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SHORT REPORT

Prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty

Ireland, 18-19 February 2016

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and social inclusion**

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The Peer Review on **Prevention and Early Intervention Services to address children at risk of poverty** took place in Dublin, Ireland, on 18-19 February 2016. The seminar was hosted by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The participating peer countries were Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, and the Netherlands. Attending as stakeholder organisations were Save the Children and SOS Children's Villages International. The Thematic Expert was Hugh Frazer from Maynooth University in Ireland.

1. The policy under review

By EU standards, Ireland has had a relatively high level of poverty and social exclusion among children. During the recent period of economic crisis followed by government austerity measures, the proportion of children living in poverty rose from 8.7% in 2009 to 11.7% in 2013: some 138,000 children in total.

In 2011, Ireland established a separate Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), demonstrating the country's commitment to supporting children. The policy framework has advanced since 2000, when Ireland adopted its first cross-cutting children's policy. In 2014 the government approved a new national children's strategy: **Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures**, running until 2020, with a target of lifting over 70,000 children (0-17 years) out of poverty. The strategy framework sets out 163 policy commitments and identifies key transformational goals, to be achieved through good coordination and better quality of services. It aims for a multi-dimensional approach involving mutual support between the different agencies involved. The DCYA and the Social Protection Ministry (DSP) work together to combat child poverty as a cross-sectoral priority.

The shift towards prevention and early intervention is a theme of the current strategy. A sizeable financial investment by the Irish government and Atlantic Philanthropies (an Irish-American initiative that supports programmes for disadvantaged people), amounting to €164 million over 10 years, goes into a wide range of programmes.

One of these is the innovative **Area Based Childhood** (ABC) programme (2013—2017), an area-based initiative designed to combat child poverty and social exclusion through prevention and early intervention. It has been launched in 13 mainly urban areas like Dublin, Cork and Limerick. Consortia of agencies are implementing evidence-based programmes focused on infant and child health, early-years education and care, and better parenting skills. Funding from the government and Atlantic Philanthropies amounts to €29.7 million over the life of the programme. The ultimate aim is to mainstream learning from the ABC programme into national policy.

The **Preparing for Life**¹ project started as a local home visiting programme to improve school readiness, by motivating parents. It has been scaled up under the ABC programme to involve health services, crèches and schools. It has a rigorous data collection and evaluation element and final reports on outcomes will be issued in May/June 2016. In recent years, school attendance in Ireland has risen from 80% to the mid-90s.

The **Prevention and Early Intervention Network** was set up in 2010 and has 36 members including small, local groups as well as large organisations. It is a forum for collaboration, advocacy and research, and spearheads the **Hands Up for Children** campaign. Its website www.pein.ie offers guidance on implementation.

In 2005-2013, the previous Prevention and Early Intervention initiative supported more than 30 agencies and community groups running 52 programmes, with funding of €127 million. The Irish **Centre for Effective Services** (CES) has carried out detailed assessment of the outcomes. This learning is now being used to improve policies and programmes such as ABC.

¹ See the related websites: <http://preparingforlife.ie/>; <http://geary.ucd.ie/preparingforlife>

Ireland is in the process of developing integrated structures to support the implementation of the strategy and these include county-level **Children and Young People's Services Committees** (CYPSCs), which bring together different agencies including Tusla (the new Child and Family Agency set up in 2014), health and education authorities, police and probation services.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

There was a strong consensus that prevention and early intervention can have a lifelong impact and is the most effective way to combat child poverty and social exclusion. The debate emphasised that the first three years influence the entire life trajectory: 80% of the brain has developed by age three. Antenatal conditions such as maternal health, nutrition and stress also have a long-term impact. But prevention and early intervention can be effective at any age – some issues only become apparent later in life.

There was also a strong consensus that the well-being and development of children has many different elements. Thus effective interventions need a multi-dimensional and holistic approach to meeting the needs of children. This requires effective coordination across policy areas and the planning and delivery of services in a joined up and mutually reinforcing way.

Some participants stressed the difference between child poverty and family poverty, although they are linked and children have the right to grow up in a secure family environment. It is important to work with families on issues like income support and work-life balance, but children have specific needs that should be met in their own right and regardless of family circumstances. These include access to quality services in a broad range of areas such as health, social services, early childcare and education and housing. Also important for their development and well-being is access to music, culture and sports activities.

Participants agreed on the need for evidence-based programmes, but how can conflicting data be assessed? There is no universal answer, but randomised control trials and thorough research are the starting point for stronger expertise. More information is needed, however, and it is important that programmes that are clearly not working should be stopped, although even these can offer useful learning.

Providing comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services remains a challenge in a number of Member States. Politicians tend to respond to crises rather than adopting the long-term strategies needed to make a difference throughout a person's lifetime. Difficulties in securing long-term funding from both private and public sources is an obstacle to the planning of effective prevention and early intervention programmes. Following discussion on the relative merits of universal or targeted measures, it was agreed that both are necessary, with a majority in favour of progressive universalism.

Almost 40% of the Irish population lives in rural areas. The challenge is to ensure quality services also for them. Innovative suggestions included mobile health centres and play facilities, home-based child-minders and use of social media.

Several peer countries stressed the need for a children's rights-based approach, which entails training professionals, and to involve and listen to children themselves and take account of their wishes. Training and mentoring for care professionals is vital, since good programmes may not work if they are not properly implemented. It is important to avoid stigmatising disadvantaged children, so measures such as free breakfasts in schools should be implemented sensitively.

Using the best available evidence to develop accessible, affordable and good quality services is key to lifting children and families out of poverty, and also leads to a better use of resources. There was some discussion about the problem of measuring real cost-effectiveness, and how to target funding in the most efficient way possible, given the post-crisis budgetary constraints in many EU Member States. In this context, monitoring and evaluation are crucially important.

There are, nevertheless, strong economic arguments for prevention and early intervention, since the cost of remedying health and education problems, criminal behaviour etc, later in life is much higher. Participants took the view that the economic case for combating child poverty is not presented forcefully enough. This should complement the strong moral arguments for investing more in the well-being of all children.

3. Key learning elements

1. The **pre-birth and 0-3 years** are vital to a child's future development:
 - Prevention and early intervention are a real long-term investment.
 - More evidence of the returns for children, society & the economy is needed, as are more precise definitions.
2. **Political will** is important to ensure adequate resources and a long term approach. This needs to be built and constantly reinforced:
 - Building public awareness and support will help.
 - It is important to foster collective ownership and responsibility across policy areas for advocating for early intervention and prevention measures.
3. A **broad holistic policy mix** is essential, including quality services, child protection and family support, early childhood education and care (ECEC), health and social services, education, housing, leisure, culture, sport, music, etc. as well as support for parental employment and adequate child and family benefits.
4. Develop a **system-wide approach** that is multi-dimensional, strategic and integrated:
 - Avoid piecemeal and fragmented policies and programmes.
 - Integrate and mainstream learning from the ground.
 - Situate local area-based projects within an overall system-wide approach.
5. Combine **universal and targeted** services:
 - Participants recommended a progressive universalism approach.
 - Reach out to the most vulnerable.
 - Avoid services that stigmatise.
 - A universal approach will increase public support for services and this will help to improve the quality of services.
6. A focus on the **local level** and local coordination is important. It helps to:
 - Identify those most at risk;
 - Identify local needs and priorities and develop integrated local plans;
 - Ensure effective and coordinated delivery;
 - Enhance the participation of all sectors (statutory bodies, NGOs, local government etc.);
 - Increase accountability.
7. It is important to reach out to those **children and families most at risk**. This entails:
 - Area-based and personalised approaches;
 - Identifying people at high risk (e.g., asylum-seekers, Travellers/Roma, remote rural communities, children in care).
8. To ensure **quality**, it is necessary to invest in building capacity across agencies:
 - Develop training and mentoring for professionals;
 - Encourage networking and collaboration;
 - Undertake regular monitoring;
 - Establish quality standards in line with international standards.

9. Importance of **data and evaluation for evidence-based policy**:
 - Focus on outcomes and effectiveness – some are long term;
 - More cost-benefit analysis is needed;
 - An EU wide index for early intervention and prevention could be developed;
 - Compare expenditure profile of countries;
 - Involve stakeholders in research and evaluation.
10. Foster the **participation of children**, parents and communities, for:
 - Personal empowerment and development;
 - Better policy-making;
 - Better service delivery.
11. Put **children's rights** at the heart of policy and programme development and delivery and prioritise the best interests of the child:
 - Guarantee all child-essential services;
 - Participation must be respected as a right;
 - Develop guidelines & training on applying children's rights.
12. Working with and strengthening **families** is vital (but not a substitute for children's rights and services).
13. The **EU level** can provide valuable support through:
 - Building political awareness and commitment;
 - Ensuring the availability of good comparative data and developing benchmarking;
 - Monitoring & making recommendations to Member States;
 - Enabling identification and exchange of learning and best practice;
 - Resourcing early childhood development.

It is, however, necessary to strengthen status of social policies vis-à-vis economic governance and to ensure that economic and monetary policies are child-proofed.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to EU priorities and initiatives

The Peer Review strongly reinforced the importance of strengthening the implementation of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy if the objectives set are to be achieved and it reinforced the relevance of the Commission Recommendation on investing in children and the need to vigorously promote and monitor its implementation.

The **Europe 2020 Strategy** identified fighting poverty and social exclusion as one of its five key priorities for 2020, setting the specific target of reducing the number of people in Europe at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 20 million. Before the crisis, 19 million of the 80 million people at risk of poverty in the EU were children. Thus, although reducing child poverty was not a specific Europe 2020 target, it forms an integral part of meeting the objectives. This is especially important from a long-term perspective, since children who are the victims of poverty in their early years are less likely to acquire the skills and qualifications they need to enter the jobs market and develop their human capital and social potential later in life. A second Europe 2020 priority focuses on cutting the number of early-school leavers and increasing the proportion of young people completing tertiary education. One of the strategy's seven flagship initiatives aims to enhance the performance of education systems and facilitate the entry of young people into the labour market.

In the framework of its **Social Investment Package**, adopted in 2013, the European Commission issued a Recommendation on ***Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage***. The Peer Review confirmed that prevention and early intervention are the most effective ways to break this cycle by promoting the interests

of the child from an early age - or taking prompt action as and when appropriate - and thus avoiding more difficult and costly remedial measures later in life.

Under Europe 2020, Ireland is to cut the number at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 200,000. One of the key ways it is addressing this challenge is through prevention and early intervention, seeking to reduce child poverty, social exclusion and the range of problems arising from a poor start in life, and to cut early school leaving and the share of young people with low education and who are not in further education or training.

One proposal arising from the meeting was for the European Commission to develop a Prevention and Early Intervention Index, promoting a shared understanding of what prevention and early intervention means and incorporating the three pillars of the Commission's Recommendation: access to resources, access to quality services and children's rights to participate. Such an index would help the monitoring and reporting of Member States performance in this area and allow for cross country comparisons.

