



FOURTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE EUROPEAN PLATFORM AGAINST POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

SIDE EVENT 'INVESTING IN CHILDREN: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE'

20 NOVEMBER 2014

ORGANISED BY THE EU ALLIANCE FOR INVESTING IN CHILDRENⁱ

SIDE EVENT REPORT

RATIONALE FOR THE EVENT

20th of November 2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) – the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history. When almost 28% of children live at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, it is also a moment to remind decision makers “to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures” for the implementation of children’s “economic, social and cultural rights to the maximum extent of their available resources”, as stated in the UNCRC. The adoption of the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children demonstrates EU political will to tackle child poverty. Eighteen months on from its adoption, it is time to reflect on its impact at national level. This event aimed to reflect on the effectiveness of efforts made so far, and identify obstacles and opportunities to the Recommendation’s follow-up.

INTRODUCTION

Jana Hainsworth, Secretary General of Eurochild, opened the floor. She started by pointing out that this side event is a collective effort to evaluate the impact of the Recommendation for Investing in Children thus far, and its potential impact in the future. She emphasised that although the Recommendation is an extremely well-crafted document containing integrated approach and recognising children as right holders, it will not work if it is approached as only a piece of paper. It needs implementation properly and continuous follow-up. The Alliance for Investing in Children, which brings together 24 European networks and organisations aiming at the implementation of the Recommendation is committed to demonstrating the added value of the Recommendation on

national realities, and as a part of its work is producing an Implementation Handbook illustrating 15 examples across Europe of putting the policy guidance into practice (to be released in early 2015). Partners of this Joint Action believe that political priority need to be put to creating a better world for our children so they do not become a “lost generation”. It is crucial to keep in mind that the world of tomorrow will inherit the children of today: children’s current experiences will shape their development, their worldview and relations to others, and contribution to society. Finally, it is very important to hear children themselves and reflect how we – as parents, policy makers, service providers, advocates, authorities – can support their individual sense of agency.

Sara Gonzalez Martinez and **Carla Allende Tocino** from Spain presented children's voices. They sent a message that children are a part of a constantly changing world, they are citizens of the world, and have the right to express their views freely and to be heard in all matters affecting them. Sara and Carla emphasised children’s right to participate in decision making, which is not only a right but also a necessity, children can surprise adults by their creativity, curiosity, energy, empathy and honesty.

The causes and consequences of the crisis are particularly visible from young people’s point of view. The girls witnessed a lack of solidarity and political commitment; they were worried that materials at school were in worsening condition; they emphasised that parents’ unemployment, cuts in public transport discounts, educational trips, and increased costs for extracurricular activities and sports create even more tension and stress in the school environment etc. Overall, they encouraged to say ‘goodbye to the crisis’ and assured that they wanted to be part of the solution.

Gabriel Gonzalez Bueno, coordinator of the Spanish Alliance for Investing in Children, presented the child-friendly version of the EC Recommendation for Investing in Children, prepared by the Spanish Alliance. The publication contributes to the objectives of the Alliance in Spain, i.e. to raise awareness about the Recommendation, to provide children (and teachers or facilitators) a tool to understand the experience of child poverty in Europe and the policies to tackle it, and to motivate children as well as responsible adults to take action against child poverty. The publication includes a section called “Spreading the Word”, which is a motivational tool for children’s participation. Finally, he shortly presented some preliminary results from a pilot project that was developed with the participation of children in Spain using the publication. In the pilot some relevant outcomes for the participants were: a general lack of knowledge on the EU and its institutions; the empathy of children with the situation of other children and the positive opportunity for children to speak about some real situations in the surroundings; a strong focus on health, education, and economics problems.

Cheryl Martin and Liz Jones, coordinators of the UK Alliance for Investing in Children, presented a report that will be mapping policies and strategic priorities across four nations in the UK related to child poverty, and looking at the links with the EC Recommendation. This report consists of two parts: 1) a formal UK Alliance report - that compares UK policy in relation to the EC Recommendation and the 2020 poverty targets. This report also identifies good practice case studies across the UK which link to the key pillars of the EC Recommendation and 2) a supporting technical report which analyses and compares child poverty related policy, strategies and programmes across the UK (including those that apply to each of the devolved nations: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). The UK Alliance is also engaged in developing and facilitating workshops on topics that impact on children and young people so that they may have a voice in clarifying their needs and difficulties. These areas include: poverty and education, poverty and health, worklessness, housing and financial education and debt.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The three panellists of the discussion were: **Raffaele Tangorra**, Director General for Social Inclusion and Social Policies, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of Italy; **Andriana Sukova-Tosheva**, ESF Director, European Commission; and **Tom Dominique**, Chair of the Social Protection Committee.

Raffaele Tangorra, when asked about the impact of the Investing in Children Recommendation, emphasised that this document is not only a piece of a paper. The way the Recommendation came about has significance already. A great amount of work and involvement of stakeholders went into it, and the ad-hoc working group established in the SPC played an important role.

However, at the same time the Recommendation is soft law, and its impact will depend on how it is implemented. Thus far, without any doubts, the Recommendation had an impact at national level. For example, if we look at how funds are planned to be used in the new programming period, we can see that the Recommendation was influential for drafting the proposals. Moreover, the Recommendation helps support national policies, e.g. it was quoted when certain investments and/policies were suggested in the CSRs.

However, for impact to be felt on the ground, it is important not to stop and to carefully plan further steps of implementation. In relation to EU funds, Mr Tangorra regretted that the national authorities do not always take investment in children into account – contradicting the message communicated in the national seminars organised by the EC. The speaker agreed that at least in Italy, the Managing Authorities still tend to perceive the European Social Fund (ESF) as being exclusively for employment.

Regarding the comprehensive approach to children's well-being, he added that a list of indicators included as an Annex to the Recommendation builds on the SPC Report¹. The question is whether it is feasible to go beyond what is in this list. SPC has not started any related work but OECD is working on children's well-being indicators from a more multi-dimensional perspective. However, first a broad consensus on such indicators is needed so as to be able to start working in this direction.

The speaker added that in the past the SPC has tended to work more behind closed doors, but there is a positive sense of change, and a joint seminar or meeting with the EU Alliance for Investing in Children would be a step forward.

In relation to a proposed sub-target on child poverty and social exclusion as part of the overall Europe 2020 Strategy target, Mr Tangorra acknowledged that a current 'broad' indicator on poverty and social exclusion does not help reduce child poverty; thus, having a sub-target might be helpful. At the same time, the existing indicators and available data should be exploited to their maximum potential.

Finally, Mr Tangorra expressed his opinion in relation to the issue of having a more 'social' and inclusive European Semester. According to him, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) re-established a tradition of consulting with the stakeholders, but after the Lisbon Strategy, the OMC lacked any real impact on defining policies at national and EU levels, becoming a bureaucratic exercise. In the Council, there were debates on reviving the OMC and creating more 'social'

¹ Social Protection Committee, SPC advisory report to the European Commission on tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being, 27 June 2012.

European Semester, but it did not receive a sufficient support. Mr Tangorra also noted that the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) should have a stronger social dimension.

Andriana Sukova-Tosheva noted that the Recommendation is an important policy guidance drawing attention to children's rights. She believes that it is also helpful to shape public attitudes. 14 countries received country-specific recommendations (CSRs) related to investing in children in 2014, especially linked to a thematic objective No. 9 (TO9) on social inclusion. Clearly, the EC Recommendation was also instrumental during the negotiations with the Member States especially when the Commission was keen to promote certain issues. For example, messages such as 'early investment is crucial for early development and later life chances' and 'access to education is a fundamental right of children' strongly stem from the Recommendation.

Social inclusion is much more than getting people in the labour market and the European Structural and Investment Funds should also be used for providing access to good quality early childhood education and preventing early school leaving and to support integrated and comprehensive initiatives to promote children's inclusion. Moreover, a broad involvement of the civil society in the preparation of the Operational Programmes (OPs), their implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation are crucial. In line with the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, civil society should be part of the monitoring committees assessing the directions of planned investments of the European Structural and Investment Funds in the new programming period.

Ms Sukova-Tosheva also pointed out that internal discussions on sub-targets are going on, and the targets linked to poverty are among those to be broken down into more specific sub-targets. The UK, Ireland and Greece have already set a sub-target on child poverty and social exclusion as part of their overall Europe 2020 target. This example witnesses that Member States themselves can be designers of the national policies and that too much of guidance from the EC is not necessary. Moreover, the EC cannot propose a one-size-fits-all model for policies and measures. More emphasis on the social effects of policies should also be given in the European Semester process instead of only focusing on the macroeconomic effects.

Tom Dominique strongly emphasised that a monitoring system for the implementation of the Recommendation needs to be put in place. A continuous monitoring requires a strong cooperation between the EC, Member States and stakeholders. Mr Dominique also noted that more discussion on social priorities within the European Semester is needed. If there were clear and agreed priorities, adoption of the Annual Growth Survey would be easier. Mr Dominique also noted the SPC work on reference budgets, but confirmed that work on child well-being indicators is not planned. He reassured the Alliance for Investing in Children partners that the SPC and ISG are open for dialogue and encouraged follow up actions. He expressed his concern that the SPC lacks stakeholders' involvement. A contribution from the EU Alliance would be very welcome with a view to a possible joint meeting.

In relation to the discussion on setting national sub-targets, he added that the SPC discussed and would be in favour of keeping existing Europe 2020 targets and rather monitor them better than change them. Mr Dominique also noted that focusing more on child poverty and social exclusion could be one of the possibilities at national level and in the national reform programmes and social reports.

KEY MESSAGES OF THE SIDE EVENT

1. The European Commission Recommendation on 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage' is a well-crafted document that must be **implemented effectively** to have real impact. The coming years will be crucial in assessing whether the policy consensus articulated in the Recommendation actually translates into appropriate action in Member States. The EU Alliance for Investing in Children is calling on the European Commission to **review its implementation the latest 5 years after the adoption of the Recommendation**.
2. An **effective monitoring framework** needs to be in place to ensure a **follow-up to the Recommendation**. The Social Protection Committee (and its Indicators Sub-Group) should continue working on **child well-being indicators** with the aim to review and complement the portfolio of indicators that are included as Annex to the Recommendation. The development of better indicators and data will be vital to ensure effective monitoring of the implementation of policies for children.
3. The **mid-term review of the Europe 2020** strategy provides a chance to **strengthen its social dimension** and refocus on what matters most for Europe's political, social and economic future – children's well-being. A clearer emphasis must be put on the **social effects of policies**, in particular their impact on children within the **European Semester**.
4. Implementation of the Recommendation will need to be mainstreamed in EU and national policy making. It **should be put at the heart of the European Semester** – i.e. in the Annual Growth Survey, the National Reform Programmes, the National Social Report, Country Specific Recommendations, the regular monitoring of the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Annual Convention of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion.
5. The European Commission and Member States must ensure that **EU funds benefit children** and support a strategic implementation of the Recommendation. Structural and Investment Funds are critical European entry points for supporting **national policy initiatives** and ensuring that child poverty and well-being is high on Member States' policy agendas.
6. **Meaningful involvement of stakeholders, including children themselves should be part of implementing the Recommendation, both at European and national, regional, and local levels**. The Alliance for Investing in Children was set up precisely to engage national stakeholders more effectively in implementing the Recommendation – making use of Europe 2020 and the Structural and Investments Funds. Coordinated advocacy at EU and national levels can powerfully influence national decision-making, as demonstrated by the two national alliances for Investing in Children in Spain and the UK.

Further information on the **EU Alliance for Investing in Children**:

<http://www.alliance4investinginchildren.eu/>

Contact: Eurochild, info@eurochild.org Avenue des Arts 1-2, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

ⁱ The EU Alliance for Investing in Children is a temporary initiative developed in the framework of 'Module 1: Facilitation of joint actions' supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS / EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation.

Members of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children include:

- Eurochild (coordinator)
- Alliance for Childhood
- ATD Quart Monde
- Caritas - Europa
- COFACE – Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union
- Don Bosco International
- Dynamo International – Street Workers Network
- EAPN – European Anti-Poverty Network
- EASPD – European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities
- ELIANT Network
- ENSA – European Network of Social Authorities
- EPA - The European Parents Association
- EPHA - European Public Health Alliance
- ESN – European Social Network
- Eurodiaconia
- EuroHealthNet
- European Child Safety Alliance
- FEANTSA – European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless
- ISSA - The International Step by Step Association
- Mental Health Europe
- PICUM – Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
- Save the Children EU Office
- SOS Children's Villages International
- UNICEF EU Office

This programme is implemented by the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment, social affairs and equal opportunities area, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Europe 2020 Strategy goals in these fields. The seven-year Programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-28, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries.

For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/progress>