ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”

Sweden

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The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in July 2014 on the initiative of the European Commission to provide high-quality and timely independent information, advice, analysis and expertise on social policy issues in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

The ESPN is managed by the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and APPLICA, together with the European Social Observatory (OSE).

For more information on the ESPN, see: http://ec.europa.eu/socmain.jsp?catId=1135&langId=en

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Summary

At-risk-of-poverty rates have gradually increased among children in Sweden. According to Eurostat (EU-SILC data), there was a strong drop in the AROP numbers in 2015, but this change is not seen in the official poverty indicators of Statistics Sweden. Generally, children in Sweden have very low rates of severe material deprivation, also according to more specific indicators of child deprivation.

Family policies in Sweden have, in a number of ways, been further strengthened during the 2000s. The Swedish model of family policy strongly supports dual earner families, and labour market attachment for single parents, through its combination of cash benefits (parental leave benefits) and very high coverage of highly subsidised child care. The recent policy actions in early education and care, such as efforts to strengthen educational qualifications among staff, are in accordance with the Recommendations from the European Commission. The same conclusion can largely be applied to the public health system for children. For the educational system at large, such development has not happened. To what extent the recommendations from the report of a recent school commission will be implemented is yet to be seen, but the suggestions are in line with the Recommendations from the commission.

When it comes to children’s rights, the Swedish situation is somewhat of a puzzle. Sweden is in many ways a forerunner, such as signing the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, very little has happened in terms of legislation. The Swedish legislation simply is not in line with the intentions of the CRC. It is however the intention of the present Swedish government to make CRC part of Swedish legislation.

Mostly, our conclusion is that policies have remained much the same since February 2013 (see Annex Summary table). However, it should be noted that approaches with regards to both children’s rights and suggested reforms in the school system could be viewed as a first step towards the implementation of the Recommendations on investing in children.

Although Swedish children’s resources, services and rights are comparatively good seen from a European perspective we recommend actions on the following issues:

- The integration of the high number of unaccompanied minors among asylum seekers that arrived in 2015 is a key challenge for the pillar of services, including the educational system.
- The perspective of children’s right to participate must be strengthened in order to fulfil the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in terms of provision, protection and participation.
- The access to quality education for all children must be strengthened. Sweden has, according to PISA studies, a high degree of inequality in performance depending on schools and socioeconomic family background.
- Combatting poverty, both through employment strategies and through income security provision, for marginalised children. At present, the at-risk-of-poverty rates are extremely high for children living in single parent households and for children whose parents, or themselves, have immigrated to Sweden.
1 Overall situation with regard to child poverty and social exclusion

Seen over a longer time horizon, at-risk-of-poverty rates (AROP) have increased in Sweden both for the population at large and among children. Accordingly, official data from Statistics Sweden suggest that the prevalence of AROP in children increased from around 12 to almost 19% between 2000 and 2015. However, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, AROP numbers for children have declined markedly over the last two years (2014-2015) from the peak value in 2013. It should be noted that these figures are expressed in absolute numbers and not in proportions, but the proportions also decreased considerably between 2014 and 2015, according to EU-SILC data. This decline is actually not at all noted in the official estimates from Statistics Sweden. Instead, using another equivalence scale, these estimates suggest rather stable proportions during the past few years of children living in households with incomes below 60% of median income. In fact, we even find a continuation of the increase that can be seen in the longer time-span (mentioned above), but only slightly so (Statistics Sweden 2017). ¹

The extent of severe material deprivation according to the EU definition is very low in Sweden, although one should recognise that non-random non-response probably leads to an underestimation in the EU-SILC data. More interesting from a Swedish perspective is the extent of jobless households with children. Around 5.2% of all children lived in so-called quasi-jobless households in 2015. In sum, the latest EU-SILC data reports that 86% of all children in Sweden do not fulfil any of the three overall criteria on the Europe 2020 “at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion (AROPE). An alternative indicator of more specific child material deprivation with data from 2014 once again highlights Sweden’s position within Europe. Although this indicator reports a slightly higher prevalence (4%), it is the lowest number within the EU-28 (see further statistical annex to Frazer and Marlier 2017).

Startling differences in AROP rates still exists in Sweden for children living in different household types. While the AROP rate for households with two adults and two dependent children is 4.7%, it is more than sevenfold higher for single persons with dependent children (34.9%); a relatively common household category. Whereas Sweden in the past was especially successful in combatting poverty among vulnerable groups such as single mothers, this has changed dramatically, beginning in the aftermath of the Swedish recession of the 1990s (Fritzell et al 2014). Another marked difference in the AROP rate is between children of native born parents and children of immigrated parents – an issue that is related to the strong spatial segregation that was highlighted in the previous country report of investing in children (Halleröd 2014).

Guio et al. (forthcoming) have recently also produced estimates of more specific indicators of child deprivation consisting of 17 different items. According to their analysis of EU-SILC data, only 4% of Swedish children lack at least three of these items, a fraction that is the lowest in the EU (see further in the statistical annex to Frazer and Marlier 2017).

In summary, at-risk-of-poverty-rates are relatively high among children in Sweden and there has been a long-term increase of these rates. Differences between household types are nowadays very high and the AROP numbers are especially high among children living in single-adult households and among children who have immigrated or whose parents have immigrated. The extent of severe material deprivation and more specific child indicators of deprivation are at the same time very low, and are lower than almost all other European countries.

¹ The difference in equivalence scales is probably the reason for the higher level in the official Swedish estimates, but is highly unlikely to produce the different changes in proportions between 2014 and 2015.
Figure 1: Trends in number of people (whole population) at risk of poverty or social exclusion, thousands, 2008-2015, Sweden

Source: EU-SILC, Statistical annex to ESPN Synthesis Report (Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2017))

Figure 2: Trends in number of children aged 0-17 at risk of poverty or social exclusion, thousands, 2008-2015, Sweden

Source: EU-SILC, Statistical annex to ESPN Synthesis Report (Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2017))
2 Assessment of overall approach and governance

From an international perspective, Sweden is often considered pioneering in providing social support and securing the livelihood of families with children. Both cash benefits and services targeted at families with children are comprehensive in Sweden compared with many other European countries. Whereas other areas of the Swedish system of cash benefits have suffered from eroded benefits and more stringent qualifying conditions in recent decades (Fritzell et al., 2014; Bäckman and Nelson, 2017), family policies have largely been strengthened (Ferrarini, 2006). In services, it is more difficult to identify any substantial cutbacks and improvements. However, it should be noted that both child care and compulsory education have been reorganised substantially in recent decades, involving processes of marketization.

Swedish family policy is universal, similar to many other areas of the Swedish welfare state. Thus, in general terms, the main building blocks of Swedish family policy apply equally to all families with children, irrespective of their income or social status. Swedish family policy is also clearly multidimensional, providing an integrated approach to remove structural obstacles for participation by combining prevention and support. One example is the combination of a comprehensive parental leave benefit and universal childcare (heavily subsidised by international standards), which supports the gainful employment of both parents (Korpi et al., 2013). This so-called earner-carer model of family policy was reinforced by the abolishment of the home care allowance in 2016. Another example is the idea of life-long learning that characterises Swedish child care and educational policy (see more below).

The universal character of the Swedish welfare state provides for inclusive policies, where the diversity of needs is comprehensively considered. Nonetheless, some policies are targeted to cover the needs of particularly vulnerable groups. One example is means-tested social assistance (Försörjningsstöd), which includes special rates for families with children. Another example is the housing allowance for families with dependent children. This housing allowance is income-tested and geared towards families with low incomes.

Although the Swedish economy was affected by the global financial crisis that appeared in 2008/2009, impacts were less salient than in most other European countries. The crisis also had limited consequences for family policy, and essentially there have been no major financial crisis-induced policy changes. By comparison, the refugee crisis that appeared in Europe a few years later appeared to be more challenging. In 2015, around 163,000 asylum seekers came to Sweden (amounts roughly to 1.7% of the Swedish population). Almost 35,000 asylum seekers were unaccompanied minors. The integration of such a large number of asylum seekers poses challenges for many different but integrated areas of the Swedish welfare state, including not only social policy but also the educational system, labour market policy, and the role and functioning of civil society. In 2015, the Swedish parliament decided to provide municipalities, county councils, and NGO’s with more money to handle the refugee crisis (Fritzell, 2016). Amongst other things, the increased budget has been used to provide housing and benefits for unaccompanied minors. Moreover, the extra SEK 10 billion ( EUR 1.1 billion) that in 2016 it was decided to allocate to municipalities to contribute to local welfare services was partly distributed according to the number of asylum seekers that the municipality received (Palme, Heap and Fritzell 2016).

3 Pillar 1 – Access to resources

As noted above, the Swedish family policy model is often considered to support dual earner families by facilitating gainful employment of both mothers and fathers, often on a full time basis. The comparatively low child poverty rates in Sweden, in combination with high rates of female labour force participation, suggest that this integrated system of cash benefits and care services is comparatively successful in promoting adequate living standards among families with children (Bäckman and Ferrarini, 2010). Below, we briefly outline the various cash benefits that apply specifically to parents with dependent children, and
describe the most significant changes introduced since 2013. Overall, changes to the Swedish system of family policy have been quite modest.

**Child allowance** – This benefit is universal and provides financial support to children and their parents. Parents with sole custody receive the entire child allowance. Parents with dual custody each receive half of the allowance, depending on when the child is born. The allowance is SEK 1,050 SEK (EUR 111) per month for each child. There is a large family supplement from the second child on. When the child reaches the age of 16, the child allowance is transformed into a study allowance. The child allowance was not X updated between 2013 and 2017, and over this period the large family supplement was only updated twice, in 2015 and 2017.

**Parental leave benefit** – This benefit is universal and paid for a total of 480 days per child. Three levels of compensation exist (earnings-related benefits, a flat-rate basic benefit, and a flat-rate minimum benefit). The earnings-related benefit is paid for 390 days (80% of earnings). An earnings-ceiling applies, above which benefits are not paid. The earnings-ceiling is uprated each year in line with changes in consumer prices. The flat-rate minimum benefit (SEK 180 / EUR 18.5 per day) is paid during the remaining 90 days of leave. The minimum benefit has not been updated since 2006. The flat-rate basic benefit (SEK 250 / EUR 26 per day) is paid to parents who lack or have very low earned income. Since 2004, the flat rate basic benefit has been uprated three times, in 2004 (SEK 180 per day), in 2013 (SEK 225 per day) and in 2016 (SEK 250 per day). The benefit can be disbursed between 0 and 7 days per week, according to parents’ choice. The benefit can also be taken part-time; 75, 50, 25 or 12.5% of a day. This way, parents can stay at home longer. However, to maintain the level of the earnings-related benefit when on full-time parental leave, the benefit must be taken 5 days per week when the child has turned one.

In February 2016, the Swedish Government launched a new independent inquiry for a major overhaul of the Swedish parental leave system. The main objectives are to modernise and simplify the current legislation, as well as to strengthen conditions for equal parenting. The final report is expected in October, 2017. However, an intermediate report was delivered to the Government in October 2016, suggesting changes in the possibilities of immigrants to qualify for benefits. The proposed objective of this intermediate report was to suggest new measures in existing legislation that would strengthen the labour market participation of immigrants with children. The inquiry proposed that a restriction for entitlements to parental leave benefits should be introduced. It is suggested that this restriction be linked to the date that a child becomes a resident of Sweden.

**Temporary parental benefit** – this benefit provides economic compensation for parents who need to take care of sick children (until the age of 12), or who need to abstain from work for other reasons when children are in need of special temporary care. Temporary parental benefit can be received for at most 120 days per child per year. The amount of the benefit is 80% of earnings up to a ceiling. Previously, parents needed a certificate from their child care centre or the school that their child was sick and had to stay home. This proof of sickness was abolished in 2013.

**Maintenance support** – this benefit is provided to parents who have custody of a child and where the absent parent is not paying alimony. The benefit is SEK 1,573 (EUR 161) per month. It was raised from SEK 1,273 per month in 2015. In 2016, the obligation of the Social Insurance Office to assist parents in reaching agreements on alimony was strengthened.

**Housing Allowance for families with children** – this benefit is income-tested and varies according to housing costs. Only one income limit applies, which stayed the same between 1997 and 2016. However, in 2017 the income limit was raised from SEK 117,000 to SEK 127,000 (EUR 12,000 – 13,000) per year for dual-parent families and from SEK 58,500 to SEK 63,500 (EUR 6,000 – 6,500) per year for single parents.

**Attendance allowance for children** – this benefit makes it possible for parents with disabled children to hire personal assistants, or to reduce their own labour market participation.
### 4 Pillar 2 – Access to affordable quality services

**Early childhood education and care** – Childcare (ages 0-5), preschool (age six) and after school care (ages 6-12) are offered to everyone, are highly subsidised and are widely used. Since 2013, two main policies have been adopted. An ordinance on government grants for interventions to reduce the size of children’s groups (SFS 2016:1373) came into effect in 2017. In 2016, the government decided to take measures to broaden the educational activities and to strengthen the professional skills of childcare staff.

Childcare in Sweden is comprehensive and the educational ambition has been strengthened since the late 1990s, when a curriculum was implemented. We assess the existing services and recent reforms as being in accordance with the recommendations.

**Education** – Since the year 2000, student performance in the PISA-exam has dropped and differences in performance results depending on schools and socioeconomic family background has increased dramatically (Skolverket, 2013; OECD 2016). In 2015, a school commission was launched to address these problems. The commission’s final report was presented in April 2017, which included a range of suggestions to improve performance and equality and reduce segregation in the school system.

Schools are generally free of charge, but since the 1990s, Sweden has had a negative development in regard to several recommendations. We assess that the school commission’s instructions cover most EC recommendations. To what extent the suggestions from the school commission will be implemented is yet to be seen.

**Health** – Paediatric clinics monitor children’s health and growth and give advice to parents. These are available for children up to age six (free of charge). After that, children are referred to the school health services (also free of charge). In most counties, appointments at health centres, youth clinics and other outpatient facilities are free of charge for everyone below 20. When in contact with health- and dental care practitioners, people are entitled to interpreters. However, a recent report showed that there is a shortage of qualified interpreters in the health care system (NBHW, 2016).

For years, measures have been taken to enhance accessibility to psychiatric care for children aged 0-17 (*Barn- och ungdomspsykiatrin, BUP*). Still, far from all counties meet the set targets for waiting times. Waiting times vary greatly between counties. In March 2017, the government announced that SEK 100 million (EUR 10.3 million) will be spent on improving psychiatric care for children and young adults.

In January 2016, all drugs included in the high-cost ceiling system became free of charge for children up to age 18. In 2016, a proposal for new legislation was presented, including reforms to increase the upper age limit for free dental care to 23 years, and to make contraceptives free of charge for people below 21 years of age.

We assess that the comprehensive system, with health monitoring and parental advice from birth, is beneficial for the general population. The removal of fees is a measure that will further benefit disadvantaged children. Improving accessibility to psychiatric care is a key target. Moreover, increasing the number of interpreters would be a way of reaching potentially vulnerable groups, which would in turn benefit the children of the parents with insufficient Swedish language skills.

**Housing segregation and homelessness** – In 2007, the government promised that no families with children should be evicted from their homes. A report commissioned by the government was presented in 2011 which included suggestions on how to prevent evictions that involve children. The “zero vision” has not yet been reached, but the number of families with children evicted per year has fallen from 716 in 2008 to 387 in 2016 (official data from the Swedish Enforcement Authority).

As stated in several of our earlier ESPN-reports and in the Investing in Children report from 2013, economic inequalities have increased in Sweden. These inequalities have a strong spatial component (Fritzell et al 2014; Halleröd 2014; Nelson & Fritzell 2015). In 2015, the government presented a long-term reform programme to lower segregation between 2017
and 2025. Reforms explicitly targeted at children were: support to preschools in socially disadvantaged areas, increased support to schools with low performance results, and to have sports and youth coaches in socially disadvantaged areas. In 2017, a government appointed investigator was commissioned to create a new administrative authority to counteract segregation.

The government has addressed the problems and the broad reform programme covers the Commission’s recommendations. As yet, there are no outcomes that can be evaluated.

5 Pillar 3 – Children’s right to participate

Sweden has been seen as a forerunner when it comes to children’s rights, being the first nation in the world to prohibit all forms of corporal punishment of children by their caretakers and one of the first countries to sign the CRC. Although the present government has declared the intention to incorporate CRC in the Swedish legislation, the hitherto weak imprint of CRC on Swedish legislation has remained a puzzle. With regard to the legal reform work, it has been observed that the lawmaker recognises the parents’ rather than children’s participatory rights (Heimer and Palme 2016). The Ombudsman for Children (BO) in Sweden claims that Swedish legislation simply is not in line with the intentions of the CRC (BO, 2012).

In the area of education, pupils’ participation was early on regarded to be important both for their effective learning and for their well-being. Participation is also looked upon as a democratic right in the mature welfare state (SOU 1985:30). In the social services (Heimer and Palme 2016), legislation was first adjusted to be in line with the CRC in the area of family disputes and child protection. Still, in the area of family disputes, no progress to strengthen children’s participatory rights can be reported and the children’s agency, i.e. notion that children have rights and views that should be taken into account in decisions concerning them, continues to be underemphasised. Reforms in the area of child protection have been slow and gradual, but in the last few years there has been some progress in strengthening children’s right to voice, mainly through reducing hindrances such as the need for parental consent for children to be heard by the social services. When it comes to child poverty, it can be noted that children are only able to receive benefits through being part of the family unit and they are not seen as relevant actors in their own right.

Hence, the progress the Swedish lawmaker has made is limited (Heimer and Palme 2016). Vulnerable children are not guaranteed a legal right to voice, but are only given informal opportunities to be heard by the social services, while it is foremost parents who are regarded as clients in all three areas of the social services we studied. This appears to follow from the logic of the lawmaker recognising parents’ rather than children’s participatory rights. This parental focus has blocked a more ambitious implementation of the CRC and a development towards a more ‘child-focused’ policy regime (cf. Gilbert et al 2011). Swedish (and other) lawmakers have good reasons to reflect on the options to clarify children’s participatory rights in national legislation.

The recognition of children’s agency appears necessary in order to unlock the stalemate in child policy development in Sweden, as well as to dissolve the tension between children as ‘beings’ and ‘becomings’.

2 The tension between children as “beings” versus “becomings” is often stressed in policy documents and research on children. Whereas the latter focus on the future, the importance for children’s well-being as adults, the former imply a concern for the child here and now and that the child is a social actor to be understood in its own right.
6 Addressing child poverty and social exclusion and child well-being in the European Semester

The issue of child poverty and social exclusion has not been highlighted in National Reform Programmes (NRPs) or other reports. The CSR and country reports have especially highlighted the problem with the educational system, both the deterioration of educational outcomes and the polarisation trends in educational attainment (see for example the discussion in the Country Report 2016 (European Commission 2016). This is also related to the well-known problems of the Swedish housing market, which has repeatedly been highlighted in the CSR for several years. These problems are also affecting children. Not least in the sense that increasing spatial segregation between socio-economic groups and between natives and immigrants lead to different opportunities.

7 Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments

The 2014-2020 Swedish ESF programme has no doubt been formulated to support the implementation of the ‘Recommendation of investing in children’ and is done so in line with the ambition to break cycles of disadvantage. There is a very clear focus on youth, education and employment. While this is well-motivated given the challenges of young persons in Sweden, it leaves less room for attention to younger children.

Part of the programme is discussing policy from a rights perspective and does so in relation to the rights of disabled persons. It seems warranted to have a stronger rights-based perspective on issues related also to other groups, not least vulnerable children. The participation of vulnerable groups in the provisioning of various services appears to be especially important, also on a programmatic level.

The focus on youth, education and employment in the programme is also mirrored in the project catalogues of ESF. There are a number of projects that are focused on the completion of basic education and not least on preventing drop-out. There appears to be an even stronger emphasis on programmes aimed at facilitating the transition from education to the labour market. It is also evident that the programme identifies the special challenges for foreign-born children in both schools and school to work transitions.

Another way of addressing this issue is to start from the overall ESF funds and see how the budget is allocated. Is it used to support the implementation of the Investing in Children recommendation? Overall, the Swedish budget is relatively small: EUR 818 million in total over the complete period 2014-2020. The bulk, slightly above 50%, in the Swedish budget refers to employment (thematic objective (TO) 8 in EU-terms), whereas around 20 and 25% refer to social exclusion (TO9) and education (TO10) respectively.

It is impossible to pinpoint the amount going to children since programmes allocated to the adults in the family may also be highly important for children. Looking at specific budget categories one can note that the budget category for 10i “reducing and preventing early school leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early-childhood, primary and secondary education” is zero in the Swedish case. The employment programmes are on the other hand concentrated on integrating long-term unemployed and young persons (TO8i and TO8ii).

The amount committed by early 2017 is a bit lower than 50% for most categories and the co-funding is always two-thirds of the total amount. So far, expenditures already spent and declared to the Commission are very low – around 2.5% in total.

When it comes to the project catalogue for 2014-2020 it is a bit difficult to identify a participatory dimension. This motivates a note on a project that was carried out in the previous programme period that has obvious relevance for the participation of children. In 2012 the ESF supported an educational programme for social workers in the Stockholm region. The educational programme had its focus on children and the kinds of instruments that the social services are increasingly using in order to streamline the services to the CRC. The programme was coupled with efforts on the part of the involved municipalities to
engage the trained staff to disseminate new methods and insights. The programme has resulted in a broad effort to inform on ‘how to talk to children’ with a clear agency perspective on children’s participation. This has included ads in the major newspapers in the region and web material. Moreover, the city of Stockholm has initiated a project with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) on this note, and with the foundation Allmänna barnhuset on how to deal with children in violent contexts.
References


Guio, A.-C., Gordon, D., Marlier, E., Najera, H. and Pomati, M. (forthcoming), ”Measuring and monitoring child material deprivation in the EU”.


(see table Andel med låg disponibel inkomst per k.e. – ålder (Proportion AROP by age). Stockholm: Sweden.
### Annex: Summary Table – Progress since February 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area or approach</th>
<th>Overall have policies/approaches been strengthened, stayed much the same or been weakened since February 2013 (in the light of the EU Recommendation)?</th>
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<td>Stronger</td>
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<td><strong>Governance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Multi-dimensional strategy with synergies between policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Children’s rights approach &amp; effective mainstreaming of children’s policy and rights</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Evidence-based approach</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Involvement of relevant stakeholders (including children)</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access to resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Parents’ participation in the labour market</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Child &amp; family income support</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access to resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• ECEC</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>• Health</td>
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<td>• Housing &amp; living environment</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>• Family support &amp; alternative care</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s right to participate</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• in play, recreation, sport &amp; cultural activities</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• in decision making</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester</strong></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td><strong>Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments</strong></td>
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