

**Making the case for investing in children:
a child-rights integrated approach to fight child poverty and promote children's well-being**

**Submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Report
'Towards a Better Investment in the Rights of the Child'**

Eurochild¹ is a network of more than 160 organisations and individuals from 35 countries working in and across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people. Our vision is of a society where children and young people grow up happy, healthy, confident and respected as individuals in their own right.

Introduction

Children throughout the world have been negatively affected by the financial and economic crisis. **Eradicating poverty continues to be the greatest global challenge facing the world today with impacts.**² A society that denies its youngest members opportunities to fully participate is wasting human potential and undermining its future development³.

Despite being one of the richest regions in the world, the European Union has shockingly high poverty rates. Some 28% of children – or 26.5 million children – live at risk of poverty and social exclusion⁴. In 2013, the European Council endorsed the European Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. Whilst not legally binding, this is a strong soft law instrument which promotes an integrated and child rights approach to address child poverty and promote children's well-being. The Recommendation calls on EU member states to invest in policies and services that target children, in particular the most vulnerable. It addresses 3 key pillars: access to resources, access to services, and child participation. It acknowledges that investment in children and the realisation of children's rights are among the most effective ways to eradicate poverty across the whole of society.

According to a network of independent experts, implementation of the Recommendation is currently very weak⁵. However the fight against child poverty and social exclusion, investment in early years education and care and the promotion of the transition from institutional to community-based care have been identified as thematic priorities in the next phase of EU structural and investment funds (2014-2020). Institutional arrangements and financing frameworks still present major obstacles to implementation of integrated and coordinated policies and services for children at all levels – national, regional and local.

¹ <http://www.eurochild.org/>
Contact: Mafalda.Leal@eurochild.org

² UNGA Resolution on the Rights of the Child; A/C.3/68/L.28;2013.

³ Social Justice in the EU – A Cross-national comparison. Social Inclusion Monitor Europe (SIM) – Index Report Daniel Schraad-Tischler and Christian Kroll, © 2014 Bertelsmann Stiftung.

⁴ 2013 Eurostat data

⁵ [Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage. an analysis by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, 2014.](#)

Eurochild's submission illustrates the main challenges, good practices and provide recommendations related to the mobilisation, allocation and spending of resources in areas covered by the Recommendation, notably on access to affordable quality services⁶ and children's right to participate⁷.

Access to Affordable Quality Services

Investment into Prevention

Many statutory and non-statutory services suffered cutbacks as a result of the economic crisis.⁸ Community- and family-based support services, health promotion and universally accessible, high quality education – including early childhood education and care – are among the most effective ways of preventing social exclusion and promoting well-being. Nonetheless funding for these services – often delivered through local authorities and rarely ring-fenced – is under increasing pressure. Savings made in these sectors is false economy, as it is likely to result in higher costs 'downstream'. Addressing **the consequences of family breakdown, exclusion, homelessness, poor physical or mental health and substance abuse is very costly**, not to mention the associated human suffering. If children grow up in poverty, their well-being today, their life chances tomorrow, and society's future are irreversibly damaged.

Governments should allocate sufficient funding to put in place preventive mechanisms across legislative, administrative, judicial, policy-making, service delivery and institutional functions. Integrated child protection systems – which coordinate with the welfare, education and health systems - must be supported and developed. Across Europe, Eurochild notes a lack of national strategies or strategies that are ill-coordinated and ill-resourced; dispersed and poorly enforced legislation; low levels of investment in family support and gender- and child-sensitive approaches; and insufficient data and research⁹. Good practices exist however and in our response to the open consultation on child protection systems we refer to three positive examples of **coordination and cooperation mechanisms in France, Ireland and Poland**.¹⁰

Family and Parenting Support (FPS)

FPS in Europe is not a luxury for times of plenty. Supporting parenting interventions alongside interventions to tackle the root causes of poverty and social exclusion, and address structural barriers and inequalities is a fundamental building block of cohesive societies in Europe. Interventions such as parent support, education, training, strengthening family networks, peer support, etc. can help build parents' self-esteem and skills, improve parents' long-term employability, and enhance children's well-being and development. A major challenge is how to develop processes for meaningful parents' inclusion in policy and practice development and implementation.

By supporting parents and families before problems arise we can **avoid huge long-term costs associated with family breakdown, poor mental health and social exclusion**. But due to the crisis and introduced austerity measures, **family and children's services across Europe are under threat of public spending cuts**. Teenage parents, fathers, parents with disabilities and Roma families are amongst those more vulnerable whose needs are not best met.

Particularly in times of limited resources, Eurochild acknowledges that services and interventions need to demonstrate their effectiveness in addressing social challenges. However, evidence of effectiveness in

⁶ E.g. improve access to early childhood education and care including for children under 3, eliminate school segregation, and enhance access to health, housing, social services.

⁷ E.g. in extra-curricular activities and in services and decisions affecting children, such as social services, education, alternative care.

⁸ How the economic crisis is affecting children and young people in Europe; Eurochild, December 2012.

⁹ See more: [Toward a World Free from Violence, 2013](#).

¹⁰ See [Eurochild's response](#) to the consultation on the EU Guidance on Integrated Child Protection Systems.

early intervention and prevention in family support can come from a range of sources. We strongly advocate a pluralist approach to building and using evidence recognizing the need to reflect critically on quantitative and qualitative data and analysis in assessing practice.¹¹

Many **examples of good practice at the national level** can be found at the Eurochild's Compendium of Inspiring Practices '[Early Intervention and Prevention in Family and Parenting Support](#)'¹².

Early years / Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has received increased political visibility across the globe, in recognition that **children's earliest years are the foundation for their physical and mental health, emotional security, cultural and personal identity and developing competencies**. By providing good quality services, children have more opportunities to reach their full potential. Coordination between different actors is crucial for the provision of more efficient and quality services that place children's individual and collective needs at their centre.^{13, 14}

There are several examples of good practices showing that services can be of good quality, reach out to disadvantaged communities, involve children and parents in their delivery and promoting social inclusion and children's well-being: Toybox (Northern Ireland)¹⁵; Mobile kindergartens SOS Children's Villages (Bosnia and Herzegovina)¹⁶; A good start in life (Romania)¹⁷; LicketyLeap (Scotland)¹⁸; prevention through early childhood education (Bulgaria)¹⁹.

However, our members refer to many challenges and risks that threaten provision of high quality inclusive ECEC services:

- **Cuts to staff numbers and/or training pose risks to affect the quality, coverage of and access to delivered ECEC services.** For example, access to affordable childcare is a significant issue for lone parent families in Ireland²⁰.
- There is a growing trend of privatisation and marketization of ECEC services which threatens accessibility and affordability²¹.

¹¹ See [Eurochild's Round Table Report \(2013\)](#) 'Family and Parenting Support in Challenging Times'.

¹² 12 case studies cover: 1) Spain/ Northern Ireland/ France: predominantly aimed at strengthening families and communities and promoting social cohesion; 2) Belgium/ The Netherlands/ Germany/ Sweden/ Italy/ Poland: primarily on supporting parents in their parenting task; 3) Romania/ Bulgaria/ Wales: focused on preventing children at risk from being separated from their families.

¹³ [Enquire](#) is a map featuring 20 different categories of access to education and family support services.

¹⁴ [Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan in Wales](#). The Plan brought together policies and programmes relating to children and families in Wales for the first time. It sets the direction of travel for the early years over a 10-year time horizon. Together, the actions are aimed to support the drive to tackle poverty, reduce inequalities and support economic growth. The key themes are: children's health and well-being; supporting families and parents; high-quality early education and childcare; effective primary education; raising standards. The Plan brought together policies and programmes relating to children and families in Wales for the first time.

¹⁵ [Rights-based service development model](#) which aims to significantly reduce social and educational inequalities experienced by [young Traveller children](#) through an outreach play-based early intervention service provided in partnership with children and parents.

¹⁶ This project is [targeted at children](#) at risk of losing parental care, children in alternative care and children from the communities whose rights to education are violated.

¹⁷ [This project](#) reaches 200 kindergartens and aimed to developed services for children aged 2 to 4 years and to make ECEC services more easily accessible to children.

¹⁸ [This programme](#) is a drama-led early intervention targeted at 3-5 year old children.

¹⁹ [The main project](#) goal is to increase the level of social integration and success of Roma children through their integration in preschool groups and involving parents in the process of education and development of the children.

²⁰ See: [Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Survey 2013](#).

²¹ E.g. [see an article on how the ECEC privatisation in the UK](#) is supposed to widen inequalities of access to quality early childhood provision. See also [this report by Eurostat & Eurydice](#).

- There is a major mismatch between parental leave legislation and availability of affordable and accessible childcare provision - unmet Barcelona objectives from 2002²² especially for children aged 0-3²³.
- **Lack of reliable evidence-based data on the long-term return of investment into ECEC** (an ongoing study financed through the European Commission is looking into the links between ECEC and reducing school failure or drop out²⁴).
- A challenge to embrace diversity in ECEC: acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families and developing ECEC provisions where people can learn from each other across cultural and other borders and therefore, public provisions that can effectively address prejudices and discrimination.
- Investments being directed to infrastructure building rather than into e.g. raising qualifications of the workforce or support to adapt services to children with specific social needs.

De-institutionalisation & alternative care

Eurochild is leading together with Hope & Homes for Children the campaign [Opening Doors for Europe's Children](#). A separate joint submission²⁵ of our organisations makes the case for increasing investment to support the transition from institutional to community-based care.

The project *Alternatives to Custody for Young Offenders*²⁶ focuses on remand and intensive fostering as alternatives to custody for young people, with the **active participation of custody-experienced young people**. It seeks to develop a European good practice model for intensive and remand fostering for young offenders, based on what works taken from research and good social work practice about the benefits of alternative family care compared to the negatives of custody.

Children's Right to Participate in Budget Planning & Services Development

A critical test of governments' commitment to human rights is their ability to democratize the public discussion of budget planning. This would require the presentation of proposals from Ministers of Finance detailing how their proposed budgets affect different groups in society, including those marginalised and disadvantaged.²⁷

'Invest in children! We are the future' was one of the messages coming out from the pilot consultation with children ahead of the forthcoming UNCRC Committee General Comment on Public Spending to realize children's rights²⁸. A positive experience of involving children in participatory budgets processes was shared from Croatia where a process is in place to consult with children on the allocation and spending of the city's budget.²⁹ Others examples exist in Spain and Portugal.³⁰

²² [To provide childcare places](#) by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. For statistics, see [this report](#).

²³ [Breaking the cycle of poverty: challenges for European early childhood education and care](#), P.M. Lesemana & Pauline L. Slot, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, Volume 22, Issue 3, 2014

²⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en.htm

²⁵ Towards a stronger economic evidence base to support child protection reform: from institutions to family care and community based services.

²⁶ [Project](#) led by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF).

²⁷ See [State budgets reveal whether the government is committed to human rights](#); Thomas Hammarberg, (former) Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, 4 August 2009.

²⁸ Consultation with 15 children in [CATS](#) in August 2014.

²⁹ For more information see: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/dubrovnik/14-%20Forms%20of%20Child%20Participation%20in%20Society%20%E2%80%9COur%20Children%E2%80%9D%20Opatija.pdf>

³⁰ Children's participation in participatory budgets; Catarina Tomás; Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas. 2008.

The European Recommendation Investing in Children urges governments to put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision making that affect their lives. **States are encouraged to build on existing mechanisms to involve children in service delivery and to consult them on policy planning, as well as to encourage professionals working with and for children to involve them.**

A social enterprise in NW England also called 'Investing in Children' has developed an innovative membership award scheme which allows all services which engage with children to be assessed according to whether they engaging children and young people meaningfully in improving the services³¹.

Recommendations

- Encourage and support mechanisms to involve children in service delivery and consult them on policy planning, including budget allocation and spending.
- Prioritise the fight against child poverty and exclusion as part of national anti-poverty strategies and adopt national targets for reducing child poverty.
- Good governance must drive policy making and allocation of public resources to invest in children.
- Establish cross-sectoral policy coordination as key to maximize impact and use of public resources, bearing in mind that children's rights must be addressed through holistic and integrated approaches.
- Ensure ring-fencing of resources for prevention and early intervention, and promote child protection systems that integrate welfare, education and primary health services.
- Invest in training and building more reflective practice among professionals in daily contact with children – in particular raising awareness of the UNCRC.
- Collect reliable, relevant, comparable and timely data on access and quality of services provided to children including disaggregated data on age, gender, and on children in vulnerable situations or circumstances (such as children with disabilities, asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children, children from minorities).
- Recognise and support the role of NGOs as service providers and sources of evidence and expertise.³² Approaches to research and evaluation must be developed hand-in-hand with practitioners, be trans-disciplinary and take into account those in the margins.
- Promote the exchange and mutual learning of good practices.³³

³¹ www.iic-uk.org

³² See some important initiatives on data collection and assessment undertaken the Eurochild member organisations: 1) SOS Villages International, [Assessment Tool for the Implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, 2012](#); 2) Hope and Hopes for Children Romania and Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), [The Audit of Social Services for Children in Romania – Executive Summary, 2012](#).

³³ European Commission set up an online [Platform for Investing in Children \(EPIC\)](#) that contains news and events, country profiles, statistics, practices that work, studies and reports etc. Under the Eurochild lead [EU Alliance for Investing in Children](#) 20 European networks are working together to end child poverty and to promote child well-being across Europe.