

Investing in children: a challenge and task for Europe of the 21st century

Consultation meeting

9.5.2014, Athens, I. Kranidiotis Hall, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

*Conclusions and recommendations*¹

The Greek Ombudsman in collaboration with the European Commission and 'Eurochild', organised a Consultation meeting on the implementation of the Commission Recommendation '**Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage**' (C(2013)778, 20/2/2013), under the auspices of the Greek Presidency of the European Council.

Presentations and round-tables were held, with the participation of representatives and experts from 32 institutions. 180 delegates attended the consultation. The complete programme and the report of the meeting are available on-line at the following link: www.0-18.gr/investing.

The main conclusions and recommendations of the meeting are summarized in the following two chapters. The first focuses on policies at EU level and the second on policies at national level, with a special reference to the Greek case.

1. Implementation of the Recommendation at EU level

The Recommendation, which highlights children's well-being as a matter of political priority, may be an opportunity for Member States to achieve important outcomes in the field of combating child poverty and social exclusion as well as in the field of improving the well-being of all children.

A critical element to be noted is the fact that current fiscal policies and austerity measures enforced on certain countries by the European Commission have aggravated child poverty. Also, they are in contradiction to the Europe 2020 Strategy's social goals as well as to the Recommendation itself.

Given that the percentages of child poverty and social exclusion differ significantly between EU countries, the bigger the discrepancies between what the Recommendation recommends and the actual policy, the greater the efforts that must be made by the Member States in order to bridge the gap. For this to happen it will be necessary that specific actions be undertaken in order to enhance the effectiveness of the Recommendation's implementation and its impact on the realization of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

¹ The conclusions were drafted by Nikos Bouzas and Dimitris Ziomas, researchers at the National Centre for Social Research, with the assistance of George Moschos, Deputy Ombudsman for Children's Rights and Hugh Frazer, coordinator of the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion

Therefore, the following measures (among others) are proposed:

- 1) **Better integrate the Recommendation into 'Europe 2020' Strategy**, by integrating the monitoring of child poverty and social exclusion in the National Reform Programmes, the National Growth Research, etc. To that end, clear directions must be given to the Member States to keep data on child groups that face particular socio-economic problems, quantifiable indicators etc, at national, regional and local level. Focusing on evidence-based policies must be the rule, not the exception.
- 2) Have more **child focused Country Specific Recommendations**, as part of the 'Europe 2020' Strategy.
- 3) **Set a European objective to reduce child poverty and social exclusion** and to improve the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating child favourable interventions.
- 4) **Promote children's well-being** as a key part of the social dimension of the **European Monetary Policy**. **Assess the impact of austerity measures** on children, since, apparently, children are proportionally more affected by the implementation of austerity measures than the rest of the population.
- 5) Put **children's well-being at heart of the Social Open Method of Coordination**, in particular by requiring Member States to include a comprehensive section in their National Social Reports on what they are doing to promote child well-being and to reduce child poverty and social exclusion.
- 6) Actively integrate **the protection and empowerment of children's rights** into the planning and development of the **National Reform Programmes**, as well as into the relevant governmental procedures. Secure the participation of children who face poverty and social exclusion and of the institutions working for the well-being of children, when planning and implementing the said Programmes. The European Commission must set the **minimum criteria** for the establishment of mechanisms to secure the participation of children and institutions working with children in the creation and implementation of the National Reform Programmes.
- 7) **Optimize the use of European resources/funds** in order to promote children's well-being and to combat poverty and social exclusion, as a priority.

2. Implementation of the Recommendation at national level – considering the Greek case

One of the main conclusions of the Consultation Meeting, concerning the national level, refers to the unquestionable need for national policies to combat the general population's poverty, as well as child poverty and the social exclusion of certain groups of children.

Regarding Greece, the lack of a national strategy and the absence of a comprehensive plan to combat child poverty and social exclusion, and to protect children's rights, has contributed to fragmentary policies on children and families and policies which are inadequate to counterbalance the effects of recession and austerity that have been imposed over recent years. As a result, child poverty and social exclusion have been rising swiftly ever since 2010. This unfavourable development shows that the children's social needs are increasing, while social expenditure on health, education etc, is decreasing, thus minimising the potential for the relevant policies to bring about positive effects in children's lives.

During the meeting, representatives of public and non-governmental organizations working for and with children emphasized the need for the creation of a **National Alliance** for the

implementation of the Recommendation and declared their willingness to take an active part in such an initiative.

In order to better implement the Recommendation at national level, taking into account what was discussed during the Consultation meeting, the following actions are proposed:

1) All EU Member-States, especially the ones with the highest child poverty indicators, should prepare and adopt a **Comprehensive Strategic Plan to combat child poverty and social exclusion**. Implementation of the plan should be the responsibility of government but with the contribution of all relevant public, regional and local authorities, as well as non-governmental organisations. It should be part of a greater **National Plan of Action on the Rights of the Child**, which should have a timetable, quantifiable goals and an implementation and monitoring mechanism. The Plan should focus on policies rather than on programmes, which should supplement policies. The scope and the responsibility levels of the public sector must be clarified and synergies between all bodies -according to their respective responsibilities- be strengthened.

2) In every EU Member State it is suggested that a **National Alliance is established to promote the implementation of the Recommendation** through continuous collaboration between the relevant public and non-governmental organisations, as well as independent authorities for children's rights (Children's Ombudspersons). The Alliance should pursue: a) the collection of data on the existing needs and the progress that has been made regarding combating child poverty and social exclusion, and b) the joint elaboration and promotion of proposals for the targeting of public policy and the adoption of necessary measures.

3) Regular monitoring of the Recommendation's implementation should be linked with the monitoring of the implementation of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**. The EU Member-States' national reports as well as the alternative reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child should include a special chapter on combating child poverty and on the progress achieved concerning the implementation of the Recommendation's measures that are relevant to the protection of the rights of the child.

4) EU Member States should make full **use of the European Structural Funds** while creating strategic plans to combat child poverty and protect children's rights. Governments, aided by all political parties, should secure the development of ongoing policy measures for children that will not terminate with the exhaustion of the European funds, but will also engage national funds.

5) The securing of a **decent adequate living standard**, including free access to health, social security, education and housing services for all children - regardless of their citizenship or residence status, should become a **priority in public policies**. Special measures for the care and support of particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as children with disabilities, minority children and children in need of alternative care must be taken. Critical tasks, associated with the living standard of children, are the reduction of school dropout, the protection of children from all forms of violence and the progress of deinstitutionalization.

6) Particular attention should be paid to **the right of children to participate in all aspects of social life**, through the systematic hearing of their views and respect for their needs. Every aspect of the planning and implementation of measures to combat child poverty and social exclusion and to promote children's rights must take into consideration the views of children, especially the most vulnerable ones.