

EU Alliance for Investing in Children statement on the drafting of the Child Guarantee national action plans

On the 14th of June 2021, EU Member States took a historic decision by **unanimously adopting the Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee**. By calling on EU Member States to guarantee access to basic rights and services for children in need, this ambitious and innovative framework represents a landmark step forward in protecting the rights of children growing up in poverty and social exclusion in the EU. Moreover, the approval by unanimity demonstrates the commitment of all 27 Member States to tackle child poverty within the EU.

Even before the pandemic, over **18 million children** in the EU were growing up in poverty or social exclusion. Although official Eurostat data for 2020 have not been released yet for all Member States, the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on children in vulnerable situations and their families have already been evident in several countries. Hence, an ambitious and comprehensive framework to protect children in need and ensure equal access to key services is urgently needed.

For this reason, after years of negotiations, evidence-based advocacy, and hard work, the EU Alliance for Investing in Children (Alliance) positively welcomed the adoption of the Child Guarantee. In particular, the EU Alliance was pleased to notice that most of its requests made over the last years were included in the final text of the Recommendation.

It is now up to each Member State to nominate a Child Guarantee national coordinator and design an ambitious Child Guarantee national action plan that will take a comprehensive approach in addressing child poverty and social exclusion. The national plans are expected to be submitted to the European Commission by **March 2022** and should outline how each Member State will implement the Child Guarantee until 2030.

With this statement, the EU Alliance provides key recommendations to national authorities on drafting the Child Guarantee national action plans to ensure the design of ambitious and comprehensive plans, taking into account the specific challenges of each Member State, and in meaningful consultation with relevant national stakeholders.

The EU Alliance urges EU Member States to:

- A. Ensure that the Child Guarantee national action plans target all children in need and that no child is left behind

One of the first actions that Member States will have to accomplish is identifying **the children in need** that the measures included in the Child Guarantee national action plans will target. The Child Guarantee Recommendation states that children in need are individuals **under the age of 18 years** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Within this group, the recommendation calls on EU Member States to take into account the specific disadvantages experienced by: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with mental health issues; children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; children in alternative, especially institutional, care; children in a precarious family situation

Hence, the Alliance urges Member States to ensure that the plans:

- Are relevant for **all children** in need at national, regional, and local level, taking into consideration the difficulties that might emerge in reaching children living in the most **rural or segregated** areas of each country, as well as the **most vulnerable and marginalised** groups that are often left behind by traditional social policies and schemes. The National Action Plans should be based on a thorough needs analysis of the children concerned and an assessment of the available services in the country. The plans should also be based on an integrated and comprehensive approach to break the silos between the services and policy areas identified by the Child Guarantee.
- Take a bold stance against all forms of **discrimination**, including intersectional discrimination, and concerning all groups of children. Preventive, targeted and proactive measures are needed to alter public perceptions and prevalent misrepresentations, through comprehensive anti-bias measures and specific training for services and public authorities, and through ensuring diversity in the staff to ensure that children most discriminated against also benefit from the child poverty reduction measures.
- Target children in alternative, especially institutional care, **reinforce the transition from institutional to quality family and community-based care** and ensure that **no child is placed in an institution**.¹ The national action plans should indeed promote the development and funding of high-quality family and community-based care and support services with a family-centred, community-based model of support, setting up early childhood intervention systems which address specific vulnerabilities and prevent family separation. Placing a child in an institution can never be in their best interest, goes against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and also contravenes the EU funding regulations of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which call on Member States to use the two funds to promote the transition to family and community-based care and not to support any action that contributes to segregation or social exclusion.
- Are embedded into wider national strategic frameworks for prevention of childhood poverty and inequality at a population level. While putting an emphasis on targeted approaches for groups of children in need, a proportionate universalism approach should be encouraged where effective access to all social rights for all children can be ensured proportionate to the need

As also reflected in the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation, EU Member States are recommended to **involve relevant stakeholders**, among which there should be, civil society working directly with children or for the rights of children, parents or parents' associations and children themselves, **to identify the children that need** to be reached by the Child Guarantee action plan. By meaningfully consulting these stakeholders, developing and maintaining regular cooperation mechanisms at the most suitable governance level, the targeting of children in need will be most relevant.

¹ [UN Guidelines for Alternative Care for Children](#) define institutions as 'large residential care facilities' and the related handbook describes them as 'large-scale group care' isolating children from the outside world, with rules and systems that infringe on children's individuality, rights, and psychological and emotional needs

B. Ensure that the Child Guarantee action plans take a comprehensive approach to addressing child poverty and social exclusion by promoting measures to support parents.

Although of great significance, child poverty and social exclusion cannot be addressed only by securing children's access to key service areas. In many cases child poverty is related to parents' access to resources and other measures that lead to the so-called cycle of disadvantage.

With this in mind and taking into consideration the Council Recommendation's enabling framework, the Alliance urges EU Member States to:

- Outline in the Child Guarantee action plans **measures that focus on parents' support and that break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage**. Most often, children that grow up in poverty are also growing up in poor households. In most EU Member States, children growing up in single-parent or large families, households with unemployed parents or with parents in low paid employment are also those that are most affected by the crisis. Although children's access to effective and free services can support children in need to reach their potential to the same level as their better-off peers, this cannot be enough because they have further needs that are not covered by these services. Therefore, to tackle child poverty and support children in a comprehensive and integrated way, EU Member States should also promote measures and investments related to parents' access to the labour market, tax support, targeted benefits, psycho-social health promoting and diseases/disability-preventive services, and gender equality.

C. Ensure that EU funds and national budgets are mobilised to adequately support the Child Guarantee action plans

Over the coming months, EU Member States are expected to develop their national Child Guarantee **action plans** alongside the EU funding programming for the **next seven-year financial framework**. Therefore, allocating adequate EU resources to implement the Child Guarantee is essential and part of the ESF+ regulation and a specific requirement of the Recommendation.

Therefore, the Alliance calls on EU Member States to:

- Take a **comprehensive approach** to tackle child and family poverty when implementing and monitoring the Child Guarantee and use the relevant EU funds such as the ESF+, the ERDF, the REACT-EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the InvestEU, the EU4Health and the Technical Support instrument, and complementary national budgets.
- **Transparently include in the action plans** how Member States will prioritise ESF+ and other EU funds resources for the implementation of the Child Guarantee. This is especially important for the 11 EU Members that are requested to dedicate at least **5% of their national ESF+ allocation** to the implementation of the Child Guarantee (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain, Hungary, Croatia and Luxembourg).
- Although EU funds are important and can support investments, they will not be sustainable if they are not combined with national resources that will continue funding the measures when EU funding is no longer available. Therefore, **national resources should also be mobilised, and their spending should also be included in the national plans**. The plans should be thus

embedded in a multi-annual and comprehensive national strategic framework to tackle child poverty and social exclusion.

D. Set ambitious targets and sub-targets to tackle child poverty

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan has set a target to lift at least **5 million children out of poverty by 2030**. Although the target goes in the right direction, it should have been more ambitious; it does not contend with the crisis experienced on a daily basis by millions of children, parents, carers and families. In addition, the Alliance welcomes that the Recommendation calls on EU Member State to present qualitative and quantitative targets in their Child Guarantee action plans.

Yet, it also calls on EU Member States:

- To adopt and include in the action plans **ambitious targets that will exceed the European Commission's target** by considering the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the EU and Member States commitment to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, which call on States to half poverty in all its forms by 2030.
- EU Member States should also develop and outline in their action plans, **sub-targets covering regional and local disparities for each area of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation**, i.e. children's effective and free access to early childhood education and care, all forms of inclusive education, healthcare, including maternal health care, health-promoting, disease and disability preventive services, effective and affordable access to sufficient and healthy nutrition, and adequate housing.

E. Set a national framework for data collection and a set of indicators that will take the most vulnerable into account. The monitoring of the Child Guarantee should feed into the European Semester process

The Alliance calls on EU Member States to:

- Develop a set of indicators that are aligned with the indicators developed by the Social Protection Committee. The indicators must be **disaggregated** and take into account **children in need** as per the Council Recommendation². All relevant indicators should be disaggregated to better **align with the areas** identified by the Child Guarantee Recommendation. They should also be disaggregated at **local level**, where it is possible, to have a clearer figure of the territorial differences and better plan and monitor the implementation of the Recommendation.
- Include a proper **monitoring system** that feeds into the European Semester cycle. An efficient monitoring and evaluation system will indeed be essential to ensure the Child Guarantee is an implementable instrument that triggers concrete reforms within the national and local systems.

² Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with a migrant background; children with a minority, racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); children in alternative (especially institutional) care; children of single-parent families; as well as children in precarious situations

F. Ensure meaningful consultations with multispectral stakeholders, children, and parents for the designation of the targeted groups of children and the design of the action plans

One of the most important requirements of the Council Recommendation is the **involvement of children and civil society as stakeholders** in designing, monitoring and evaluating the national action plans. This step needs further targeted investment towards the most vulnerable who have lower access to consultation tools and mechanisms and have lower opportunities to raise their voices.

Therefore, the Alliance urges EU Member States to:

- Promote the **meaningful involvement of civil society organisations, children as well as parents and parent and families' associations** at national, regional and local level in the design, monitoring and evaluation of the Child Guarantee national action plans and relevant frameworks developed as part of these plans and the bi-annual reporting of EU Member States to the European Commission. The participation of these stakeholders should be continuous, representative, and transparent. Discussion points and documents which are part of the consultation meetings should be shared with the stakeholders well in advance, conclusions of the meetings should be publicly available, and stakeholders should be informed about the outcomes of the consultations and the decisions being made as part of these consultations.
- Put in place **formalised mechanisms that promote children's meaningful and rights-based participation** in decision-making that affects their lives. In particular, develop **structures** to promote the meaningful participation of **children in need** in designing, monitoring and evaluating the Child Guarantee national action plans and relevant frameworks developed as part of these plans as well as in the bi-annual reporting of EU Member States to the European Commission. In addition, avoid existing patterns of **discrimination** and adopt specific tools to create opportunities for marginalised and discriminated children.

Endnote

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children has been advocating for a multidimensional, rights-based approach to tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being since 2014. This statement was endorsed by the following partner organisations of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children:

- Alliance for Childhood European Network Group
- ATD Quart Monde
- Caritas Europa
- COFACE Families Europe
- Don Bosco International
- Dynamo International – Street Workers Network
- European Roma Grassroots Organisations - ERGO Network
- Eurochild
- Eurodiaconia
- EuroHealthNet
- European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities – EASPD
- European Anti-Poverty Network – EAPN

- European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless – FEANTSA
- European Parents' Association
- European Public Health Alliance – EPHA
- European Social Network – ESN
- Inclusion Europe
- Lifelong Learning Platform
- Lumos
- Mental Health Europe
- Make Mothers Matter
- Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)
- Roma Education Fund
- Save the Children
- SOS Children's Villages International.

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