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Children's wellbeing requires actions beyond child policy

Coordinate all policies affecting children's lives and ensure sufficient financial support for their effectiveness

Reply to the questions of the Lithuanian Presidency on the Recommendation "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage" as a part of the Social Investment Package

We call on the EU and member states to take a comprehensive and rights-based approach when developing policies for investing in children.

Human rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are infringed on a daily basis. Children and families are facing the harsh consequences of the crisis, which is worsened by austerity measures attacking social policies and social spending. More than one in four children in the European Union live at risk of poverty and social exclusion, many are exposed to material deprivation, low quality housing, poor nutrition, and inadequate, inaccessible or unaffordable healthcare and education.[1]

This can only be addressed if a comprehensive approach is embedded in policies for investing in children and for social investment in general, looking at the larger social and economic context.

We will not break the cycle of disadvantage if children cannot enjoy their fundamental rights. These are the basis for the promotion of equality and the fight against discrimination, as well as for the commitment to redistributive policies that reduce income and wealth inequalities. The Recommendation on Investing in Children (RIC) can serve as a good example for all other Social Investment Package (SIP) proposals. It starts from a rights-based perspective to provide guidance to member states on how to tackle child poverty and promote children's wellbeing, and sets up a common European framework based on the recognition of children as rights-holders, and support to families.

QI. How can the upcoming 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework contribute in an effective and result oriented way to the eradication of the generational poverty and address the goals of "Europe 2020"?

Ensure coherence between social, health, education and employment policies and between funds and programmes under the MFF, in order to achieve the Europe 2020 goals and to fight intergenerational poverty and inequalities. This needs to be supported with the proper resources.

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage requires an integrated approach that brings together traditionally separate policy agendas of social inclusion and social protection, education, health, housing, child care, equality and employment.[2] It requires coordination to ensure that these policies mutually reinforce each other in delivering on the improvement of children's wellbeing and daily living conditions.

Prevention and early intervention as well as correction measures should be put in place to address problems before they arise or escalate and to redress the negative impact of policies on the wellbeing of all children.

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[1] As stated in the Social Investment Package (SIP) Communication, "significant disadvantages faced in childhood in education and health, are often compounded over life". Therefore, the impact of child poverty possesses a serious threat to future generations in terms of both economic development and social stability.

[2] This also concerns the implementation of the active inclusion policies including adequate minimum income, access to quality services, and inclusive labour markets to ensure adequate integrated support to families and children.

It is, for instance, important to address employment policies from the perspective of children's rights and wellbeing. For example, children may be left behind by parents working or searching for work abroad. Parents' ability to support and care for their children is compromised when they are forced to take up precarious jobs with unsociable working hours. Member states should reduce pressure on household budgets among low income families through measures such as maximising the potential for parents to access and sustain good quality employment[3], investing in affordable childcare and through adequate child and family benefits.[4]

Moreover, the mutual reinforcing of policies shows that investing in our children can be a source of job creation. Investment in the form of enabling services that empower and support children and their families, can generate jobs in the short term and save costs in the medium and long-term.[5] The RIC should be used as an opportunity to adopt a systematic and coherent approach in the areas of social inclusion, education and employment under the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Finally, coordination of policies will not be sufficient without the support of appropriate financial means at EU and member state level. As first priority, decision-makers should shift their focus from cutting social budgets to investing in these policy areas and related services, and measuring the social and financial returns they produce, as well as assessing the social and economic costs of non-investment. This should be done from a short-, mid as well as long-term perspective.

However, we want to stress that this is primarily the member states' responsibility that can only be supported by EU programmes. Considering the limited resources available under the Structural Funds and other EU programmes, member states should not use these to replace national budgets to finance social, education and health policies. Further sources of funding for these policies should be developed both at EU and national level (for example by using the financial transaction tax and by a higher focus on progressive income tax, and on taxes on capital and environmental risks).

How?

a. Use all Structural Funds and other EU programs in a strategic and complementary way to boost social investments/protection and the EU2020 social targets. This includes a combination of at least the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)[6] and the European Programme for Social Change and Innovation (EUPSCI). Use Structural Funds to continue positive policy developments such as transition from institutional to family- and community-based care, and to test and upscale other successful social innovations. [7]

b. Use the Structural Funds to put in place effective measures creating decent employment for parents that do not involve long working hours on low pay; that entitle parents and other carers to have flexible working hours and take up paid parental leave; that ensure adequate family benefits and income support; and that do not just focus on children as 'the next working generation' but on children as rights-holders who need a good childhood now.

c. In the preparation of Partnership Agreements between the Commission and the member states, allocate necessary financial resources for investing in children. This should be done by linking the objective of children's wellbeing with the thematic priorities of the Structural Funds and the ESF. Ensure that the use of energy efficiency measures, being a priority under the Common Provisions Regulation, benefits households with children living in poverty and having difficulties paying their energy bills.

d. Implement the partnership principle as enshrined in the proposal for the new ESF and the Common Provisions Regulation, in line with the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, to

[3] This also includes measures to ensure a proper balance between work and family life.
[4] Safe and secure surrounding and supportive caretakers, particularly in early years, have been identified as the basis for children's mental health, and therefore to their well-being and potential in the long-term; see also MHE, *Children's Mental Health Poverty and Deinstitutionalization*
[5] For example Scotland has modelled both the short-term and long-term savings incurred by investing in early interventions from pre-birth to aged five. In Belgium, the Flemish government is investing in early childhood education and care and reinforcing support for local projects, organisations and authorities to reach out to poor families.
[6] The ERDF has an essential role in complementing the ESF, by providing infrastructure for to promote social inclusion and combating poverty. Investment in health and social infrastructure that support transition from institutional to community-based services is very much welcomed.
[7] European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, *Toolkit on the Use of European Funds for the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care*, November 2012.

fully involve the relevant stakeholders in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Operational Programs.

e. Mainstream the principles of the RIC into the Europe 2020 governance cycle. Plan and report in National Reform Programmes and National Social Reports how much European funding as well as national money is spent (and how it is spent) on achieving the social targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy, as well as on investing in children and promoting their wellbeing. Ask the Commission to support social policies through balanced and non-contradictory Country Specific Recommendations.

f. Make use of the various financial instruments including the EU Research and Innovation Programme Horizon2020, the EU 'Health for Growth' Programme, the Rights and Citizenship and Justice Programmes, the 7th Environmental Action Programme as well as the EU Agricultural and Rural Development Funding, to support development and uptake of more evidence-based EU and national policies in all areas affecting children.[8]

QII. What would be the most operational way to achieve efficient synergy among the stakeholders in order to realise the essential and innovative changes in the area of children's welfare? The role of NGO sector in the reduction of child poverty.

Involve all relevant stakeholders in a meaningful and structured way for developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating social and other relevant policies. Engage with NGOs to identify and map best practices.

Involving civil society organisations and the people they represent at all different levels and in the different stages of policy making will enable member states to tap into the existing, on the ground knowledge of NGOs, and take into account the actual needs and wellbeing of service users as expressed by their representative organisations. It will give a voice to those who are directly impacted by the policies concerned and strengthen the structural framework for their involvement. More ownership and accountability of these processes will also trigger more input from NGOs.

Children's wellbeing is interlinked with the wellbeing of their family as well as of society as a whole, in terms of social inclusion, employment, access to services and goods, education etc. It is therefore important to involve civil society organisations in a broad sense to achieve a comprehensive and sustainable policy approach.

The work of the European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care is a good example of how a synergy between the European Commission, member states and a broad coalition of stakeholders representing people with care or support needs as well as service providers, public authorities and intergovernmental organisations, can support the up-scaling of social innovation.[9]

How?

a. Involve all relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local levels in the development of social policies to implement the RIC and the SIP as a whole, by promoting cross-governmental department links, and championing regular, meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders. The RIC itself is an illustration of cooperation between the Commission, the member states and civil society. It took up substantial input from European CSO networks who successfully advocated for its adoption. The Ad Hoc Group on child poverty is closely following the Commission's work around monitoring the implementation of the RIC.

b. Involve civil society organisations, including social NGOs, in the implementation of the RIC and the SIP to ensure that the needs of children and families are met in the best way and that their

[8] A.o. development and restructuring of health systems towards prevention and health promotion-oriented services especially during the early years; supporting sustainable production and consumption of agricultural products of high health and nutrition benefits (the EU School Fruit Scheme, the CAP in general); supporting quality environments.

[9] The European Expert Group on the transition from institutional to community-based care is a broad coalition gathering stakeholders representing people with care or support needs including children, people with disabilities, people experiencing mental health problems, families, and people experiencing homelessness; as well as service providers, public authorities and intergovernmental organisations.

quality of life is improved, and that efforts and resources to achieve the planned outcomes are used in the most efficient manner. Such meaningful involvement must be underpinned by the commitment to create a favourable environment for the functioning of NGOs and the provision of sustainable operational funding for them.

c. Involve all relevant stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation of social policies, to identify what works and what changes need to be made. This should be done by, among others, further developing the European Platform on Investing in Children (EPIC) and by consulting with NGOs for the development of tools and indicators for evaluation. Furthermore, a transparent National Contact Point should be established in each member state, responsible for coordinating dialogue and cooperation between local authorities, public institutions and civil society to effectively raise awareness, implement and monitor the RIC.

d. Support and engage in initiatives for sharing good practices, such as the EPIC, to foster the opportunity for social innovation in national policies and scaling up successful NGO projects.

e. Facilitate and reinforce mutual learning between civil society and national authorities, and across the EU, through the expansion of existing tools, such as the peer review under the Social OMC, into other areas. This should support member states in the implementation of Europe 2020, the RIC and of the SIP as a whole.

QIII. The best way to ensure the quality services, benefits and other forms of support and opportunities for children, especially the children who have less opportunities or are in poverty.

Put in place and improve the policies necessary for a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to investing in children to ensure quality, accessibility, availability, affordability and adequacy of services, benefits and other forms of support and opportunities.

It is positive to see how the RIC takes a horizontal approach, placing children´s rights, the best interests of the child, equal opportunities and support for the most disadvantaged whilst ensuring quality universal provisions for all, at the centre of efforts to prevent and alleviate child poverty and social exclusion. Child poverty is understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing not only material aspects but also other forms of deprivation and loss of dignity and wellbeing – lack of access to appropriate housing and living environment, education, health services, social services in the field of prevention and a more general lack of opportunity in society.[10]

Universal provision of high quality, accessible services for families and children, including pre- and post-natal support, health promotion, early childhood services, education, parenting support, and leisure, cultural and civic activities for children are an important foundation for inclusive societies. This should be coupled with targeted interventions to reach out to children and families most at risk. It is much more effective and less costly to address problems when they are quite new and quite small.

How?

a. Use the Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services as guidance for essential elements of a quality framework.[11] Ensure the importance of quality in service planning, funding and delivery, by developing and testing quality standards, specific to the different sub-sectors and specific characteristics of groups of receivers of care, with their active involvement. Support the on-going development of the European quality framework for early childhood education and care.

[10] Referring back to our reply to the first question, it is therefore essential to take a fully integrated and holistic policy approach which mainstreams child and family friendly policies across sectors.
[11] Social Protection Committee, *A Voluntary European Quality Framework for social services of general interest*, 2010

b. Enhance efforts towards preventing the unnecessary separation of children from their families and promoting the transition from institutional to community-based care for people with care or support needs, including children.[12]

c. Implement the Barcelona childcare targets, taking into account the importance of the quality and accessibility of early childhood education and care to children's social, emotional and cognitive development.[13]

d. Ensure the eligibility of families for benefits according to the needs of their children. Benefits should not serve the needs of the labour market or education system, by using conditionalities to force parents back into the labour market through punitive approaches or penalising parents whose children do not attend school.[14]

e. Develop training for service and benefit providers to improve their knowledge of children and families in need, as well as to empower children's participation in the design, delivery and evaluation of services. It is essential that providers have a better understanding of the situations of exclusion and their causes in order to better deal with, advise and support children and families.

f. Support the role of children's and youth organisations in providing opportunities to access non-formal educational activities as well as to participate in play, recreation, sports and cultural activities. It is important to address financial, cultural and physical barriers that prevent children from participating in such activities.

g. Ensure children's and families' participation and empowerment to improve the quality, accessibility, availability, affordability and adequacy of services, benefits and other forms of support and opportunities, to better tailor these to individual needs and expectations[15].

h. Invest in vibrant, lively, safe and accessible physical and social environments to build up and enhance resilience of children, families and local communities. Strengthen relevant urban and rural infrastructure and services necessary for better addressing child and family poverty and social exclusion.

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[12] See *Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care.*

[13] At a time when many member states have not yet fulfilled the commitments of Barcelona and where financial pressures risk to undermine the quality of services, it is more than ever crucial to support this call for quality.

[14] Such an approach is in direct opposition to the UNCRC. Several Central and Eastern Europe countries have introduced or are considering to introduce conditional cash transfers as a tool for reducing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma population. However, such programmes in fact contribute to reinforcing and increasing ethnic segregation in education. Lack of attendance is principally caused because of discrimination, poor quality instruction, lack of accessibility, overcrowding and lack of resources. Only when quality and quantity of education provision is improved can enrolment and attendance incentives be considered.

[15] Eurodiaconia, *User participation and empowerment Toolkit*