources for families** (page 108-128). In addition, there are public resources and associations that have launched projects including scholarships for extracurricular activities, which allows families at risk or in a situation of social exclusion to participate in sport and cultural activities.

France (Fédération de l’Entraide Protestante)

“The role of school in educating youth is a crucial issue: in France we have about 300 000 cases of early school leaving between 16 and 25 years old: how can we give a future to these young people without qualifications?”

According to the European Commission country report, France generally scores highly in terms of social policies tackling poverty, social exclusion and inequalities, thanks to a rather fair policy of

social benefits, which has a positive impact also on people with a migrant background. According to OECD data, France is also one of the countries where participation in early childhood education benefits pupils with a migrant background the most.

However, according to **Fédération de l’Entraide Protestante (FEP)**, one of the main issues to address is the prevention of early school leaving. The system lacks safeguards to prevent early school leaving. Each year, 300.000 students leave education early, without any professional qualification. A reform of the education system is currently under consideration.

In addition, the FEP underlines the lack of social support for families and future parents in their role and identifies this aspect as **one of the main challenges for the lifelong personal development of citizens from an underprivileged background**.

The FEP insists on the need to prevent, when possible, the institutionalisation of children to avoid the risk of social exclusion as future adults. This can be achieved through greater investment in family support. When care within the family is an issue, more investment is needed to foster care, away from institutional care. The experience and data from the FEP have demonstrated that approximately 1/3 of people in homeless shelters had lived in institutions and/or been cared by public services during their childhood.

A third point of concern raised by the Federation is the **lack of equality in access to housing and job market for young people**. The objective of the housing policy to ensure decent housing to all individuals is only partially achieved, as the “housing deposit” system often

creates difficulties for young people to find housing solutions. Besides, youth unemployment remains a key concern.

Germany (Diakonie Deutschland)

"The rate of child poverty in Germany is alarming; so far policy has not succeeded in improving the situation of poor families. The current policy instruments are not enough to avoid child and youth poverty."

The German government does not refer explicitly to the European Commission Recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" (2013/112/EU), however some of its principles are implemented through its actions. Diakonie Deutschland keeps working on embedding the principles of the recommendation into the policy framework to fight child poverty at a national level.

1. Access to adequate resources

- In 2017 the German government will publish its report on Poverty and Wealth in which refers to EU SILC statistics and acknowledges the need for a proactive approach against child poverty and destitution. Diakonie Deutschland was consulted on the preparation of this report.
- Evidence shows that **despite economic growth, child and family poverty has remained at a high level and has actually increased in some parts of Germany.** Diakonie Deutschland

has called for independent and uniform financial support for all children and young people as a part of the reform of the "Hartz IV" instrument, to safeguard their basic financial needs and social involvement.

- In January 2017, the German government adopted a change to legislation that favours children whose parents are separated and yet who do not receive **child support** (for example because the parent not living with the child does not meet his or her obligations to pay maintenance). In this situation, the parent living with the child is entitled to maintenance support from local authorities. However, in the past this mechanism only applied until the child reached 12 years old. Now, thanks to the new legislation, it will be applied up to the age of 18. Parents failing to pay maintenance are required to refund the local authority. This is easier for the mother or father living with the child as it avoids them having to take the other parent to court. This is a key change for single parents and their children. Diakonie Deutschland fought intensively for this change in the law, which will take effect on July 1st, 2017.

2. Children's right to participate

Diakonie Deutschland has initiated a study by an external academic showing that the money paid as minimum income for long-term unemployed or

granted to households with one or more parents in long-term unemployment is not enough to cover basic human needs. In particular, children do not receive the money they need to fully participate in education, leisure, social and health activities, based on a human rights approach.

More information on this is available here: <https://info.diakonie.de/presse/pressemitteilung/en/pm/anhebung-des-kinderregelsatzes-foerdern/>

Poland (Diakonia – Polska)

“As with every social phenomenon, economic emigration has both positive and negative consequences. Positive consequences include improving the family’s financial status, but the negative ones concern long-lasting separation, which weakens family bonds and gives children the feeling of abandonment by parents. This is the case of the so-called ‘euro-orphans’”.

Diakonia Polska underlines that child poverty represents a serious concern in the country, referring to the UNICEF “Innocenti” report. Children in Poland represent one of the social groups with the highest risk of poverty, given a poverty rate of about 5.5 percent points higher than the rest of the population. When accessing the Polish system of social protection, a large proportion of children are left at risk of poverty due to lack of adequate income support in Poland. Policies from the last years have been uncertain in their directions, in spite of some improvements. Diakonia Polska had been monitoring the implementation of the Investing in Children recommendation and highlights the following legislative developments.

1. Access to adequate resources

Benefits to improve living conditions are primarily provided through direct cash allocations in Poland. These include family allowances, grants for childbirth (often labelled as “baby bonus”) and allowances for children with disabilities and for their carers who have to give up work; benefits from the Alimony fund and tax credit for children.

- Since 2013, the government has intensified allocations for kindergartens, with a programme financing additional hours of care for only 1 PLN (€ 0.20).
- In 2016, the current national government introduced an additional allocation of 500 PLN (€ 115), as a monthly child allowance for every second child per family, which would contribute to fostering equal opportunities and financial support for families.
- Other allocations of adequate resources regard parental leave (26 weeks for mothers and 2 extra weeks for fathers).
- The current education reform, which raised the school entry age from six to seven years, represents a negative measure in terms of equal opportunities, as children in families with lower socio-economic status and from rural areas normally benefit the most of early schooling (there is strong evidence that early learning is crucial for later school and labour market success).

Regarding the child's right to access resources, the recommendation mentions "*quality, inclusive employment and a working environment that enables parents to balance their work and parenting roles on an equal footing*". Diakonia Polska points out the very alarming problem of children growing up without the care of one or both the parents, due to the massive emigration that Poland has faced since it joined the EU in 2004. It is estimated that the problem of the so called "Euro-orphans" concerns every fifth child in Poland, with a rate that tends to increase, especially in the south-east of the country. This long-lasting separation of children from their parents can have dramatic consequences for the child's wellbeing and their future. Family support centres address this problem only partially. Diakonia Polska provides, among others, family therapy consultations.

2. Access to quality affordable services

- Institutional care for children from 3 years old is not sufficiently developed in Poland, despite the apparent efforts of the current government. In recent years, new solutions have been introduced (day care, mini-nurseries, etc.), however results are not completely satisfactory. Still a little over 3% of the youngest children are under care for at least 30 hours per week.
- Education at primary and secondary levels faces several obstacles. The sharp decline in the number of students due to the negative demographic trend has led to many schools closing down, especially in rural areas.

Additional issues concern the controversial content of school curricula, the education of students with disabilities and the insufficient financial assistance to students.

- Regarding **access to health care services, all children/young people under the age of 18 are entitled to free basic services financed by the State**. This appears more effective and efficient when it comes to healthcare for babies and children than it does for teenagers, especially in the field of prevention (vaccinations, regular health checks), and basic treatment. Unfortunately, the lack of specialist physicians remains a serious problem.

3. Children's right to participate

- The governmental project "Orlik", aiming at providing every municipality with a playground with a football and basketball/volleyball field has considerably increased the opportunities for active recreation. Visible inequalities remain in terms of access to kindergartens, where, especially in big cities, the lack of available places remains a challenge. Moreover, the **offer of extracurricular activities at school** remains highly unequal and different for children from urban and rural areas.

Romania

(Episcopia Reformata din Ardeal)

Episcopia Reformata din Ardeal reports a clear improvement in the legislation regarding the benefit system for children, despite serious inequalities among vulnerable groups such as Roma children and children from poor families. These groups continue to face significant obstacles in accessing and completing education, especially in rural areas. Vulnerable groups such as families in rural communities, Roma families, institutionalised children and people with disabilities rank significantly below the rest of the population in access to education, completion rates and performance.

Since 2013, the legislation in the field of social benefits to children and families has changed three times, mainly increasing the resource benefit and developing efforts to increase participation of disadvantaged children in early childhood education and care. These improvements are in accordance with the reforms pointed out in the 2016 EC Country Report on Romania and respond to a very urgent need, as Romania ranks among the very first countries in the EU as regards child poverty and social exclusion.

Following on legislative changes, children now receive an indemnity of 84 lei (about € 19) per month until 18-year age, while children with disabilities receive 200 lei (€44.50). Parents have right to an indemnity equivalent to 85% of their average income (based on the 12^o month before birth income) until the child reaches 2 years. Legislation has recently changed.

Every child has access to free health insurance and education until 18-year-old, which can be

extended even longer if children remain in education.

The relevant laws are law 34/1998 on social subvention from public funds of NGOs, law 292/2011 on the social assistance and protection, law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, and law 448/2006 on the protection of persons with disabilities. They were all reviewed in 2015 and 2016. Resources allocated have more than doubled since 2013.

CONCLUSION

Eurodiaconia has strongly welcomed the 2013 European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children, which brought about a very necessary political momentum. Three years on, Eurodiaconia is glad to report on positive developments achieved at the national level following on the implementation of the European instrument.

However, much more is left to be done, and Eurodiaconia, in line with the “EU Alliance for Investing in Children”, recommends

- 1- The adoption of an EU roadmap for the implementation of the recommendation to establish specific objectives and timeline, highlighting the role of different actors and government levels.
- 2- Eurodiaconia also urges the European Commission to work towards the

adoption of child well-being indicators, following on the adoption of the 2015 European Parliament Written Declaration on Investing in Children (No. 0042/2015), which calls the European Commission to introduce specific indicators on children at risk of poverty and urges EU Member States to use EU funding to implement the Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage*.

To conclude, Eurodiaconia believes the fight against child poverty must be an essential elements of public policies to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty. Eurodiaconia therefore urges the European Commission to develop and effective monitoring and implementation of the Commission Recommendation on “*Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage*”.

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