



Policy Conclusions from the Thematic Review
on
"Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion" (March 2018)

1. Scene Setter

Despite the continued favourable evolution in the employment and social situation in the EU, in 2016 there were still over 25 million children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Child poverty is an important concern, as it impacts not only the immediate well-being of children, but also affects the society as a whole.

Inequalities and poverty tend to persist from childhood to old age, as children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely to do well in school, enjoy good health and realise their full potential later in life, when they are at a higher risk of becoming unemployed and poor and socially excluded¹. From the point of view of the society, child poverty and social exclusion leads to an inability to harness the best of children's talents and could also require support for those in need throughout their lives.

Therefore, addressing the main drivers of child poverty and social exclusion is of utmost importance: they include the employment status of parents, limited access to pre-school education, health and social services and low income support. Furthermore, integrated and preventive approaches and early intervention are called for in order to lower the share of children at risk, to break the poverty cycle across generations and contribute to inclusive growth.

Early childhood policies such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are considered to be key policy tools for supporting children's cognitive, emotional and social development, preventing and tackling poverty and promoting social mobility. In addition, timely interventions already at a young age are highly cost-effective because they prevent future expense necessary to overcome the negative consequences of a lack of education and skills, social exclusion and unemployment. Child-focused early childhood policies are an important tool for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child.

¹ SPC report (2012) *Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being*.

2. Policy framework

The topic of social inclusion and well-being of children is not a new one for the SPC. In 2008, on the basis of an in-depth examination of policies targeted at children in poverty and the work done at ISG, the SPC proposed various analytical tools and policy recommendations. Renewed in 2012 under the title "Combating and preventing child poverty, promoting the well-being of children²", the Committee's analysis was used to prepare the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation. Work on improving the EU toolbox for monitoring child poverty has been on-going and in 2017 the SPC ISG adopted a child-specific deprivation indicator.

At an EU level, important efforts have been made to combat child poverty and address the well-being of children, notably through the ongoing implementation of the 2013 "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage Recommendation" with an explicit link to the European Semester and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The 2014 council conclusions on protection and promotion on the rights of the child also addressed child poverty and the impact it has on children as well as equal access to quality services.

In the area of ECEC, the European Council set the Barcelona Targets to improve the provision of childcare in 2002³. In 2009, the Education Council adopted the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (ET 2020). In this context, a thematic Working Group was established and its work led to the publication of a Quality Framework for ECEC⁴.

The recently adopted European Pillar of Social Rights contains several principles relevant to the rights and well-being of children. Most notable among those is Principle 11, dedicated to childcare and support for children.

²Combating and preventing child poverty, promoting the well-being of children:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/keyDocuments.jsp?policyArea=&type=0&country=0&year=0&advSearchKey=childpoverty&mode=advancedSubmit&langId=en>

³ Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council 15 and 16 March 2002,
http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf

⁴ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf

3. Thematic Review findings

In line with the policy priorities of the Bulgarian presidency, the SPC held a thematic discussion on "Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion" in March 2018. The discussion has been structured around the following questions for discussion: i) how to improve access to quality ECEC for the disadvantaged children and how to better reach parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds? ii) how to improve the integrated delivery of early childhood development and protection services? and iii) how to deliver on EPSR principle 11 at EU level and what role should the social Open Method of Coordination (OMC) play in this respect. Presentations by the European Commission and UNICEF set the stage, while Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Sweden and Slovenia shared country experiences and best practices.

Despite the large diversity of the social and educational systems across Europe, a number of common findings and challenges were highlighted during the review, supporting the importance of exchange of best practices and the value of peer learning:

3.1 Improving Access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds

- Participation in early childhood education and care programmes is beneficial to all children, but is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with special needs. Their early involvement is key in preventing the development of competence gaps which can hamper a good start already in primary education.
- An effective ECEC system is one where activities are child-centred and dedicated to the well-being and development of the child. It should offer equal access to quality services to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with migration background, or with special needs. Experience from several countries shows that those children stand to profit most from ECEC, yet they are less well represented in ECEC.
- Policies and services need to be family-centred, as during the children's first years families provide the first and most important context for children to grow and develop. Complementing the key role of the family and supporting parents with ECEC is important, as it can lay the essential foundations for successful lifelong learning, social integration and employability.

- Affordable, accessible and high-quality early education and care, along with appropriate tax and benefit incentives is a major factor in enabling parents (especially mothers) to work. This is particularly important, as the labour market situation of parents has been identified as one of the key drivers for child poverty, (alongside with limited access to social services and low income support).
- Well-designed work-life balance policies, such as family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements, can also support parent's participation in the labour market. Several countries have reformed their schemes to support a more gender-balanced take-up, highlighting the importance of fathers' involvement for children's well-being, health and development.
- Pre-school education is also a key priority in laying the foundation for further education that would ensure that children acquire the skills which will enable them to access skilled, well-paid jobs, enabling them to build their own way out of poverty.

3.2 Improving the integrated delivery of Early Childhood development and protection services

- Well-designed and well-coordinated interventions - integrating health, education, care, social protection, finance and other sectors - can achieve concrete results for children from disadvantaged background and their families, particularly those from the most marginalised and segregated communities.
- Practices that deepen the partnership between parents and early childhood education centres and schools have been found to have an especially positive impact for children in disadvantaged families. ECEC can be used to establish personal contact with the parents of such children. Through follow-up house visits and the use of designated family case worker(s) it is possible to coordinate and integrate the various types of support (housing, debt relief, counselling for better parent skills).
- The combination of universal policies promoting the well-being of all children and targeted policies directed at, but not stigmatizing, the most vulnerable families is a key element in the development of effective strategies.
- The availability of trained service providers and experts and their more equal geographical distribution and regional accessibility is important to ensure equal access to the integrated delivery of services.

3.3 Delivering on principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights

- While the centre of gravity of social policies is with the Member States at national and local level, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is a joint responsibility of the

Member States, EU institutions, social partners and other stakeholders. This implementation can be supported through a variety of processes, such as the *European Semester* and various EU-level policy initiatives, such as the Work Life Balance Initiative or the upcoming Council Recommendation on high quality early childhood education and care systems.

- Mutual learning and sharing of good policy practices are key social OMC tools to deliver on these principles.
- The importance of monitoring the implementation of the Pillar principles has been highlighted. The new child-specific material and social deprivation indicator, approved by the SPC, provides a broader complementary vision of children's well-being and living conditions that can be used alongside other existing monitoring frameworks.
- Many family-oriented policies qualify for financial support from the European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), mainly the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional development Fund (ERDF). European Funding can serve as a catalyst for reforms, which can be later sustained through national budgets. It is therefore important to maintain and event strengthen the existing funding possibilities for children in the upcoming post-2020 programming period.