



Strengthening social protection for children in Greece

ESPN Flash Report 2019/08

DIMITRIS ZIOMAS, ANTOINETTA CAPELLA AND DANAI KONSTANTINIDOU – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

JANUARY 2019

Description

A number of initiatives have been launched by the Government throughout 2018 with a view to strengthening children's social protection, especially for those from vulnerable groups. Although these are moving in the right direction, they remain partial and are not underpinned by an overall approach to tackling child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being.

As part of the reform of the social welfare system in Greece, underway since 2017, particular emphasis has been placed throughout 2018 on launching initiatives to strengthen social protection for children. These include the following initiatives:

- A new reform of the family benefits scheme, mainly involving the consolidation of the two main family/child benefits into a new "Child Benefit"; the new scheme focuses more on those families with children in need, by providing greater financial support for those on a lower income.
- The creation by the municipalities of new early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities. The Government has allocated €15 million (drawn from the national part of the Public Investment Programme for 2018) to many municipalities to this end. It is estimated that this will eventually increase the number of child places available by 10,000.
- Further actions aimed at the integration of refugee and migrant children into the formal educational system in Greece. This concerns mainly a significant increase in the number of morning "Reception Classes", operating in certain public primary and secondary school units located in Zones of Educational Priority. These classes are part of the formal educational system and aim at supporting pupils with limited knowledge of the Greek language,

including refugees and migrants, who attend the mainstream classes. It should be noted that the "Reception/ Preparatory Classes for the Education of Refugees", launched in October 2016 and targeted at refugee and migrant children who live in official refugee sites, also continue to operate (during afternoon hours) in certain public schools on the mainland.

- Extension of the "special nutrition free school meals" programme, which for the school year 2018/19 covers in total about 153,000 pupils in 954 state primary schools, representing 25% of the total number of pupils in all state primary schools. This programme, which has been under implementation over the last three years, offers free school meals to all the children who attend pre-selected (subject to specific criteria) public primary schools, situated in various municipalities.
- A new regulatory framework for the guardianship of unaccompanied minors who arrive in Greece. Among the main provisions are the establishment of a "Guardianship Commissioner for Unaccompanied Minors" and the creation and functioning of three distinct registers: a) the unaccompanied minors' register; b) the guardianship commissioners' register; and c) the register of accommodation centres for unaccompanied minors.
- The adoption of a new law to promote adoption and fostering. This contains a number of provisions to

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

reform and simplify the relevant terms and conditions, and establishes: a) a "National Council for Adoption and Fostering"; b) a "National Adoption Register"; c) a "National Fostering Register"; and d) a number of special national registers for both the minors to be adopted or fostered and the prospective adoptive/foster parents.

In addition, a pilot programme has been developed for the deinstitutionalisation of disabled persons and, in particular, disabled children living in degrading conditions in certain residential care structures. The plan is to create and run a number of "Supported Living Houses" to accommodate them and improve their living conditions and the quality of care provided.

Finally, the Government recently announced the establishment of 100 "Family Support Centres", to address issues concerning families with children and to respond to their everyday needs. Although their actual tasks are yet to be defined, these are expected to function within the existing Community Centres, which have been in operation since 2017 to support municipalities in implementing various social policy measures and initiatives at the local level.

Outlook & commentary

As evidence suggests, children in Greece are among the groups who have been proportionally most affected by the fiscal and economic crisis. EU-SILC data reveal that the at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion rate for children increased by 7.5 percentage points between 2008 (28.7%) and 2017 (36.2%). To address this situation, a number of Government initiatives have been taken since January 2018, as described above.

The reformed "Child Benefit" scheme and the extension of the coverage of the "special nutrition free school meals" programme are considered important initiatives

likely to contribute to reducing child poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, the increase in the number of ECEC facilities is expected to increase the number of affordable places available, thereby reducing the excess of demand over supply for ECEC services, and ensuring that more children can take up their right to formal ECEC. It is questionable, however, whether this initiative alone can meet the ever-increasing needs in this area. Besides, no other initiatives have yet been taken to deal with the qualitative aspects of ECEC services.

As to the initiatives taken for the integration of refugee and migrant children into the formal educational system, these are considered very important steps towards the integration of this vulnerable group into Greek society, ensuring at the same time their right to education. Yet, certain organisational shortcomings remain. The establishment of a regulatory framework for the guardianship of unaccompanied minors, a particularly vulnerable group, is considered a very positive development, which is likely to contribute significantly to strengthening their social protection rights, though its full implementation is still pending.

Furthermore, the new law on "Child Adoption and Fostering" is expected to help to improve the lives of children in residential institutions, by facilitating their transition from institutional to family-based care. Among other things, it simplifies and sets deadlines for the relevant procedures, which, in turn, is expected to reduce waiting times for the completion of adoption and fostering processes. In addition, the law gives -for the first time in Greece- the right to same-sex couples living in a civil partnership to become foster parents. Full implementation of this law, together with the completion of the pilot programme for the deinstitutionalisation of disabled children and adults, may

contribute to the design and implementation of an integrated plan for children's deinstitutionalisation, long awaited in Greece.

Even though the above-mentioned initiatives are positive steps, they are still partial and are not part of an overall strategic action plan – accompanied by a public investment plan- for tackling child poverty and social exclusion and for promoting child well-being.

Further reading

Ziomas, D., Bouzas, N., Capella, A. and Konstantinidou, D. (2018), "ESPN Flash Report - New reform of the family benefits scheme in Greece", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=19709&langId=en>.

Ziomas, D., Theodoroulakis, M., Capella, A. and Konstantinidou D. (2018), "ESPN Flash Report - Reforming the social welfare system in Greece", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=19997&langId=en>.

Ziomas, D., Capella, A. and Konstantinidou, D. (2017), "ESPN Flash Report - Integrating refugee and migrant children into the educational system in Greece", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18245&langId=en>.

Author

[Dimitris Ziomas](#), Antoinetta Capella and Danai Konstantinidou (National Centre for Social Research - EKKE, Greece)