



EU Alliance for Investing in Children response to the Joint Declaration by the Council of the EPSCO Ministers “Overcoming poverty and social exclusion – mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on families – working together to develop prospects for strong children”

On 11 December, the Presidency Trio of Portugal, Slovenia and Germany published a Joint Declaration¹ on overcoming child and family poverty and social exclusion. The document is co-signed by the Ministers of the EPSCO Council and represents a crucial step forward in combating child poverty.

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children (EU Alliance) welcomes the commitment of the EPSCO Ministers, and the messages included in the Joint Declaration, which are fully aligned with the messages of the EU Alliance.

In particular, we welcome the acknowledgment of the dramatic impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on children, the commitment expressed by Member States to urgently prioritise the fight against child poverty and the call for the European Commission to propose a comprehensive and holistic approach in tackling child poverty through the European Child Guarantee. Finally, we welcome the Ministers’ call for a strong social dimension in the Europe 2030 Strategy.

1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families in the EU

The EU Alliance welcomes that EU Member States acknowledged the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and children and called for a particular focus on children and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Even before the pandemic, nearly one in four children lived in poverty or social exclusion across the European Union.² Albeit the EU is one of the most prosperous regions in the world, families are struggling to make ends meet, and children are among the first to suffer. The COVID-19 outbreak is now having far-reaching effects on Europe’s economic and social fabric and, consequently, on children’s well-being. Although children are considered a low-risk group, they will be hit hard by this public health crisis. The crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities and putting huge pressure on available health and social welfare services. Child poverty levels are thus likely to escalate as the full economic impact of the pandemic becomes apparent, making it even more urgent to act.³

The combination of financial stress, uncertainty over the future, and families being confined to the home during the lockdown led inevitably **to increased anxiety and mental health problems**. **School closures** caused additional stress for children who missed the social contact and structure that school provides. For children already living in poverty, it meant increased hunger if they missed out on free school meals. Home-schooling also **highlighted the educational divide and the digital divide**. Many parents are struggling to support their children’s learning, particularly those with a low level of

¹ <https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/163116/5964d2c157c6aa8b78840d5b0b59cb84/20201211-en-erklaerung-eu-mitgliedstaaten-poverty-armut-data.pdf>

² Eurostat

³ EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Joint Statement on protecting children and their families during and after the COVID-19 crisis](#), April 2020

education themselves. Most education is currently delivered online while schools are closed, but many low-income families are not equipped with computers, and often parents do not have the necessary technical skills.

To protect and support children and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion during such unprecedented times, the EU Alliance calls on EU Member States to:

- **Ensure children and families are at the heart of the EU Member States' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**
 - EU Member States should take children's needs into account when drafting their national Recovery and Resilience Plans. The Plans should prioritise the fight against child poverty, fully implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, and be monitored systematically through the European Semester.
 - EU Member States should prioritise actions to support children and families through the REACT-EU and the CRII & CRII+ programmes. Activities to support access to the labour market are important, however social and child protection systems should be also strengthened to support those in need.
- **Adopt an ambitious European Social Fund Plus with an earmarking to tackle child poverty.** Child poverty is not a recent phenomenon although it has been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure that financial resources are dedicated towards children and families in poverty throughout the 2021-2027 EU funding period, EU Member States should adopt the European Commission's and European Parliament's proposal for 5% of EU Member States European Social Fund Plus resources to tackle child poverty.
- **Address the most urgent needs of children and families in vulnerable situations.** Prevent the pandemic widening existing gaps, such as equal access to online learning and protection of mental health.
- **Ensure concrete synergies among policy areas to embed integrated working and acknowledge the transversal impact of policies on children, young people and families.** The best interests of the child and the promotion of their well-being should be the cornerstone of these synergies.
- **Avoid a silo-approach** by involving stakeholders, children and families in designing and monitoring the work dedicated to realising the commitments in the field of inclusion, education, deinstitutionalisation, early childhood development, and child poverty.

2. European Child Guarantee

Tackling child poverty through a comprehensive European Child Guarantee

The EU Alliance welcomes the Ministers' call for **the adoption of a multi-dimensional approach to tackling child poverty** based on the principles and integrated approach of the **2013 European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children**⁴.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H0112>

The importance of this comprehensive approach has been also reflected in the Final Report of the Child Guarantee Feasibility Study Phase I, which proposes that a **Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee** would “**complement and build on**” the **Investing in Children Recommendation**. This approach would be vital if the EU is to still ensure that children and families are **supported holistically** to exit poverty

On the base of this proposal, the EU Alliance calls on the European Commission to commit to a rights-based, integrated approach to tackle child poverty in the EU and broaden the scope of the Child Guarantee and the Council Recommendation by:

- **Ensuring that the future national multiannual strategies foreseen by the Commission Child Guarantee Roadmap⁵ are built around the three pillars of the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation.** In the strategies, EU Member States will outline how they plan to tackle child poverty through different and comprehensive policies (e.g. work-life balance policies, minimum income and minimum wage, access to tailored benefits), through the development of service areas and with the meaningful engagement of children and young people. The service areas will be outlined in the Child Guarantee Action Plans.
- **Broadening the scope of the Child Guarantee by incorporating parents’ access to resources under each service area of the Child Guarantee Recommendation.** Parents’ inadequate access to resources is one of the main drivers for child poverty; poor children grow up in poor families. As a consequence, there is a need to support parents and primary caregivers in their role and ensure they have adequate income to sustainably provide this support. Their participation in the labour market in decent jobs, fair minimum wages, access to adequate unemployment benefits and minimum income, as well as non-stigmatising in-kind support and tailored benefits are crucial components of preventing and tackling child poverty and social exclusion. The EU Alliance proposes to the European Commission to incorporate parents’ access to resources under each service area of the Child Guarantee Recommendation. This would empower parents and primary caregivers to deliver on their caregiving role and ensure that children have access to quality and affordable services.⁶
- **Safeguard the right of children growing up in poverty to have their voices heard:** Children and parents in poverty and social exclusion should have their voices heard in all decision-making processes that affect their lives at local, national, and EU level. Hence, child participation should be included as a horizontal principle in the Child Guarantee Recommendation. In this sense, children and parents should participate as partners in the development and monitoring of the national multiannual strategies to tackle child poverty and the Child Guarantee Action Plans.⁷

A European Child Guarantee with a comprehensive implementation and monitoring framework that will feed into different EU initiatives.

The EU Alliance also welcomes the request to consider children’s rights from a horizontal angle and to ensure the complementarity and compliance with other initiatives of the European Commission, such

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12565-European-Child-Guarantee>

⁶ EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Contribution of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Child Guarantee](#), October 2020

⁷ *ibid*

as the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester, and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

To ensure and protect this interconnectedness, the Commission should propose a **Child Guarantee Council Recommendation which will have a clear implementation framework that can be monitored, and which can feed into other initiatives.**

The EU Alliance calls on:

- **EU Member States to develop multi-annual national strategies and Child Guarantee national Action Plan plans and European Commission to monitor their implementation:** As already proposed, the EU Alliance proposes that the multi-annual national strategies are structured in line with the three pillars of the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children. In the Child Guarantee Action Plans Member States will identify challenges, priorities, set targets, and present the actions that Member States will take to implement the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee. Within the Child Guarantee implementation plans, EU Member States will also identify the interconnection between different EU policies and funding and clarify how they will use national budgets and EU funding opportunities from the Next Generation EU and the 2021-2027 EU Multiannual Financial Framework (ESF+, ERDF, InvestEU, Erasmus, RRF and React-EU can all be used to support the implementation of the Child Guarantee). The multi-annual national strategies and the Child Guarantee action plans should be monitored and feed into the implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the European Semester process and against priorities set in Annex D of the 2019 European Semester Country Reports.⁸ In addition, they should feed into the monitoring of the European Pillar of Social Rights (and in particular in principles 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20) and the social scoreboard poverty indicator. Finally, the Child Guarantee implementation plans should be monitored against the EU's implementation of the Sustainable Development

- **The European Commission to set an ambitious EU target to reduce child poverty and inequality across the EU and to adopt new key indicators⁹.** In line with targets of Sustainable Development Goal 1, the EU should set an ambitious EU target to eliminate extreme child poverty and to halve child poverty in the EU by 2030, as defined by the children at risk of poverty or social exclusion composite indicator (AROPE). This target should be then translated into national targets and should guide the development of the national multiannual strategies, the Child Guarantee action plans, and national investments. The EU's progress in the fight against child poverty should be monitored against this target and its progress should feed into the monitoring of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Child Rights Strategy and the European Semester.
In addition, to ensure proper monitoring, the European Commission and the EU Member States should adopt new key indicators. The AROPE indicator should be complemented by other key indicators that ensure a comprehensive understanding of child poverty and social exclusion. This should include a focus on early childhood development and the transition from institutional care to family and community-based care. Coordination with the European and national statistical offices will be key to ensure comparable data collection across the EU. Furthermore, disaggregation by age of relevant indicators should be foreseen.

⁸ ibid

⁹ EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee for the wellbeing of all children across the EU](#), March 2020

A strengthened civil society in the process of tackling child poverty.

Civil society actors are primary interlocutors of children and families in and at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In particular, civil society has stepped in during the COVID19 crisis and often through limited resources it has supported children in the most vulnerable situations while services were closed to continue their education or to be medically and emotionally supported. Civil society has also supported families hit by unemployment offering them in-kind support or guidance. Civil society should thus be consulted in the designing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the EU and national policies and plans and should be adequately financed to run projects that support children and families.

The EU Alliance calls on the European Commission and EU Member States to:

- **Provide platforms for best practice exchange** and for a continuous dialogue across and within EU Member States, with the European Commission and civil society organisations.
- **Reach as many stakeholders as possible as well as enhancing children's and parents' participation in decision making.** Particular attention should be paid to the inclusion of children and families experiencing poverty and social exclusion and civil society organisations representing them.¹⁰
- **Ensure civil society organisations meaningful participation in the implementation of the Child Guarantee.** Organisations should be consulted on the development of multiannual national strategies and the Child Guarantee Action Plans.¹¹
- **Ensure the meaningful participation of civil society in the various policy process interlinked with the Child Guarantee and combating child poverty,** such as the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester cycle, and the drafting of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.
- **Ensure that EU and national resources will be foreseen to fund civil society organisations to run projects** that will support the implementation of the Child Guarantee. To do so the reduction of co-financing requirements for civil society should be considered where possible.¹²
- **Ensure meaningful participation of civil society in the ESF+ monitoring committees** and especially in activities related to ESF+ Strategic Objective (x)¹³ and in the allocation of the ESF+ earmarking to tackle child poverty¹⁴.

¹⁰ EU Alliance for Investing in Children Response, [EU Alliance for Investing in Children Response to the public consultation on the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), November 2020

¹¹ EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Contribution of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Child Guarantee](#), October 2020

¹² EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Contribution of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children to the European Commission Public Consultation on the Child Guarantee](#), October 2020

¹³ promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived and children;

¹⁴ Subject to agreement.

3. Europe 2030 Strategy

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children is fully aligned with the Joint Declaration in asking the setting up of a comprehensive Europe 2030 Strategy characterised by an ambitious and strong social dimension.

The EU Alliance has strongly supported the European Parliament¹⁵ and the Council of the EU¹⁶ proposals for a long-term EU Strategy in line with the commitments made on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹⁷ Indeed, the European Green Deal, although crucial to fight climate change and ensure a better, cleaner and healthier future for all, is not integral enough to be seen as the overall post-2020 EU strategy; the EU needs an ambitious, comprehensive and overarching strategy that would encompass the short and long term challenges that it is currently facing.

The EU Alliance thus calls for a comprehensive, sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy that balances the social, economic and environmental dimensions and that takes into account the most pressing social needs of children and their families.

In particular, the Alliance calls on the European Commission to:

- **Propose and adopt a comprehensive, sustainable Europe 2030 strategy with a strong social dimension:** The social aspect of the Europe 2030 Strategy should incorporate the principles outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Set an ambitious target to tackle poverty and child poverty in the EU with a mid-term review:** As also proposed earlier in this paper, an integral part of the Europe 2030 Strategy should be the setting of an ambitious EU target to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion by 50%. This target should take into particular account the furthest left behind. The European targets should be translated into national-level targets. The national targets should be based on the EU AROPE indicators, be set beyond the GDP rate; and should look at the wellbeing of people not only at the national level but also at regional and local levels.
- **Strengthen social and economic policy coordination and monitoring of the Europe 2030 Strategy:** The European Commission and the Council should ensure the coherence of European social and economic 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.
- **Meaningfully engage civil society, social partners, children and families in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Europe 2030 Strategy:** This unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic requires creative and sustainable solutions. This also goes through consulting civil society organisations (European and national) representing diverse interests to understand the needs of the population and be in a good position to respond to those needs.

¹⁵ European Parliament, [European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2019 on the Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), March 2019

¹⁶ The Council of the European Union, [The Economy of Well-being Council Conclusions](#), October 2019

¹⁷ EU Alliance for Investing in Children, [Call for Action for a comprehensive, sustainable Europe 2030 strategy with a strong social dimension](#), June 2020