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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Taking stock of the 2013 Recommendation on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage"

Commission Staff Working Document

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS USED	2
1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. CURRENT STATE OF PLAY	5
2.1. Scene setter.....	5
2.2. The role of the European Commission in supporting the implementation of the Recommendation.....	7
3. IMPACT OF THE RECOMMENDATION ON EU POLICY-MAKING	10
3.1. The European Semester	10
3.2. 2014-2020 ESIF programming.....	10
4. PROGRESS ACHIEVED BY PILLAR IN THE MEMBER STATES.....	11
4.1. First pillar: Support parents through access to paid work, child and family benefits	14
4.1.1. Active Labour Market Policy	14
4.1.2. Minimum Income Schemes and Unemployment Benefits	16
4.1.3. Family and Child Benefits.....	16
4.2. Second pillar: Support parents with affordable quality services.....	18
4.2.1. Childcare.....	18
4.2.2. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	20
4.2.3. Parental Leave	20
4.2.4. Parenting Support Services.....	21
4.3. Third pillar: Children's right to participate.....	23
4.3.1. Children's participation in decision-making affecting their lives.....	24
5. REACTIONS AND FEEDBACK OF STAKEHOLDERS	27
5.1. European Parliament	27
5.2. NGOs.....	28
6. CONCLUSIONS	28
ANNEX I – LATEST AROPE FIGURES FOR CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION (2015 VERSUS 2013).....	31

ANNEX II – EUROPEAN SEMESTER COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS	32
ANNEX III – PROGRESS OF THE BARCELONA TARGETS FOR CHILDCARE.....	33
ANNEX IV – NGOS ASSESMENT, COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INVESTING IN CHILDREN RECOMMENDATION.....	34

LIST OF ACRONYMS USED

ALMP	Active Labour Market Policy
AROP	At Risk of Poverty
AROPE	At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion
COFACE	Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union
CR	Country Report
CSR	Country Specific Recommendation
EAPN	European Anti-Poverty Network
ECCP	European Code of Conduct on Partnership
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
EPIC	European Platform on Investing in Children
ERDF	European regional Development Fund
ESDE	Employment and Social Development in Europe
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESPN	European Social Policy Network
EU	European Union
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
ExAC	Ex-ante Conditionality
FEAD	Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
PES	Public Employment Services
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
PPA	Preparatory Pilot Action
SIP	Social Investment Package
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
Member States	Belgium/BE; Bulgaria/BG; Czech Republic/CZ; Denmark/DK; Germany/DE; Estonia/EE; Ireland/IE; Greece/EL; Spain/SP; France/FR; Croatia/HR; Italy/IT; Cyprus/CY; Latvia/LV; Lithuania/LT; Luxembourg/LU; Hungary/HU; Malta/MT; Netherlands/NL; Austria/AT; Poland/PL; Portugal/PT; Romania/RO; Slovenia/SI; Slovakia/SK; Finland/FI; Sweden/SE; United Kingdom/UK

1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2013, the Commission adopted the Recommendation ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’ (the Recommendation)¹. In July 2013, the Council of the European Union gave its unanimous support. The Recommendation reflects a broad political consensus across the EU and is the fruit of more than a decade of work to tackle child poverty. This is work which started in 2010 at the Belgian presidency conference on child poverty in Laeken. The Recommendation calls on the Member States to invest more in policies on children to strengthen child rights, reduce child poverty and improve child well-being. It is part of a much wider ‘social investment package’ (SIP)² providing Member States policy guidance on social investment.

The rationale behind social investment is to strengthen people’s current and future capacities by helping them to ‘prepare’ for life’s risks rather than simply ‘repairing’ the consequences. Social investment requires a life-cycle approach. This means ensuring that budgetary spending on human capital is efficient, adequate and sustainable. It also means supporting people’s participation in the current and future labour market and confronting new poverty and social risks (such as family breakdown, precarious work, work-life balance, ageing, etc.). The risks and needs of the whole life-cycle of individuals have to be taken into account. Social investment is oriented towards children, and policies for children (childcare, benefits and education) play a crucial role in this. Social investment also recognises that there is a link between individuals’ circumstances and the collective well-being. More efficient and effective social policies are crucial to ensuring the future adequacy and sustainability of budgets for social policies.

Investing in children is perhaps one of the best examples of social investment. Due to its strong multiplier effect, social investment not only pays off for children individually but also for society as a whole. Indeed, it is far more beneficial for societies to invest adequately during the early years of children’s life than to try to solve the problems of adolescents or young adults later on. There is ample evidence, for example, that disadvantaged children who benefited from early childhood education and care (ECEC) are less likely to leave secondary school early and to become unemployed, a situation that often leads to a number of other social problems.

Declining child well-being, rising child poverty and social exclusion can affect a child’s economic and social rights. Children growing up in poverty are much less likely to reach their full potential, enjoy good health, complete their education, find a job, and in so doing become productive taxpaying adults. This is a situation that Europe’s ageing societies cannot afford. Therefore, the Recommendation takes an explicit **child rights approach** by referring to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)³ which all EU Member States have ratified.

¹ Commission Recommendation 2013/112/EU, of 20.02.2013, ‘Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ (OJ L 59 of 2.03.2013, p. 59).

² Commission Communication ‘Towards social investment for growth and cohesion — including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020’ (COM(2013)83 final of 20.02.2013).

³ Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20.11.1989. Entry into force 2.09.1990, in accordance with Article 49.

Reducing child poverty and breaking the cycle of disadvantage across generations requires an **integrated approach** focused on children and their families. This means identifying and removing structural barriers and combining prevention and support. It is about doing more for the development and well-being of all children and specifically improving the situation of the most vulnerable. The Recommendation takes this approach. The Recommendation underlines not only the need for parents' participation in the labour market and child-related benefits but also the need for equal access to inclusive and non-segregated quality education, safe and adequate housing, strong family support, and quality alternative care. The Recommendation urges support for the participation of all children in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities, and support for children's right to be heard in all decisions that affect them. It also urges focusing on children who are at greater risk because of multiple disadvantages, such as Roma children, certain migrant or ethnic minority children, children with special needs or disabilities, children in alternative care, street children, children of imprisoned parents, as well as children in households at particular risk of poverty, such as single-parent or large families.

It is broadly acknowledged that the cost-effectiveness of policies is greater when there is a stronger focus on the **early years** (and, in particular, the pre-school years when a child is under three). There is substantial evidence that this is essential to break the cycle of inequality and disadvantage. The early acquirement of a range of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies makes learning at later ages more proficient, easier and more likely to continue; it also contributes to better health and has psycho-social benefits.

The Recommendation sets out a **comprehensive integrated approach** built on three pillars:

- a) **parents' access to resources** preferably in the form of paid work but also through adequate child and family benefits;
- b) **parents' access to quality services**, such as ECEC;
- c) **children's right to participate** in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities and to be heard in all decisions that affect their lives.

The integrated policies advocated by the Recommendation are complex and require time to develop and implement. In many cases existing institutions need to be rethought and reformed, and changing current practices is often a complex process.

The Recommendation was adopted during the economic crisis triggered in 2008 making its implementation clearly more difficult but also its policy approach more relevant. This needs to be taken into account when reviewing progress. Member States that were in urgent need of fiscal stabilisation were also often confronted with high levels of unemployment and poverty; hence, policy often had to concentrate on the most urgent economic and social challenges. Such an adverse situation made a full and integrated implementation of the Recommendation, in the short time available, extraordinarily difficult. On the other hand, those Member States under less economic and social pressure have been more successful.

The need to improve children's life chances is at the core of the Commission's proposal for the European Pillar of Social Rights. A wide consultation on the first outline of the

Pillar confirmed the importance of improving children's rights, with the ultimate goal of enhancing social convergence and fairness.

Now, four years after the Recommendation's adoption and in the light of the consultation processes to date, it is time for a first review of progress achieved, both in general policy terms and for each of the three pillars. To this end, this staff working document examines the Recommendation's state of implementation and its impact on policy-making for children and families in the EU. Its purpose is to describe how the Recommendation has been implemented so far. The document includes a number of good practices and practical examples of actions and offers valuable information for moving forward with the Recommendation.

It is worth noting that the findings for the first and second pillar are taken from the 2015 report on Social Investment in Europe by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN)⁴. The ESPN is a network of 28 independent national social inclusion experts (referred as "experts" in the text) which provides the Commission with independent information, analysis and expertise on social policies. It helps the Commission monitor progress on the EU social protection and social inclusion objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy⁵. For the third pillar, it has to be underlined the implementation of the Recommendation has been more limited and much less evidence and data are available for presenting a detailed state of play.

2. STATE OF PLAY

2.1. Scene setter

The EU's social and economic future greatly depends on its capacity to stop the transmission of disadvantage from one generation to the next.

Child poverty and social exclusion not only have a negative imprint on a child's future but are also a huge waste of potential that Europe's ageing societies cannot afford. Analysis of the correlation between the educational achievements of parents and those of children suggests that people from families experiencing disadvantages face considerable obstacles in achieving better living standards. There is solid evidence that the socioeconomic status of a child is a good predictor of adult health: growing up in a disadvantaged environment can have a long-lasting negative impact on health that upward social mobility can do little to reverse.

The long recession that started in 2008 has led to a marked deterioration in the child poverty and well-being indicators of many EU Member States; and not just in the countries on the periphery most affected by the crisis but also in several of the central European countries. Child poverty also increased in the poorer neighbourhoods of the

⁴ See [‘Social Investment in Europe: a study of national policies’](#), 2015.

⁵ At the end of 2017 the ESPN experts will present an update of their 2014 evaluation report on the implementation of the Recommendation. This report will address the situation in each Member State with detailed evidence on the progress made in policy-making and in the absorption of EU funds.

EU's major cities, where an increasing proportion of the resident child population is growing up in low-income families, both native-born and migrant, who have been negatively affected by the crisis. But even well-off middle-class children can be affected when economic hardship undermines family stability.

The latest available figures⁶ show that the risk of poverty and social exclusion for children aged 0-17 in the EU stood at 26.9 % in 2015. This means that more than a quarter of all children in the EU, around 25 million, are growing up in a household which either earns less than 60 % of the median income, suffers from material deprivation or is a quasi-jobless household. Moreover, some groups are more affected and, in particular, the children of parents originating from third-countries display a much higher rate of risk of poverty. On the positive side, since 2010, the proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU has decreased slightly, from 27.5 % in 2010. However, significant differences exist between Member States.

One of the main policy challenges ahead is to overcome the income losses of parents who lost their job during the recession by creating new jobs. Another significant challenge is to ensure that children growing up in a situation of particular disadvantage (i.e., children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children with a migration background and Roma children) enjoy equal access to measures intended to invest in their future.

Badly designed tax-benefit systems or high childcare costs can indeed work as financial disincentives for single parents and second earners, making it unattractive to accept low paying (mostly part-time) jobs. But parents can also be discouraged from accepting a job because of, for instance, a shortage of affordable childcare or inflexible working time arrangements that prevent a parent from balancing professional and private life. In eastern and southern Member States, many working parents may also suffer from in-work poverty due to insufficient wages. This is caused by the lack of, or too low, a minimum wage and/or inadequate child and family-income support measures. Reconciling paid work and family care can also be difficult if there is no paid parental leave and if there is no childcare or it is too costly. There is still a shortage of quality services, notably ECEC for children under three in 22 Member States (see details on ECEC in chapter 4.2.2).

One of the Recommendation's horizontal principles is that governments should try to '*(M)aintain an appropriate balance between universal policies, aimed at promoting the well-being of all children, and targeted approaches, aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged*'⁷. This is precisely what can be observed in the best policy approaches for addressing child poverty. **These policies are embedded in a wider system that deals with poverty and inequality (social exclusion) through several broad policy instruments;** namely, supporting the labour market participation of both parents, supporting wages and income, and ensuring adequate parental leave policies and equal access to services utilised by families, particularly those in a situation of multiple disadvantages.

⁶ See latest update for 16.11.2016: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7738122/3-16112016-AP-EN.pdf/c01aade1-ea44-411a-b20a-94f238449689>.

⁷ See the 4th horizontal principle mentioned on page 2 of the Recommendation.

Countries with lower or decreasing levels of child poverty and social exclusion have, as overall approach, redistributive policies. Such policies ensure that parents have access to decent jobs paying an adequate income or have adequate income support. These countries manage to redistribute wealth equitably with effective tax and social protection systems, and they ensure access to good-quality services offering opportunities to most children. At the same time, extra support must be given to disadvantaged vulnerable children. These cases also make clear that reducing the structural causes of poverty and inequality requires a long-term strategic and integrated approach.

2.2. The Commission's role in supporting the Recommendation's implementation

Child poverty is a cross-cutting issue, involving a wide range of policy areas. While the Member States are for the most part responsible for child and family policies, the Commission has a role to play and has taken steps to implement the Recommendation. These include:

- a) **Regularly monitoring** child and family policies, especially through the **European semester**. Member States' national policies in this field have received strong attention in the country reports. Where appropriate, this has resulted in country-specific recommendations (CSRs)⁸. In addition to its work in the European semester, the Commission is also monitoring child outcomes in its regular reports, such as its annual report on 'Employment and Social Developments in Europe'⁹.
- b) **Financially supporting** Member States' reforms through the **European Structural and Investment Funds**. In the 2014-2020 programming period there are significantly more funding possibilities for children in the European Social Fund (ESF) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).
- c) **Providing operational and financial support** to key EU-level NGO networks such as Eurochild, the Confederation of Family Organisations in Europe (COFACE), the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), who have formed an EU Alliance for Investing in Children with 20 other non-governmental organisations.
- d) **Creating a special website on Europa in 2013 called the European Platform on Investing in Children (EPIC) for an easier exchange of information and best practices** between Member States, stakeholders and institutions¹⁰. This platform is a mutual learning tool where users can share evidence-based practices related to the various aspects of the Recommendation. It also presents concise up-to-date reports on child and family policies for each Member State. The contract for the website has just been renewed for 4 more years.

⁸ For further details, see Section 4.1 below.

⁹ The 2016 report is available at:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7952&furtherPubs=yes>

¹⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&langId=en>.

- e) **Organising national seminars to raise awareness** of the Recommendation. Between 2014 and 2016, 11 national seminars were organised¹¹ where implementation was discussed in more detail. They were well attended by regional and local authorities and by NGOs, who are potentially important project applicants in calls for proposals organised by the national ESF and ERDF management authorities.
- f) **Organising six peer review seminars** on child and family-related topics between 2014 and 2016 as part of the open method of coordination (OMC) on social inclusion¹². The topics covered were support for marginalised families, local consultation platforms, conditional cash transfers, quality ECEC, and prevention and early intervention.
- g) **Financially supporting the OECD Family Database**¹³ which collects detailed statistics on child and family policy from different sources, as well as a number of detailed policy briefs on work-life balance and child well-being.
- h) **Actively promoting integrated child protection systems**¹⁴ aimed at preventing and responding to all forms of violence against children. Children growing up in a situation of disadvantage, such as children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, may be at greater risk of violence from external factors¹⁵. At the June 2015 European forum on the rights of the child, the Commission tabled a reflection paper on integrated child protection systems, including the ‘Ten principles for integrated child protection systems’¹⁶. The Commission has funded and continues to fund projects to strengthen national child protection systems and address violence against children, including through the rights, equality and citizenship programme¹⁷.
- i) **Strengthening synergies across policy areas of high relevance for social inclusion of children** and making use of existing statistics and administrative data to monitor the impact of policies on children and their families. Boys and girls (especially early school leavers, children left behind, unaccompanied children, and children with

¹¹ In IT, EL, ES, HU, LV, RO, BG, IE, SK, MT and PL.

¹² More information about these peer reviews can be found on:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?year=0&country=0&theme=5&catId=1024&langId=en&mode=searchSubmit#searchDiv>.

¹³ <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>.

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/rights-child/protection-action/index_en.htm.

¹⁵ These include children in migration or seeking international protection, including unaccompanied, undocumented or stateless children; children who are neglected, or without appropriate care; children in detention or in residential care; children who go missing, who are abducted by a parent or are victims of trafficking; children who are discriminated against, including Roma children and children with disabilities; children in conflict with the law; children left behind by parents moving abroad for work; children of parents in prison; or children in situations of extreme material deprivation.

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/rights-child/protection-systems/index_en.htm and
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/rights-child/european-forum/ninth-meeting/index_en.htm.

¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2016-49/compilation_previously_funded_projects_rights_of_the_child_and_violence_against_children_40298.pdf.

disabilities, as well as in the Roma community) are one of the most vulnerable groups to trafficking in human beings. The EU legal¹⁸ and policy¹⁹ framework addressing trafficking in human beings is human rights based, child sensitive and gender specific. The Commission published a study on high risk groups for trafficking in human beings, in particular on children²⁰, a study on Commission funded anti-trafficking projects including, inter alia on child trafficking²¹, collects data in child trafficking²² and children are mentioned as particularly vulnerable in its reports²³.

- j) **Highlighting the importance of monitoring and improving the situation of children with a migrant background**, notably in the frame of the European Semester. More specifically, the Commission has proposed a series of actions in the Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals²⁴ and in the recent Communication on The Protection of Children in migration²⁵.
- k) **Developing research activities:** the EU research Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation (Horizon 2020 and FP7) have funded a substantial body of research on issues related to early childhood education and care²⁶, families, social inclusion and children well-being²⁷. Their results have been discussed in a two days

¹⁸ Directive 2011/36/EU of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA

¹⁹ The EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings 2012–2016

²⁰ **Study on high-risk groups for trafficking in human beings** (2015) https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/study_on_children_as_high_risk_groups_of_trafficking_in_human_beings_0.pdf

²¹ Study on Comprehensive policy review of anti-trafficking projects funded by the European Commission (2016) https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/study_on_comprehensive_policy_review.pdf.
23% of Commission funded projects between 2004 and 2015 were on child trafficking. Funded projects on child trafficking were awarded EUR 30.5 million in the same period.

²² Eurostat, Statistical Working Papers, Trafficking in human beings (2015 edition) http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/eurostat_report_on_trafficking_in_human_beings_-_2015_edition_0.pdf

²³ Commission Staff Working Document, Mid-term report on the implementation of the EU strategy towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings, Brussels, 17.10.2014, SWD(2014) 318 final and Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings Brussels, 19.5.2016 COM(2016) 267 final https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/report_on_the_progress_made_in_the_fight_against_trafficking_in_human_beings_2016.pdf

²⁴ COM(2016) 377 final.

²⁵ COM(2017) 211 final.

²⁶ CARE – Curriculum and Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood education and care <http://ecec-care.org/>

²⁷ Projects are listed in the publication "Great Start in Life!" http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/project_synopses/ki-01-16-979-en.pdf

conference in Brussels at the end of 2016²⁸. Co-organized by Directorate General for Education and Culture and Directorate general for Research and Innovation, it brought together about 300 researchers, policy makers, teachers and practitioners.

3. IMPACT OF THE RECOMMENDATION ON EU POLICY-MAKING

3.1. The European semester

As part of the yearly cycle of economic policy coordination (the European semester), the Commission undertakes a detailed analysis of EU Member States' plans for budgetary, macroeconomic and structural reforms. It proposes CSRs for the next 12-18 months, which are then discussed and adopted by the Council. These are meant to help reach the objectives of the EU's long-term strategy for jobs and growth (the Europe 2020 strategy).

The Commission has actively monitored the Recommendation's implementation by discussing reforms of child and family policies within the context of the European semester. The Recommendation has served as an important policy lever in this respect. National policies in this field have received strong attention in the country reports, resulting in a regular series of CSRs. The most frequently addressed policy topics are income support, childcare/ECEC, inclusive education for Roma children and financial disincentives for single parents and second earners.

However, compared to 2014 and 2015, fewer CSRs were issued in 2016²⁹. This was partly because the Commission wanted to narrow its focus to areas where Member State action was most needed. This was to encourage better implementation and more ownership by national authorities, social partners and other stakeholders. Nonetheless, part of the reason there were fewer CSRs in areas such as financial disincentives, inclusive education, childcare and youth activation is because of improved policy reform in various Member States.

3.2. 2014-2020 ESIF programming

The Member States also receive a considerable amount of funding under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to help carry out reforms.

The Recommendation played an important role in negotiating the new 2014-2020 ESIF programming period. It was successfully used to leverage more funding possibilities for children and their families in the European Social Fund (ESF) and the ERDF. What is new compared to the previous programming periods is that **25.6 % of the total ESF allocation of EUR 86.4 billion is earmarked for social inclusion measures** and all Member States have to allocate at least **20% of ESF resources to social inclusion**. This can include measures for access to childcare. Moreover, **EUR 8 billion is set aside for measures tackling early school leaving**. Thanks to the Recommendation there is a stronger focus in programming on issues such as ECEC and alternative community-based

²⁸ Conference Great Start in Life! The Best Possible Education in the Early Years https://ec.europa.eu/education/great-start-in-life_en

²⁹ For details on the 2014-2016 CSRs, see Annex II.

care. Under the ERDF, EUR 11.9 billion has been earmarked for measures promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. In addition, approximately EUR 5.9 billion has been earmarked for investment in education facilities, out of which EUR 1.22 billion are planned for ECEC infrastructures.

Moreover, the new Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) makes available EUR 3.8 billion for fighting poverty and helping the most vulnerable in Europe. This fund can be used to address some of the specific needs of families with children in precarious situations that are exposed to material deprivation. A strong point of the FEAD is the built-in cooperation with NGOs.

The management authorities in Member States are implementing these allocations. The main challenge is to be able to select enough good projects to make an efficient use of the budgets available for children and families, as well as to ensure the sustainability of the investments. The optimisation of investment can be better achieved when there is a good partnership between all the stakeholders. Here again the idea of an integrated strategy promises to be very useful.

To this end, the Commission has together with the Member States agreed on a new **European code of conduct on partnership** (ECCP). This code helps Member States to organise a meaningful partnership with the relevant stakeholders. It is thanks to this new code that NGOs can now claim a seat in the monitoring committees of the various programmes. Their presence will be helpful to develop and implement projects. In this way the NGOs can play a vital role when it comes to the full absorption of the funds in the Member States.

The so-called **thematic ex-ante conditionalities (ExAC)** are another new programming instrument used in the current 2014-2020 programming period³⁰. They aim at ensuring that the funds are deployed in an efficient and effective way consistent with policy priorities. There are, for instance, ex-ante conditionalities which aim at promoting active inclusion and Roma inclusion in particular. There is also a special ExAC to promote lower early school leaving rates. One of the ExAC calls for the adoption of a national action plan. The non-fulfilment of a precondition constitutes a ground for the Commission to suspend (interim) payments.

By mid-March 2017, all action plans for the ex-ante conditionalities on active inclusion had been completed. Also, four out of six action plans for the ExAC on Roma and 10 of the 11 action plans for the ExAC on early school leaving had been finalised. This demonstrates significant progress in adopting strategies that can contribute to more effective and efficient social investment in children.

4. PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN EACH PILLAR IN THE MEMBER STATES

As explained earlier, the Recommendation proposes a comprehensive, integrated and rights-based approach built on **three** main pillars. The idea of an **integrated, comprehensive approach** to address child poverty and well-being is perhaps the most

³⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/nl/information/legislation/guidance/.

novel aspect of the Recommendation. Successfully implementing such an approach takes political will and excellent cooperation between all local players involved in supporting families and their children. An effectively integrated approach also calls for careful interplay between active labour market policies (as suggested in the first pillar of the Recommendation) and various social policies (as covered in the second pillar).

Good practice — Leave No Child Behind from North Rhine Westphalia in Germany

This comprehensive integrated programme focuses on prevention and uses the life-cycle approach. It tries to make all vulnerable groups visible and create a mechanism for accountability. This project, which is 50 % funded by the ESF, is a good example of ‘progressive universalism’, meaning a combination of a universal service for everyone and a targeted additional action for the most needy.

A key policy tool of this project is the ‘local council-run prevention chains’ which cover the period from maternity leave to the (re-)transition to working life. These chains combine support services across sectorial lines and along life courses, and are operated by public institutions and local community organisations. For this to work, all players need to be supportive of the shared cooperative approach. Within the prevention chains, the services offered by the players are synchronised and coordinated with a view to sustained assistance and support. And extra attention is given to vulnerable transitions such as the changeover from pre-school to primary school.

https://www.kein-kind-zuruecklassen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Flyer/LNCB_web.pdf

The three sub-sections below present in more detail the activities developed in the Member States for each of the three pillars.

It is important to note that the findings described in this chapter are even more relevant to the situation of children with particular disadvantages. Unfortunately, specific data and evidence on the living conditions of these children are difficult to collect and, when available, often partial and fragmented. Before presenting the general situation, the issues of children in particular situations of disadvantage are highlighted by way of example³¹:

- **Roma children**³²: EU-MIDIS II shows that (i) every third Roma child (30 %) lives in a household that had faced hunger at least once in the previous month, and (ii) Roma children lag behind their non-Roma peers on all education indicators. Only about half (53 %) of Roma children between the age of 4 and the starting age of compulsory primary education participate in early childhood education; on average 18 % of Roma between 6 and 24 years of age attend an educational level lower than the level corresponding to their age; and the proportion of Roma early school-leavers is disproportionately high compared with the general population. It should be noted that ESIF investments in segregated education for Roma children are excluded.

³¹ Children with disabilities are not included due to lack of specific data.

³² ‘[Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey — Roma — Selected findings](#)’. Report by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), 2016.

- **Children living in institutions:** according to NGOs, in 2015, despite considerable progress, more than 500,000 children were still living in institutions across the EU. These children frequently grow up isolated from the care and support that families and communities can provide³³. General poverty-alleviation measures play an important role here given that, in many cases, children are moved to the institutions for poverty. Prevention measures focus on ensuring access to high-quality education, social care and healthcare services to eliminate all barriers for children with special needs. The specific ESIF ‘ex-ante conditionality’ rule on de-institutionalisation encourages the shift to community-based care by promoting investments in small-scale community-type services that provide the basic conditions for independent living. In addition, ESIF can be used for investments in de-institutionalisation processes, including the improvement of the quality and capacity of existing infrastructures for community-based services, as well as the development of infrastructure for family-like placements for children. ESIF investments in long-stay residential institutions are excluded, regardless of their size.
- **Homeless children:** children living in poverty are more exposed to overcrowded housing conditions and the risk of homelessness. The number of children living in families spending more than 40 % of family income on housing has grown considerably since the onset of the crisis. In 2015, severe housing deprivation affected more than half of all poor children below 18 in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and more than 20 % of poor children in Latvia, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia. The number of children in homeless shelters also increased. In Ireland, for instance, the number of homeless families almost doubled between 2015 and 2016³⁴. Children suffering from housing deprivation frequently encounter many barriers in access to education, school attendance, educational attainments, good health and overall well-being.
- **Children in migration and unaccompanied minors:** in 2015 and 2016 roughly one in four asylum applicants in the European Union was a child.³⁵ In 2016, 95 000 children arrived by sea to Europe.³⁶ According to Eurostat, 96 465 unaccompanied or ‘separated’ children arrived in the EU in 2015³⁷. Children in migration face a multitude of challenges, from identification and registration, reception conditions not adapted to their circumstances, access to asylum procedures and procedural safeguards, and access to integration measures, as well as access to education and healthcare from the earliest moment of arrival. For unaccompanied children, there is a lack of trained and qualified guardians and/or delays in appointment of guardians as

³³ <http://www.openingdoors.eu/poverty-pushing-children-into-institutions-11-country-snapshots/>.

³⁴ <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/homeless-families>.

³⁵ The terms ‘children in migration’ in this document covers all third country national children (persons below 18 years old) who migrate to and within the EU territory, be it with their (extended) family, with a non-family member (separated children) or alone, whether or not seeking asylum. The term ‘separated child’ is defined as set out in para 8 of [General Comment No 6 of the UN Committee on the rights of the child](#).

³⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53447>.

³⁷ See http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyunaa&lang=en.

well as a lack of adapted accommodation such as foster care or other small-scale family-based care. Children in migration are exposed to risks including violence in reception/transit centres, exploitation, physical and sexual abuse and trafficking. Children may go missing or become separated from their families. The challenges for children in migration in accessing housing, education, and healthcare makes them extremely vulnerable to poverty, and their situation therefore demands specific attention. Accesses to adapted reception, education and healthcare from the earliest moment are therefore hugely important, and cannot wait until a decision on asylum has been made, as these procedures may take several months. Early integration measures and addressing child poverty are discussed in the Commission's 12.4.2017 Communication on the protection of children in migration.

Better data to analyse the situation of these groups of children is one aspect where more work is still needed for assessing the Recommendation's implementation.

4.1. First pillar: Support parents through access to paid work, child and family benefits

The Recommendation states that Member States should support the labour market participation of parents by ensuring (i) paid parental leave, (ii) available and affordable ECEC/childcare, and (iii) sufficient working time flexibility. It also argues that the adequate livelihood of families can be secured with social transfers and integrated quality services. The tax-benefit system and/or in-work benefits, such as an earned income tax credit, are also effective policy instruments to overcome possible financial disincentives to accept paid work and to address in-work poverty.

As outlined in the Recommendation, when supporting parents, it is important to strike the right balance between a universal and more targeted approach. The most effective systems combine universal benefits for everyone (at least partly aimed at compensating for the cost of raising children) with a separate conditional or means-tested provision targeted at those who are the most disadvantaged. Universal provision is also important to maintain a sense of solidarity between the tax-paying and benefit-receiving citizens of our societies. The universal provision of in-kind (instead of cash for) services such as childcare allows authorities not only to guarantee the quality of the service but also to reach out to groups at the margins of society. In many countries without universal provision, childcare services are proportionally less utilised by low-income families. This is problematic because, as said above, poor children especially benefit greatly from quality childcare especially when it is provided in a socially mixed context. In particular, participation to ECEC can contribute to the integration of children with minority and migrant background by enabling them to acquire the language of instruction.

4.1.1. Active labour market policies

Most Member States encourage parents to find paid employment by linking their minimum income schemes to requirements and incentives. Usually the focus is on 'positive' incentives such as work-related benefit top-ups or income disregards³⁸. There

³⁸ 'Income disregards' is the portion of income from work that is 'disregarded' when calculating social assistance benefits. It is therefore a work incentive for benefit recipients.

is also the obligation to register with the public employment services (PES) and participation in active labour market policy (ALMP) measures.

The analysis done in the context of the European semester process has shown that in many countries³⁹ there are financial disincentives that make it unattractive for single parents or second earners to enter the labour market. Perverse interaction between a new pay check, taxes and lost benefits can sometimes undermine the idea that ‘work should pay’, at least in the short term.

Many parents, particularly women, achieve an optimal work-life balance to care for their young children by opting to work either **flexible hours** or by working **fewer hours** as a **part-timer**. Voluntary part-time is common in the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Sweden. In all these countries more than one third of all working women work part-time. In practice, most parents in these countries establish their own individual arrangements for combining (in)formal childcare, parental leave, flexible hours and/or part-time. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that part-time working has a cost in terms of lower pay, fewer promotion opportunities and reduced pension entitlements. Part-time workers have a higher risk of poverty and are less likely to be entitled to unemployment benefits or re-employment assistance if they become unemployed⁴⁰. Satisfaction with work-life balance tends to be higher in countries where there are more opportunities to reconcile work and private life⁴¹. A lack of affordable childcare capacity and/or paid parental leave can act as a barrier for parents who prefer to work full-time.

³⁹ NL, LU, DE, BE, IT, AT, FR, EE, IE, LU, HR, CZ, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK and FI.

⁴⁰ Source: OECD, 2011-2012.

⁴¹ Source: Eurofound, 2013.

Good practice — The Nantes childcare project for single parents working evenings and weekends

- Ensures an integrated tailored approach; services adapt to families, not the other way around.
- Crosscuts three public policies: ECEC, social protection and return to employment. Gives access to employment, preparatory training and individualised and responsive approach.
- Offers single mothers childcare at both regular and atypical times
- Offers childcare at atypical times, and emergency childcare at child-minders' homes to cope with irregular or flexible working hours during evening shop hours.
- Adopts a social investment approach.
- Ensures each childcare centre accommodates about 60 children from 3 months to 4 years old, divided over three separate groups of 20.
- Involves a large number of stakeholders.
- Develops solutions adapted to actual needs, both in terms of public service and family support. Good coordination between early childhood providers and social policy experts is key to this project's success. Strong local political backing from the mayor and the responsible city councillor.

See <http://www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/news/Cities-at-work-Integrated-childcare-services-Nantes-WSPO-9U3LZS>

4.1.2. Minimum income schemes and unemployment benefits

When analysing the adequacy of **minimum income schemes**, it should be kept in mind that such benefits are often not the only source of revenue for low-income families and that the amount varies according to household composition. Minimum income schemes generally play a key role in reducing the intensity of child poverty.

For more details on minimum income schemes, see the staff working document on the implementation of the 2008 Commission Recommendation on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market.

4.1.3. Child and family benefits

Child and family benefits are crucial for investing in children. They help to ensure that families have sufficient income for children to grow up in a safe and healthy environment with all the basic necessities.

There have been cut-backs and/or additional conditions and means-testing. Also, some governments⁴² have failed to increase benefits in line with living costs in recent years. This seems to be in clear conflict with the Recommendation's horizontal principle to

⁴² CZ, EL, ES, FI, HR, HU, IE, LV, PT, RO and SI.

‘recognise children as independent rights-holders’⁴³. It also paves the way for more stigmatisation of children receiving benefits whose number continues to decline.

The impact of family benefits in reducing the harmful effect of the recession on child poverty has varied widely across the EU. Experts report a strong positive impact in reducing child poverty and protecting children during the financial crisis in eight Member States⁴⁴. In some of these countries⁴⁵ the overall reduction in family benefits was offset by an increase in ECEC provision⁴⁶. Several experts in countries with fairly generous systems say that the system is inefficient in combating child poverty (Belgium, Germany and Croatia). Another problem can be the very limited amount of family benefits in a country and the unwillingness to make changes (Bulgaria, Greece, Poland and Romania).

Member States tend to fall into one of three groups. However, this must be seen as a snapshot of what is a dynamic process heavily influenced by the recession. Therefore, these groups should not be considered permanent.

A **first group**⁴⁷ consists of Member States who still have and continue to improve their historically well-developed and comprehensive sets of policies to support early childhood development.

A **second group**⁴⁸ includes Member States that have traditionally paid less attention to a comprehensive approach but have fairly well-developed policies in some important areas (AT, BE, EE, FR, IE and MT). In response to the hardship and challenges posed by the crisis, most of them are reviewing their policies and taking positive steps to develop more comprehensive approaches to early childhood development.

A **third group**⁴⁹ comprises Member States that have recently been investing little in policies supporting early childhood development, even if a few of them (Bulgaria, Latvia and Slovakia) have been increasing spending (albeit from a very low baseline). To understand the performance of these countries, it is important to realise that at the beginning of the crisis several of them⁵⁰ were forced to adopt urgent fiscal consolidation measures. This led to an initial freezing or even reduction in spending. Now that unemployment has started to come down and fiscal stabilisation is in progress, spending on child and family benefits has started to recover slowly. However, an integrated

⁴³ See the horizontal principles of the Recommendation in the introduction.

⁴⁴ AT, CY, CZ, FI, HU, IE, NL and SI.

⁴⁵ FI, HU, IE, LV and NL.

⁴⁶ For further details, see Section 4.2.2 below.

⁴⁷ DE, DK, FI, NL, SE and SI.

⁴⁸ AT, BE, EE, FR, HU, IE, LI, LU, MT, PL and UK.

⁴⁹ BG, CY, CZ, EL, ES, HR, IT, LT, LV, PT, RO and SK.

⁵⁰ CY, ES, LT, PT and EL

approach is still lacking in some countries⁵¹ and there is a tendency to develop new services in a fragmented way.

Reductions in spending on families and children are not confined to this third cluster of Member States. Between 2008 and 2012, spending on families across the EU fell in 21 out of 28 Member States. Even allowing for some demographic changes over this period, this is in stark contrast to an increase in spending for old-age pensions in 26 Member States during the same period. The distribution of adjustment costs of fiscal consolidation between young and old appears to have been unevenly disadvantaging the young⁵².

More positively, the experts note that in some countries⁵³ there has been some increase in spending in favour of children and families, though in some cases from a very low baseline.

4.2. Second pillar: Support parents with affordable quality services

4.2.1. *Childcare*

The provision of affordable quality childcare services is an excellent example of a **win-win social investment strategy**. It not only boosts children's development, it also enables parents to accept paid work. In most cases, the extra tax revenue (over the life course) generated by the increased participation of parents in the labour market is enough to cover the cost of the extra childcare. If affordable quality childcare is not available, the costs of centre-based care for two children can, in some countries, amount to more than one fifth of the disposable income of a low-earning couple. Such prohibitively high costs act as a barrier to the use of childcare and effectively discourage parents from working.

At the 2002 Barcelona summit, the European Council decided to set specific targets, referred to as the **'Barcelona targets'**, for the provision of childcare. The objective of the targets was to provide childcare by 2010 to (i) at least **90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age**, and (ii) at least **33 % of children under 3 years of age**.

At the time, it was argued that more childcare was needed to achieve more gender equality in the EU labour market. According to the latest EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) available (2015), 13 years after the Barcelona summit the following picture emerges:

⁵¹ BG, EL, HR, IT, PT and RO

⁵² Darvas, Z. and Wolff, G.B. (2014), 'Europe's social problem and its implications for economic growth', Bruegel Policy Brief, Issue 2014/03.

⁵³ AT, BG, DE, HU, IT, PL, SE, SI, SK and UK.

0-3 category	Category over 3 (mandatory school age)
The EU-28 average is below the target, at 30.3 % of children 0-3 in formal childcare	The EU-28 average is below the target, at 83.3 %
18 Member States are below the target	19 Member states are below the target
14 Member States are significantly below the target (10 pp or more)	13 Member States are 10 pp or more below the target
8 Member States are less than halfway to the target	5 Member States are significantly below the target (20 pp or more)

Seven years after the original 2010 deadline, there is still a clear lack of childcare capacity for children under three⁵⁴. The availability of **accessible, affordable and quality childcare** varies widely between the Member States, and it is important to note that these differences often reflect differences in respective starting positions. Four groups of Member States can be distinguished, reflecting what has happened among the Member States.

The **first group** consists of the ‘historical Scandinavian forerunner’ Member States⁵⁵ that have been particularly successful in ensuring relatively broad access to quality childcare at an affordable cost.

A **second group** includes Member States⁵⁶ where more attention has been paid to childcare over the last two decades as women’s participation in the labour market has grown, even if there are still areas that need to be improved (e.g. supply, quality or cost of childcare or existing regional differences).

A **third group** of Member States⁵⁷ includes new Member States where efforts to increase the availability of childcare are more recent.

Finally, in the **fourth group** of Member States⁵⁸, the major weaknesses are in the availability, affordability and quality of childcare. In some cases there are even signs of further cut-backs due to fiscal consolidation. When it comes to the financing of childcare, experts highlight the positive role played by EU funds⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ For details, see Annex III.

⁵⁵ DK, FI, SE, with SL.

⁵⁶ AT, BE, DE, FR, LU, NL and PT.

⁵⁷ CY, EE, HU, LV, MT and PL.

⁵⁸ BG, CZ, EL, ES, HR, IE, IT, LT, RO, SK and UK.

⁵⁹ CZ, EL, HU, LT, PL and SK.

4.2.2. *Early childhood education and care (ECEC)*

There is broad and growing acceptance that investing in **ECEC** significantly promotes children's socio-economic development. The **first group** of Member States⁶⁰ with fairly well-developed ECEC systems has kept their systems intact during the economic crisis and some have even improved the quality and extended coverage (Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands).

In the **second group** of Member States⁶¹, with **less developed ECEC systems**, steps have been taken to address shortcomings. However, progress is often slow, and significant differences in access by social background remain. Two recent, successful examples in this group are the 'sure start children's houses'⁶², in Hungary, and the 'area-based child poverty initiative'⁶³, in Ireland.

The **third group** of Member States⁶⁴ has **very limited services** and very low rates of enrolment in ECEC, especially for 0-3 years olds. While the problem is often acknowledged in official documents, very limited increases in expenditure and poor implementation measures restrict progress.

There is a risk, even in rich Member States, that children from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately miss out on formal ECEC. In France and Ireland, for instance, children from low-income families are over four times less likely to use formal ECEC than children from high-income families.

The Commission has developed a **quality framework for ECEC**⁶⁵ with the Member States. There are **10 key principles** on access, workforce, curriculum, monitoring, evaluation and governance. This useful framework emphasises that a crucial aspect of quality must be the close involvement of parents. It is often through ECEC that one can best develop a constructive relationship with the parents of disadvantaged children. Such a relationship combined with parenting support services is one of the best ways to improve the home situation of a disadvantaged child⁶⁶.

4.2.3. *Parental leave*

Besides the availability of childcare, a **well-designed, generous and sufficiently flexible (but not excessively long) maternal, paternal and/or parental leave system** plays a key role in parents' participation in the labour market.

⁶⁰ DE, DK, FI, NL, SE and SI.

⁶¹ AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, EE, EL, HU, IE, LV, LT, MT, PL and UK.

⁶² <http://jobbadni.hu/en/sure-start-childrens-house-bodvalenke/>

⁶³ https://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/Area_Based_Approach_to_Child_Poverty_Initiative/2574.htm

⁶⁴ BG, CZ, HR, RO and SK.

⁶⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf .

⁶⁶ See also Section 4.2.4 below.

Paid parental leave schemes are largely paying for themselves thanks to the increase in taxes and social contributions across the life cycle. Parental leave, and in particular paid, non-transferable paternal leave, gives both parents a chance to bond with their child in a meaningful way, helping their children to grow up into independent emotionally secure adults. More paternity leave and/or parental leave used by both parents can also help to promote gender equality on the labour market.

The length and coverage of schemes in nine Member States⁶⁷ are given a positive assessment. It is difficult to give a clear-cut assessment of whether leave schemes can be a disincentive to work. This is because, irrespective of the length and generosity of these schemes, the availability of childcare at the same time plays a key role in facilitating parents' employment. What appears to be most crucial is not to have a gap between the end of parental leave and the availability of childcare. The experts note that such a gap exists in Austria, Croatia, Greece, Luxembourg, Romania and the UK. There are also many shortcomings in promoting a gender-balanced use of leave schemes. In quite a few countries there is no statutory entitlement to paternity leave. Mothers generally use parental leave much more than fathers and for longer periods. The low replacement rate of some parental leave schemes may be one of the reasons why fathers' take-up is generally so low⁶⁸.

The extensive **length of maternal/parental leave** creates an obstacle to female participation in the labour market in Croatia, Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia. In Croatia the lack of flexibility of existing leave schemes and their 'confusing' rules are questioned. Experts of Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy and the UK warn of a social gradient in the use of leave linked to the parents' socio-economic background.

Several countries have undertaken reforms of parental leave schemes to address the gender balance⁶⁹, increasing the length of some schemes⁷⁰, introducing elements of flexibility or work incentives⁷¹ and extending coverage⁷².

4.2.4. *Parenting support services*

The most common types of support services are parental education, family counselling offices, maternal and child health clinics, outreach visits to mothers and babies by midwives, family assistant support to vulnerable families, psychological support, and support for parents with disabled children. A simple but also labour-intensive way of adopting an integrated approach in practice would be to assign every disadvantaged family with an individual case officer who would be able to make house visits.

⁶⁷ CY, DE, EL, FI, LV, NL, RO, SE and SI

⁶⁸ In particular in CY, HR, IE, LU, MT and UK.

⁶⁹ FR, IT, PL, SI and UK.

⁷⁰ BE, LV and PL.

⁷¹ BE, CZ, DE, HU LV, MT, NL and PL.

⁷² HU and IT.

Moreover, the Recommendation emphasises the importance of family support (including preventive services) and quality alternative care in preventing in so far as possible children's removal from their family setting and their placement in an institution. Where alternative care is necessary, the focus should be on quality of care in line with the United Nations Guidelines for the alternative care of children. In any case, if a child does have to be removed from their family setting, the Recommendation calls for quality support including in the transition to adulthood. 25.6 % of the ESF budget is earmarked for projects on social inclusion, including deinstitutionalisation.

In addition, Austria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Slovenia and the UK are among the Member States that have quite an extensive range of parenting support services, and several are making further improvements. These services are lacking in seven Member States⁷³. In these countries there is little evidence of any effort to improve services in response to the Europe 2020 strategy or the Recommendation. At the same time, some positive developments are also cited for others⁷⁴.

Good practice — TRIPLE P: Positive Parenting Project, counselling of both children and parents

- **Thoroughly evaluated programme (originally elaborated in Australia), rated as best practice by the EPIC.** Used all over the world and in most EU Member States, available in many languages.
- **Parents are the most important factor** determining a child's well-being during the early years of life. Supported parents feel more productive and confident, happier and less subject to marital conflict and depression.
- **Five different levels of engagement based on parental need:** simple general lecture for everyone on how to communicate with your child; a special workshop for learning skills to overcome certain problems (e.g. not sleeping or incontinence); intensive individual family case management with regular home visits for troubled families
- **Philosophy:** parents first need to have a good relationship with their child before you can deal with any misbehaviour; emphasis is on positive parenting and on positive feedback to encourage good behaviour.
- **Triple P license costs about EUR 30,000 per year.** To this must be added the cost of training the social workers plus the fixed cost needed for translating the training modules.
- In a **Glasgow prison project**, fathers who participated in Triple P received as a bonus more time to see their children and were less likely to reoffend later on compared to fathers who had not.

See EPIC: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1251&langId=en&mode=7>

⁷³ EL, HR, HU, LT, PL, PT and RO.

⁷⁴ BE, EE, FI, FR, IE, LT, LU, NL, PT and UK.

4.3. Third pillar: children's right to participate

The third pillar of the Recommendation consists of measures to support children's participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities, as well as measures to facilitate children's participation in decision-making affecting their lives. It is of crucial importance for the well-being of a child, in particular when it comes to the goal of "breaking the cycle of disadvantage". Participation in after-school activities can provide disadvantaged children with new perspectives and positive role models that can strongly influence their future social mobility.

Overall, the third pillar has achieved significantly less than the other two. Even though the Recommendation clearly states that it wants to promote an integrated rights based approach that is in line with UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the implementation focus was on the first two pillars. There is little evidence of activities on the child's right to be heard, for example in judicial proceedings or administrative proceedings concerning them, nor is there evidence of the mainstreaming of child participation in the other pillars of the Recommendation (for example in consulting children on service design, delivery and review).

4.3.1. Children's participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities

The strand of the Recommendation focusing on a child's **right to participate in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities** has been less successful than the other two strands.

At EU level, the Erasmus+ programme (that supports education, training, youth and sport in Europe) funds projects which deal indirectly with children's rights, empowerment and well-being. Since its beginning in 2014, the Erasmus+ programme has funded roughly 2,000 projects dealing with children's participation. The Creative Europe programme supports audience development and improved access to cultural and creative works with a focus on children, young people, people with disabilities and under-represented groups. One third of the European Cooperation projects selected for funding in 2016 focused on this priority. In addition, the Creative Europe programme funded 12 transnational projects in 2016, addressing the role of culture in the integration of refugees, of which one third focused on cultural activities for children, children refugees and unaccompanied refugee children.

Good practice: Brussels' Toekomst Atelier/Atelier d'Avenir (TADA)

Children from underprivileged backgrounds miss the insight into the 'future' (toekomst) more than others. They usually have few opportunities to meet people from diverse professional backgrounds whom they can ask about 'now and in the future'. TADA wants to open the door 'to the world' for these children by allowing them to discover all aspects of society through experiential learning classes on weekends.

The bilingual (Dutch-French) non-profit organisation TADA provides supplementary, voluntary, motivational and society-oriented education to children aged 10 to 14, who come from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Brussels. Over the course of 3 school years the TADA pupils discover diverse aspects of society in weekly experiential classes. Every Saturday the TADA pupils receive courses from inspiring professionals — **volunteers** — from all areas of the labour market, for example entrepreneurs, engineers, chefs, lawyers, and journalists. Through experiential learning and courses on topics such as law or finances for children, TADA shows children what the 'future' could have in store for them.

See <http://www.toekomstatelierdelavenir.com/>

4.3.2. Children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives

The Recommendation explains how **a child's right to participate in decisions that affect their lives** should be ensured. For instance, Member States should take steps to involve children in the running of services such as care, healthcare and education and support the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They should also implement a child's right to be heard in all justice-related decisions and promote child-friendly justice, in particular by giving children effective access to court and judicial proceedings.

The right to participate is also one of the 10 principles the Commission proposed in 2015 for integrated child protection systems⁷⁵. A key component of an integrated child protection system is inter-departmental and multi-disciplinary action to tackle root causes of violence against children, such as poverty, exclusion and discrimination. It includes proactive policy and preventive outreach measures, parenting and family support, universal and targeted social services, and specific strategies to reduce child poverty.

In 2015, the Commission published a study entitled 'Evaluation of legislation, policy and practice on child participation in the EU'⁷⁶. The study identifies examples of good practice at local, municipal, and city level for schools, care settings and town planning. It shows that child participation can tackle everyday life issues with tangible and measurable results⁷⁷. Respect for children's participation rights leads to better decision-

⁷⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/2015_forum_roc_background_en.pdf

⁷⁶ <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/evaluation-of-legislation-policy-and-practice-of-child-participation-in-the-eu-pbDS0614240/> and <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/evaluation-of-legislation-policy-and-practice-of-child-participation-in-the-european-union-eu--pbDS0514101/>.

⁷⁷ See Commission work on child participation, and guidance for perspective projects that apply under the rights, equality and citizenship programme (Lundy Model): http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/rights-child/child-participation/index_en.htm.

making and benefits society in general as well as children. Country reports were also drawn up⁷⁸ as well as a catalogue of resources⁷⁹.

There is, however, much more scope to involve children in actions and decisions that affect them. Are there possibilities to involve children in policy or service design? Are the views of children on services delivered to them and challenges they face reflected in policy elaboration? Accessible guidance on how to ensure child participation is set out in the Lundy Model of Participation and the Lundy Voice Model Checklist for Participation (Professor Laura Lundy of Queen's University, Belfast⁸⁰).

⁷⁸ Click on 'related publications' to see **[national reports](http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/evaluation-of-legislation-policy-and-practice-of-child-participation-in-the-european-union-eu--pbDS0514101/)**
<http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/evaluation-of-legislation-policy-and-practice-of-child-participation-in-the-european-union-eu--pbDS0514101/>

⁷⁹ <https://bookshop.europa.eu/en/evaluation-of-legislation-policy-and-practice-of-child-participation-in-the-eu-pbDS0614241/?CatalogCategoryID=cOwKABstC3oAAAEjeJEY4e5L>

⁸⁰ Laura, Lundy (2007) '“Voice” is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33:6, 927- 942
Lundy Model of Participation and Lundy Voice Model Checklist: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/lundy_model_child_participation.pdf Ireland, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 (17 June 2015), p. 21-22. Accessible here:
<http://dcya.gov.ie/documents/playandrec/20150617NatStratParticipationReport.pdf>
Lundy Model of Participation and Lundy Voice Model Checklist: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/lundy_model_child_participation.pdf

Good practice: Youth participation in digital matters

Youth participation is an inherent part of the work that the [Insafe network of Safer Internet Centres](#) (SICs), which are co-funded and coordinated by the European Commission, carry out at national level. SICs organise short- or long-term youth panels where they invite children and young people to join and get involved in different activities, such as face-to-face and online meetings, focus groups, creation of resources, organisation of events and campaign, etc. Each SIC develops its own youth participation strategy adapted to national trends and needs. However many have included on their agenda the engagement of young people in reaching out to policy makers, either at national level through participation in events or at European level during the European Youth Panel and [Safer Internet Forum](#). At European level, the [Insafe coordinator](#) organises youth webinars with youth panellists to prepare them for actively participating in the Safer Internet Forum, but also in other European and international events, such as [EuroDIG](#) and [Internet Governance Forum](#).

Examples of good practices of Safer Internet Youth Panels stimulating participation and inclusion:

- the Danish SIC involved young people aged 13-17 years old to prepare recommendations for policy makers in 2017. The Danish Media Council and the helpline [Cyberhus](#) are working to engage vulnerable young people in creating a better internet for children and young people by organising online debates on Cyberhus's anonymous platform;
- The Swedish Media Council in partnership with Attention conducted a [research](#) about the media habits among children with neuropsychiatric disorders, which found that this group uses media more often and for longer time than the national average;
- In the UK, Childnet developed [STAR](#), a toolkit with practical advice and teaching activities to help educators explore internet safety with young people with autism spectrum disorders;
- On Safer Internet Day 2014, several young ambassadors of the European Insafe network launched the "[Youth Manifesto](#)", a crowd-sourced initiative by youth for youth to raise their voice and be directly involved in policymaking. The Youth Manifesto publication contains 10 selected principles which reflect the digital rights and opportunities that Europe's young people view as most essential for building a better internet.

Good practice — The Small World School in Antwerp

A school in the south of Antwerp whose pupils were mostly from different ethnic backgrounds organised a Freakies festival with a cultural NGO called De Veerman. Professional actors from the NGO worked with the pupils to put on the festival. The event revolutionised the climate, reputation and attractiveness of the school. It changed the school's image to a multi-cultural small world school that is now also very popular among indigenous middle-class children.

The idea was to create an extended school with after-school activities that would:

- focus on the many dimensions of children's development (cognitive, health, social, etc.) to compensate for the many disadvantages;
- offer a wide range of services (health care, social support, ICT, library and arts education);
- involve parents, youth work, cultural centres, local associations and social partners;
- have extended opening hours/periods;
- cater for continuity across different stages of education, and;
- be flexible, demand-driven, project-based and bottom-up.

The school cooperates with the De Veerman cultural centre and with pedagogical knowledge centres. No major extra funding was needed, as local community resources covered the costs of the extra-curricular activities.

For more information (in Dutch) see

<https://www.stedelijkonderwijs.be/dekleinewereld>, and

<http://www.veerman.be>, contact tijl.bossuyt@veerman.be

5. STAKEHOLDERS REACTIONS AND FEEDBACK

5.1. European Parliament

Since the Recommendation's adoption four years ago, the European Parliament has been active in pursuing its full implementation. In November 2015, the Parliament adopted an own-initiative report by MEP Ines Zuber on 'Reducing inequality, in particular child poverty'⁸¹. The Zuber report fed into the development of the European Parliament's special written declaration on investing in children that was adopted in December 2015 with the support of 428 MEP signatures⁸².

Both the written declaration and the report call on the Commission to consider including a **specific and binding indicator on the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion** in the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

⁸¹ 'Réduire les inégalités, en particulier la pauvreté des enfants' (MEP Ines ZUBER — A8-0310/2015 / P8_TA-PROV(2015)0401).

⁸² http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/02_Child_Poverty/European_Union/WD_Investing_In_Children-1.pdf.

The Commission is also asked to request all Member States to introduce **specific national (sub)targets on reducing child poverty and social exclusion**. This is to contribute to the Europe 2020 target to reduce poverty. Finally, urge is, first, put on the Member States to use **EU funding** and all other available instruments to implement the Recommendation and, second, on the Commission to draw up a **roadmap and adopt child well-being indicators**, in line with the Recommendation, and put in place a **child guarantee**.

In its reply, the Commission stated that specific national targets for child poverty, as requested by the European Parliament, are not desirable. This would probably, the Commission explains, lead to a proliferation of targets and become counterproductive in the context of closer EMU. Moreover, in the current political context, there is little support in the Council for setting specific national targets on child poverty.

It is worth noting that, since then, the European Parliament has included a preparatory pilot action (PPA) in the 2017 budget to develop the necessary analytical basis for a child guarantee scheme⁸³.

5.2. NGOs

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children brings together over 20 European NGO networks sharing a commitment to promote child well-being⁸⁴. The Commission provides financial support to a number of key EU wide umbrella NGO networks such as Eurochild, the COFACE), the EAPN and the PICUM.

The NGOs have always been supportive of the Recommendation but are critical of the gaps in its implementation. Overall the Recommendation is welcomed as an agenda-setter promoting a comprehensive child-rights approach that resulted in highlighting the importance of an integrated approach to the early years and to more financial support from the ESIF. However, the NGOs deplore the lack of visibility of issues related to the Recommendation in the European Semester. According to their assessment, the Recommendation has not yet had the impact on policy reform in the Members States that was expected⁸⁵. Focus has instead been on a few policy areas (e.g. childcare, inclusive education for Roma children), and a comprehensive approach is still lacking.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since the Commission's adoption of the Investing in Children Recommendation and the Council's unanimous endorsement of it, four years have passed. The global picture that has emerged from its implementation is variable and dynamic, suggesting that this is still very much work in progress.

⁸³ See preparatory action (budget line 04 03 77 25) voted in the 2017 "Child guarantee scheme / establishing A European child guarantee and financial support".

⁸⁴ See the implementation handbook of the Investing in Children Alliance, March 2015.

⁸⁵ For more details, see Annex IV.

Compared to 2013, the number of children under 18 in the EU at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) has decreased slightly to 26.9 % (from 27.7 %). The four main risk factors for child poverty (i.e. single parenthood, working poor, inactivity traps and migration background) are fairly stable, but the last factor has become more important due to the recent large inflows of asylum seekers and will require stronger monitoring in the future. The EU average hides wide-ranging trends and performances in Member States. While in some Member States the situation has improved, albeit coming from a very high level, in others child poverty has increased.

The gap in performance between north-west and south-east Europe results from a substantial difference in their starting position and the impact the recession has had on their economy. Some countries have had to deal with economic urgencies first, while others, for lack of capacity, have not been able to act against child poverty in an effective and integrated way. These differences in starting position, in the severity of the recession and in institutional capacity all have to be taken into account.

From the beginning, the Recommendation received strong support both at national and EU level, including from the European Parliament and civil society. However, the Recommendation is still neither well-known nor properly used within the Member States at local level, where concrete policy mechanisms have to be developed and implemented. The setting-up of meaningful partnerships between all the stakeholders is crucial in this respect.

The Recommendation's main message has inspired many positive projects and experiences. Public debate and civil society have played a crucial role in promoting implementation by identifying areas where progress is needed and by engaging in a number of concrete forward-looking innovative initiatives.

The Recommendation has been, to various degrees, successfully used as a policy lever in the European Semester, resulting in relevant CSRs to Member States on topics ranging from childcare capacity, income support and disincentives to inclusive education. It also has had a positive impact on the 2014-2020 ESIF programmes. The Recommendation was effectively used as a lever during the negotiations resulting in larger budget allocations.

There is now considerable ESIF funding earmarked for family and child policies. This has created great potential for financial support that should generate a large number of quality project applications from local authorities and NGOs. Close cooperation between management authorities, local authorities and other stakeholders such as NGOs, which the Recommendation calls for, will reduce the risk of under-absorption and increase the efficiency of the funds used.

Most Member States agree that only a comprehensive integrated approach is an effective strategy capable of breaking the cycle of disadvantage of vulnerable children. This plea for an integrated approach was perhaps the Recommendation's most innovative message; it requires improved cooperation between all stakeholders at local level and renewed focus, something many Member States find challenging.

Still, progress on the 2002 Barcelona target of 33 % childcare coverage for children under 3 has been poor. The EU-28 average is only 30.3 % and 20 Member States are below target. Most Member States agree that it is socially fair and economically sound to

invest more during the early years and that ECEC is the best way to do this. However, the Recommendation's appeal to spend more on ECEC has not gained enough traction yet.

In terms of achievements, the Recommendation's first two pillars, on access to income and services, have been more influential in bringing about concrete policy changes and developing projects. The third pillar, on children's rights to legal and social participation, has received much less attention. So far there has been little interest in social/legal participation and in the rights of vulnerable children, despite the fact that child participation is a right and has proven benefits in terms of improved decision-making, for individual children, children as a group and for society in general.

The Recommendation's key message that one should 'always take the child's best interests as a primary consideration and recognise children as independent rights-holders' has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Both the European Parliament and NGOs have suggested that the best way to respect children's rights is to put in place an EU-wide child guarantee. Moreover, there has to be more data on the situation of specific groups of vulnerable children before there can be any adequate monitoring of their rights.

This Recommendation has made progress thanks to a number of important measures that have supported its implementation: ESIF financing (EUR 8 billion set aside for children); EU awareness-raising actions in the Member States (notably through peer review seminars); financial support for EU NGOs; and sharing of knowledge and best practices through the EPIC website containing a repository with evidence-based best practices (for each of the three pillars and up-to-date country reports on child and family policies in each Member State).

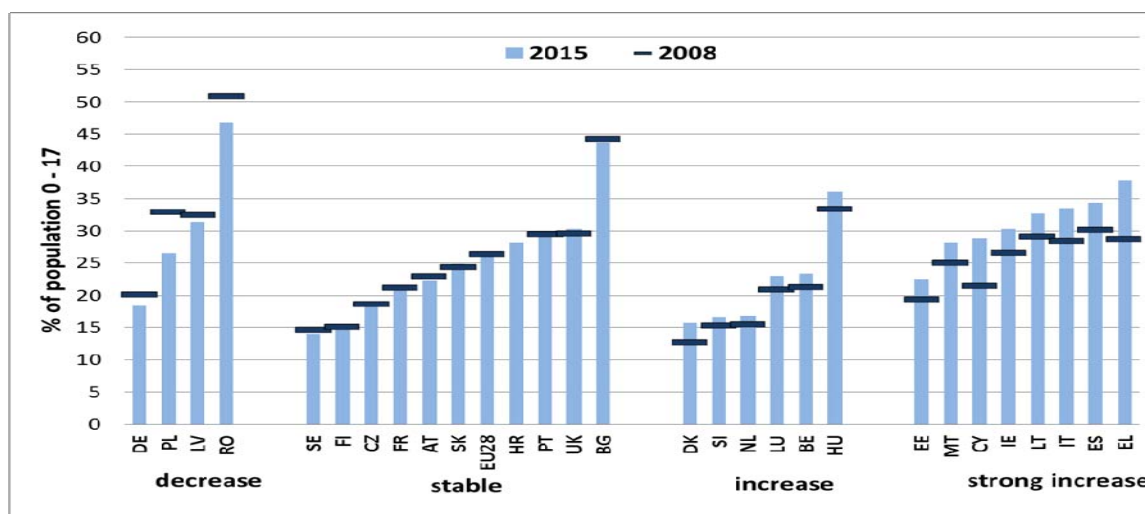
The public consultation on the preliminary draft of the European pillar of social rights highlighted the need to continue efforts to combat child poverty, to mainstream rights of the child with a clear focus on protection from poverty and strengthen the work-life-balance for both parents. It indicated that one of the best ways to address child poverty is by creating the conditions that make it possible for parents to earn their own living. The consultation also strongly emphasised the need to take concerted action to break the cycle of disadvantage faced by so many children and give a strong boost to the Recommendation's implementation. The Work-life balance initiative, presented in the framework of the European pillar of social rights, aims at improving the situation of working parents, in particular working mothers. Progress achieved through this initiative can have a positive impact on children.

The experiences presented in this report on four years of implementation will be instrumental for further action at local, national and EU level.

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ANNEX I — LATEST AROPE FIGURES FOR CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION (2015)

Figure 1: Change in the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (0-17) between 2008 and 2015

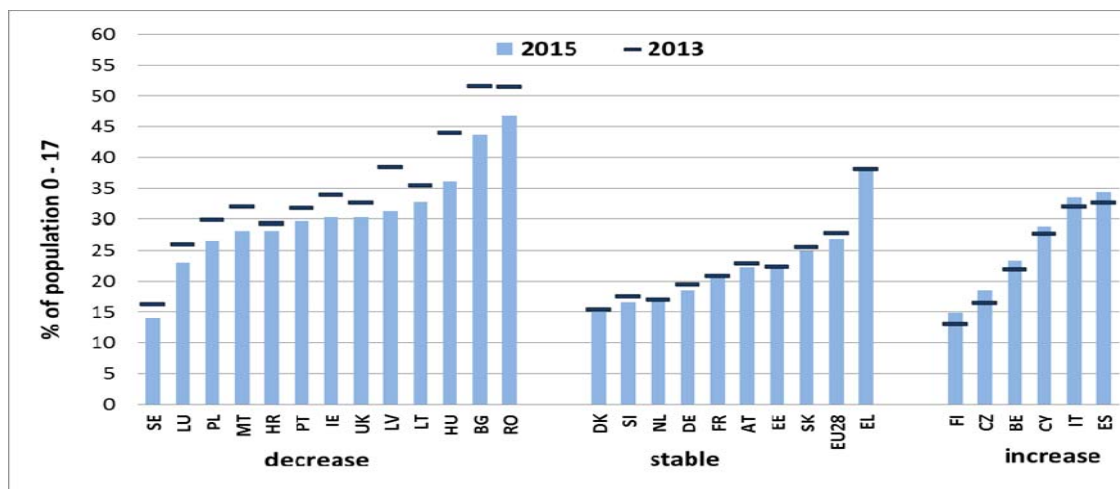


Source: Eurostat (EU-SILC), EU27 for 2008.

Figure 1 shows that the strongest increases in child poverty between 2008 and 2015 took place in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Italy, Ireland, Malta and Spain. The situation is much more serious for children raised by a single parent. They suffer from a risk of poverty twice as high as for children raised by two parents. Other risk categories are children growing up in large families and with an ethnic or migrant background.

Figure 2: Percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (0-17), 2013 and 2015

Between 2013 and 2015 the average AROPE for children in the EU decreased slightly from 28 % to 27 %. But as figure 2 shows, there are wide differences between the Member States, with reductions in Bulgaria, Hungary and Greece and increases in Cyprus, Spain and Italy.



Source: Eurostat (EU-SILC)

ANNEX II — EUROPEAN SEMESTER COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below gives an overview by topic of the CSRs issued in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to the various Member States on child poverty and well-being as covered by the Recommendation.

Overview of the 2014, 2015 and 2016 country-specific recommendations on families and children			
Policy Topic	Countries receiving a family/child CSR in 2014	Countries receiving a family/child CSR in 2015	Countries receiving a family/child CSR in 2016⁸⁶
Child poverty			IE, IT (<i>N.B.</i> ‘national anti-poverty strategy’)
Income support	IE, IT, UK, ES, HU, BG, RO, PT, LV	BG, CZ, HU, IT, LV, LT, PT, RO, SL, ES	BG, ES, FR, HU, HR, IE, IT, LT, LV
Efficiency/effectiveness of social protection support	FI, RO, EE, HR, LV, ES, BG	HR, IE, IT, FI	HR, ES, IT
ECEC/childcare (access, affordability, quality)	IE, IT, SK, RO, PL, DE, EE, CZ, AT, UK	AT, CZ, EE, IE, RO, SK, UK	CZ, IE, ES, IT, SK, UK
Inclusive education/ Early school leaving	SE, ES, SK, RO, PT, MT, IT, DK, DE, FR, CZ, BE, AT, PL, HU, HR, EE, BG [AT, DK, SE – young people with a migrant background]	AT, BG, CZ, EE, HU, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT, RO, SK, UK	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK [AT, BE — young people with a migrant background]
Affordable housing	UK, SE, NL	NL, SE, UK	IE, NL, SE, UK, LU
Financial disincentives to the labour market	NL, LU, DE, BE, IT, AT, FR, EE, IE, LU	HR, CZ, DE, EE, IE, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK	DE, IE, FR, FI
Reconciliation	MT, PL, LU	IT	
Youth activation	LU, LT, LV, UK, SE, FI, SK, SL, PT, HU, IT, HR, FR, ES, IE, DK, BG, BE	IT, RO, SK, ES, FI	BG, RO
Access to health	BG, RO, LV, ES	BG, LV, LT, RO	BG, CY, LV, PT, RO, SI
Roma-related	BG, HU, CZ, RO, SK	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK	BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK

⁸⁶ To avoid duplication Cyprus and Greece did not receive any CSRs in 2014 and 2015; they were still following macroeconomic adjustment programmes. However, Cyprus received CSRs in 2016.

Table 1: Formal childcare enrolment in % in 2015

	Age 0-3			Age 3 - mandatory school age		
	<30 hours	30 hours +	Total	<30 hours	30 hours +	Total
EU28	14.7	15.6	30.3	33.9	49.4	83.3
Belgium	23.3	26.8	50.1	21.7	77.1	98.8
Bulgaria	0.5	8.4	8.9	3.3	68.2	71.5
Czech Republic	1.2	1.7	2.9	22.6	54.9	77.5
Denmark	7.7	69.6	77.3	9.2	88.0	97.2
Germany	9.8	16.1	25.9	34.6	55.0	89.6
Estonia	3.6	17.8	21.4	6.8	86.1	92.9
Ireland	21.7	8.9	30.6	73.4	18.6	92.0
Greece	4.9	6.5	11.4	41.1	26.0	67.1
Spain	19.1	20.6	39.7	46.6	45.4	92.0
France	16.0	25.7	41.7	36.9	56.7	93.6
Croatia	2.3	9.5	11.8	6.5	46.4	52.9
Italy	10.4	16.9	27.3	23.3	62.6	85.9
Cyprus	9.4	11.4	20.8	49.4	32.0	81.4
Latvia	0.9	22.0	22.9	3.1	79.2	82.3
Lithuania	2.0	7.7	9.7	5.0	68.8	73.8
Luxembourg	16.9	34.9	51.8	27.0	54.9	81.9
Hungary	4.6	10.8	15.4	9.6	79.5	89.1
Malta	10.7	7.2	17.9	34.6	53.8	88.4
Netherlands	41.1	5.3	46.4	77.5	13.2	90.7
Austria	13.7	8.6	22.3	57.7	27.6	85.3
Poland	1.1	4.2	5.3	7.5	35.5	43.0
Portugal	4.3	42.9	47.2	6.4	83.5	89.9
Romania	4.2	5.2	9.4	50.9	7.3	58.2
Slovenia	2.5	34.9	37.4	8.8	82.1	90.9
Slovakia	0.2	0.9	1.1	14.0	53.6	67.6
Finland	7.9	24.6	32.5	23.2	59.6	82.8
Sweden	21.4	42.6	64.0	25.9	70.3	96.2
United Kingdom	26.1	4.3	30.4	48.8	24.0	72.8

Source: EU-SILC 2015

ANNEX IV — NGOs' ASSESSMENT, COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE RECOMMENDATION'S IMPLEMENTATION

On 6 December 2016, the European Commission organised a strategic dialogue meeting of the main European NGOs working, directly or indirectly, on children-related policies to discuss the state of implementation of the Recommendation. The main messages conveyed by those stakeholders are summarised below.

The NGOs underlined the Recommendation's main **positive results**:

- it worked as an important **agenda-setter** for all stakeholders;
- it allowed NGOs to persuade several Member States to use the Structural Funds more efficiently for children;
- it led some Member States (Belgium, Ireland, Portugal and Estonia) to adopt an **integrated policy approach** to children-related issues;
- the Recommendation's key message to focus on the early years and on ECEC was taken up in most Member States, and it became a priority in 12 of them;
- it also generated more financial support for de-institutionalisation projects and Roma children (in particular girls);
- it also led to children's actual involvement in policy-making in a few Member States.

The NGOs were somewhat more critical when it came to the Recommendation's implementation. Their main **comments** are the following:

- The Recommendation lacks **visibility** at national level: only four European countries referred to it in their national reform programmes. The fact that many ministers responsible for social affairs are unfamiliar with it undermines its implementation. A better partnership between civil society organisations and national governments would be needed to bridge the gaps between different levels of governance.
- The Recommendation's **integrated strategy** has not sufficiently influenced the way in which the European Semester addresses policy reforms. Too often proposals are considered to be fragmented and piecemeal. Some countries go for a quick fix and create 'one-stop-shop' services in the form of a single-ticket window without a well-integrated back office.
- **Funding** is spent inefficiently. According to NGOs, spending should be done in a more children-friendly way. It would appear that in some countries ESIF money is managed in too centralised a way to actually contribute to the integration of local communities. The lack of management capacity in many countries also results in funds remaining unspent. The focus appears to be on projects that are easy to implement and not necessarily on what is most urgent/needed.

- The Recommendation's implementation is limited by a huge **disparity** in resources and management capacity **between the Member States**. In this case, one size clearly does not fit all.

Finally, the NGOs put forward interesting and constructive **proposals** to improve the Recommendation's implementation in the near future. These include the following:

- On the whole the UNCRC, the Recommendation, the European Semester and national actions need to be **much more coherent**. There should be a clear political link between what the countries do under the Recommendation and are obliged to do under the UNCRC. The Recommendation should reinforce the actions already undertaken under the UNCRC and vice-versa.
- Now it is time to start looking also at **children's rights**. The prevention of violence in families requires more attention as some are under extraordinary pressure that can easily erupt into violence. A change in mentality is needed to recognise that children are first of all human beings; they are not just objects of our actions but legitimate actors of change.
- **The NGO networks** with their national member organisations **should have more influence** on the implementation of the ESF, especially in Eastern Europe. There is unequal access to information and not enough technical assistance. NGOs can help develop and implement projects at local level and in this way improve the absorption of funds. The obvious legal instrument for this is the new European code of conduct on partnerships. To solve the lack of management capacity, more training of national civil servants is needed.
- The European Parliament's proposal for a **European child guarantee** could take the form of a **childcare guarantee** similar to the successful youth guarantee.
- The Commission should continue to facilitate mutual learning, spread good practices and provide evidence via research activities. The European Platform for Investing in Children has great potential as a tool to monitor the Recommendation's implementation in the Member States. However, specific child benchmarks on well-being have to be developed. EU funding of social research on child and family matters must continue to allow for more future proofing of social policies.