

Child Poverty and Wellbeing in Europe

**ESN Position Paper on the EU Recommendation
March 2012**

The European Social Network (ESN) brings together people who design, manage and deliver social services in public authorities across Europe. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.



Introduction

In the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Commission plans to publish a European Recommendation on Child Poverty. ESN believes that an EU Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-Being will **give children visibility** in the context of the “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” that the EU envisages. It could serve as a resource to help Member States achieve the targets to lift 20 million people out of poverty & social exclusion and reduce the rate of early school-leaving to below 10% by 2020.

It would translate the political commitment of the EU and its Member States into **a framework for policy reassessment and action**. It could also serve as a framework for the establishment of a set of indicators that are specific to the child’s wellbeing rather than their parents’ income or employment. It should also include indicators that capture the situation of children outside traditional households, children in care and in particular those in large institutions.

ESN is one of the stakeholders supporting the Commission and Member States to develop the Recommendation. In November 2011, ESN organised the seminar “Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection” in order to ensure up-to-date input from social services in the Recommendation. On 14 December 2011, ESN participated in a stakeholder consultation with the Commission and Member States on the Recommendation.

Social services are among the actors responsible for **implementing the UNCRC** which is becoming more and more embedded in the design of social services in EU Member States. Therefore, the proposed Recommendation would have to be consistent with the UNCRC. Therefore, a child rights approach is a moral and legal obligation which recognises the child as subject of rights and the obligation to empower children as citizens who can express their wishes, experiences and needs. A selection of UNCRC rights are included in this paper where they relate to the headings of the Recommendation.

ESN’s particular concern is with **the most disadvantaged and socially excluded children** (children with disabilities, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care, children at risk of neglect/abuse, undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers, Roma and traveller children). These are children who may also be at risk of poverty and social exclusion and may struggle to complete secondary education. They are also the children with whom ESN Members in local public social services typically have most contact. In ESN’s view, this Recommendation should champion these children and the services that aim to help them, especially in these difficult economic times.

ESN sees it as important to **help parents or other adults involved in a child’s upbringing**, given the ‘cycle of deprivation’, whereby children ‘inherit’ poverty and disadvantage from their parents. In many cases, improving children’s lives also means improving parents’ lives. ESN also emphasises the links between different key services, the importance of multi-agency work between services working with children, the mutual interdependence of benefits, family policies and services, and the participation of children in decisions affecting their lives.

ESN members recognise the **multi-dimensional nature of child poverty** and ESN supports the three-pillar approach presented in the “Roadmap for a Recommendation on Child Poverty”: access to adequate resources; access to quality services & opportunities; and

children's participation. This paper summarises what managers and senior professionals in social services for children and families believe to be the key elements under each pillar.

Pillar 1: Support to Families

The Recommendation should foresee measures to **access adequate resources**, such as adequate family income and benefits and labour market legislation to reconcile work and family life. Many countries offer universal child benefits or income support to families; however, ESN recognises that some families will need more support than others either because of their low income or because of a child's disability or health condition.

Therefore, the Recommendation should promote a combination of cash benefits for all children and additional cash benefits for those on a low income and/or to assist with particular challenges (housing, disability, health conditions). However, there is a strong feeling among ESN members that **benefits are rarely going to be enough** to help the most disadvantaged families; they need additional support, advice and 'accompagnement' that social services, in cooperation with others, can offer.

Pillar 2: Access to Key Services

ESN is seeking to ensure recognition within the Recommendation of the role of social services for children and families. These services have a particular **responsibility for safeguarding children** which is legally established in many countries. Beyond this, their work impacts on children's lives in many ways – through support to children, parents, carers and the wider community from infancy, through education and into adulthood.

Access to services is not only important to reduce child poverty and improve child's wellbeing but it is also essential to achieve the Europe 2020 targets such as the reduction of early school leavers below 10% and a 40% of young people in tertiary education. Basic provision for every child should be combined with a higher level of support for each child who needs in line with the principle of '**progressive universalism**' advocated by Prof. Melhuish at ESN's seminar 'Investing in Children'¹. ESN Members asserted that universal services are needed to help them identify which children need additional help/protection.

Following discussions with Members at our 'Investing in Children' seminar, ESN has proposed that a number of **overarching principles on key services** be incorporated in the Recommendation:

- regular strategic assessment of children's needs in a local area
- structural coordination between services and individual cooperation between professionals
- a duty for all services to alert child protection authorities in cases of neglect and harm
- quality monitoring and continuous improvement based on outcomes in children's lives
- accessibility of services to minority ethnic groups
- accessibility of services to children from a disadvantaged background.

¹ On 14-15 November ESN organised the Seminar "Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection" to input onto the EC Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-Being. For more information, please see: <http://www.esn-eu.org/e-news-nov11-autumn-seminar1/index.htm>

Although some may feel that these elements are taken for granted in Europe today, they are not universally recognised or not implemented. The Recommendation is a good opportunity to re-assert them. ESN has proposed specific wording to the Commission and SPC on these points².

2.1 Access to (quality) early childhood education and childcare services (ECEC)

Together with child protection, early childhood education and care is a responsibility of local government in many countries, either through direct provision or benefits paid to families on a low income to assist access. Member States have an existing policy commitment ('Barcelona target') to make sure that every child from the age of three until the age of compulsory schooling has access to a place in ECEC services.

In ESN's view, support should **begin during pregnancy**, especially for first-time parents on a baby's/child's health, development and learning; Members noted that this can in part be done very successfully through peer support groups. ESN believes that the Recommendation should call for the universal provision of services as a preventive method. ECEC services should be capable of identifying children and families with **additional needs or facing particular problems** and alert specialist services.

Investment in ECEC services must focus **not only on accessibility but also on quality**. If ECEC placements are of low quality, this provision would be a poor use of public money, asserted Prof. Melhuish at ESN's 'Investing in Children' Seminar³. Quality ECEC programmes would be holistic and take account of a child's physical, psychological, emotional, nutritional and social needs and development and adapt according to different stages of a child's development.

In some European countries there have been very high levels of ECEC coverage. However, only some of these countries have put in place policies and research mechanisms to try to maximise quality provision. ESN members recognise that services (not only ECEC) do not adequately assess the effectiveness of their interventions. Therefore, the Recommendation should act as a timely reminder of the need to **improve quality and performance**.

In light of this, ESN has stressed that access to **quality ECEC should not be dependent on income**. Neither should families from a poor socio-economic background should not be stigmatised in the way that they access these services. Participation of disadvantaged children in targeted high-quality childcare programmes has been identified as particularly beneficial and considerably more effective than giving families of disadvantaged children unrestricted cash transfers⁴. However, governments may allow for frameworks under which there is some means-testing to allow those who can afford to pay more, to do so.

² ESN Response to Stakeholders Consultation on Child Poverty Recommendation. Available by e-mail.

³ On 14-15 November ESN organised the Seminar "Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection" to input onto the EC Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-Being. For more information, please see: <http://www.esn-eu.org/e-news-nov11-autumn-seminar1/index.htm>

⁴ Currie, J. (1998): The Effect of Welfare on Child Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Know. JCPR Working Papers, Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research

In order to achieve quality ECEC, much depends on the **care, attention and professional skills of ECEC staff**, as has been recognised by the Commission its 2011 communication⁵. According to ESN members responsible for ECEC services, ECEC professionals should have skills and knowledge in the following areas: developmental child psychology; risk and protective factors; 'optimal relationship ability'; language development skills; engagement with children and their parents; availability of other key services; advice on parenting; balance between discipline and free play.

The Recommendation should therefore emphasize the importance of developing **holistic quality ECEC programmes accessible to every child**.

2.2 Education

Art. 28 UNCRC: States Parties recognize the right of the child to education

ESN Members' attitude to the role of education is shaped by working with schools to support the most vulnerable children. The education system should be seen as part of the **early intervention mechanism**, in which besides teaching, attention is paid to the health, social and emotional needs of children seeking a greater involvement of health, social services and specialist services if needed.

Early on in this paper, we had stated that this Recommendation should champion the most disadvantaged and socially excluded children. In the area of education, it can do this by emphasising that schools (and key services) do everything possible to make sure that every child completes their education. ESN believes that a **preventive approach** to poor educational attainment and early school leaving would allow schools to seek additional help for children who need it. Decisions on schooling are taken in the best interests of the child, in consultation with the child.

2.3 Healthcare

Art. 24 UNCRC: Right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. No child [shall be] deprived of his or her right to access such health care services.

In ESN's view, particular emphasis should be placed on **access to healthcare of the most disadvantaged children**. The Recommendation should emphasize that free preventive health care be available for every child from pregnancy onwards. Such prevention is key to reducing health inequalities. Further, it would give health services the opportunity to involve social services where necessary.

2.4 Housing and Environment

Article 27.1.: States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

It has been seen that the concentration of disadvantage in particular districts or housing developments leads to social problems. This Recommendation should give policy-makers

⁵ Commission communication on early childhood education and care: *Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow.*

guidance on **decent housing in socially mixed areas** and recall the need for urban regeneration and rural development in disadvantaged areas. Good and affordable housing should be planned and provided based on various rental and buying schemes that are accessible to people on a low income. Regulation should not only focus on housing but also on the infrastructure surrounding homes. ESN members emphasize that local planners should foresee child-friendly services and amenities, endorsing the concept of 'child-friendly places'.

2.5 Child Protection and Social Services

Social services are key players in fighting child poverty and improving child wellbeing at local level. They may provide income support to families and deliver and help fund early childhood education and care. They work with vulnerable families who have been experienced social exclusion and poverty over several generations to help them overcome or manage issues such as the addiction, debt, disability, insecure housing, poor mental health, long-term unemployment, among others. They **assess the needs and wishes** of a child and their family and **bring together other services** (education, health, housing, justice, employment and culture) to safeguard and improve a child's wellbeing, dignity and development.

In the area of child protection, social services support children who are at risk of neglect or abuse. They **assess the risks to a child** and put in place **appropriate support to prevent harm and improve wellbeing**. If it is judged that there is a severe risk of harm, a decision can be taken by the competent authorities (usually involving a Court) to place the child in alternative care. There is a strong movement across Europe for the development or reinforcement of community-based forms of alternative care (notably fostering and adoption), rather than placement of children in institutions.

The Recommendation should fully recognise the role of social services in combating child poverty and promoting wellbeing of children and families. Investment in children should be linked to the international legal framework provided by the UNCRC, which requires governments to respect *children's right to the provision of services* (Articles 18, 23 and 24) and *protection against violence and abuse* (Articles 19 and 34).

ESN has proposed to the Commission and SPC that the Recommendation incorporate the following elements:

- an assessment of a child's safety, development, health and wellbeing
- appropriate action primarily to ensure the child's safety, but also to support the child and parent/guardian(s) based on the assessment
- avoidance of institutionalisation and alternative (foster) care for children currently in institutions
- mechanisms to hear and record the voice of the child
- independent legal representation for children in public care.

Child protection and social services are key to overcoming child poverty and improving the wellbeing of vulnerable children. Whilst child protection issues can occur in all kinds of families, **poverty is a stress upon good parenting**. If a child is at risk of harm it is very difficult to improve their wellbeing or to lift them out of poverty and social exclusion. In its proposals

for the Recommendation, ESN has paid particular attention to the links between social services and other key services⁶.

Pillar 3: Children's participation

The UNCRC provides the legal framework for the participation of children, notably **the right to be heard** in all decisions affecting them (Art. 12), the right to freedom of expression (Art. 13) and the right of access to information (Art. 17). The EC Recommendation should therefore be linked to the UNCRC and provide guidance on mechanisms that may facilitate the participation of children in policy-making that affects their lives at all levels of government; this implies training in participation for professionals.

Children's participation is not only important on an individual level, but also at an organisational level in schools, local and regional government. Policy makers should hear the wishes and needs of children, for instance, through local children's councils meeting regularly to discuss issues affecting them in their own communities.⁷

Likewise, ESN recognises that it is equally essential to implement the **child's right to engage in recreational, leisure and cultural activities** (another interpretation of 'participation') in line with Art. 31 of the UNCRC. This right is implemented by ESN Members in some countries (e.g. Belgium).⁸

Monitoring and implementation of the Recommendation

ESN has welcomed the re-introduction of **specific reporting** on poverty and social exclusion and wider social policies (Guideline 10) through the 'National Social Reports'. ESN has advocated for the reports to be structured by population groups; reporting under the heading of 'children' should directly reflect the Recommendation and not only outline policy but also targets, indicators and funding information and provide links to relevant policy documents.⁹

Member States should **involve all relevant** actors (including children) in the development of the national reports, to ensure that they represent an accurate picture of current policy and its successes/failures. Engaging public authorities and civil society working with and for children, and children themselves is vital to ensure that their views are taken into account in future policy-making that may aim to fill in gaps in public policy or improve its consistency.

It is easy to see from **EU household income statistics** that families with three or more children, one-parent families¹⁰ and children living in jobless households are at greater risk of poverty; however, these are not necessarily the factors that make the child/family poor. A more sophisticated analysis of the causes of poverty and social exclusion has to be undertaken. However, some children have been invisible in the statistics on child poverty,

⁶ Our seminar provides case studies of the links between ECEC services and child protection in the UK, Hungary and France. Presentations are available at: <http://www.esn-eu.org/e-news-nov11-autumn-seminar/index.htm>.

⁷ See ESN report on Good Practices in Multi-Agency Work and Children's Participation across Europe

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ESN has previously [published proposals](#) on how to make these reports more accessible and user-friendly.

¹⁰ On the report above TARKI recognises in nearly all EU countries children who live with lone parents or in large families are at greatest risk of poverty in the EU.

e.g. children in institutions, victims of violence, abuse and neglect, and children with disabilities. In their national strategies, Member States should report on the situation of these groups of children, for example by providing on the number of children in care and comparing the number of children who are living in institutions with those living with foster families.¹¹

As the recommendation is about child poverty and wellbeing, a set of **wellbeing indicators** should take account of both material and non-material dimensions in line with the 2009 TARKI study. Material indicators could include affording new clothes, eating fruit and vegetables, or participation in leisure activities.

Non-material indicators, meanwhile, could refer to the outcomes at different stages of a child's development, like education (participation in ECEC, reading and numeracy skills rates of early school leaving), health (breast-feeding rates, life expectancy, mortality, vaccination, obesity, physical activity, access to health and dental care), risk behaviour (e.g. teenage birth, smoking, alcohol, drug and crime) and local environment (e.g. criminality and pollution)¹². These indicators should be broken down by age¹³, household type, work intensity and migrant status, housing and parents' employment.

¹¹ EU Network of Experts on Social Inclusion, "Policy Solutions for fostering inclusive labour markets and for combating child poverty and social exclusion", July 2011.

¹² TARKI (2010): Child poverty and child well-being in the European Union. Report prepared for the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (Unit E.2) of the European Commission, Budapest.

¹³ In considering potential indicators, the starting point should be the set 0-17 already agreed at the social OMC and for breakdowns, please see the TARKI report.

Conclusion

ESN believes that a Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-Being would ensure that children are visible in the Europe 2020 Strategy. It would link the various EU policy initiatives on children (children's rights, ESL, ECEC) on the EU political agenda and provide a firm basis for action to Member States.

ESN sees access to social services as important not only to reduce child poverty and improve child's wellbeing but also essential to achieve the above Europe 2020 targets. The Recommendation should hence advocate universal access to key services for all children and families and access to specialist services for the most disadvantaged children.

The EC Recommendation should be linked to the international legal framework provided by the UNCRC, which requires governments to respect children's right to provision of services, protection against violence and abuse and the participation of children, notably the right to be heard in all decisions affecting them.

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ESN resources

[Resources from ESN seminar 'Investing in Children'](#)

[Good Practices in Multi-Agency Work and Children's Participation across Europe](#)

ESN's Response to Stakeholder Consultation on Child Poverty Recommendation (available by request)



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