

Money, influence and mind-sets: How can advocacy and research help the EU to be a positive force for change in children's lives?

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Introduction

The financial and economic crisis is profoundly impacting millions of people in Europe, including children and their families: according to official data, over 1 child in 4 is living in, or is at risk of, poverty (Eurostat 2016). Governments' tendency to resort to austerity measures, moreover, has further contributed to the worsening of the situation of children and young people. As poverty rates become increasingly higher, the potential implications for children's development and well-being are enormous: poverty often results in less opportunities, it affects the quality and availability of essential services, and ultimately hinders a child's chance to reach his or her full potential.

Eurochild, a European network of over 180 organisations working for the promotion and protection of children's rights, actively advocates for child poverty to be prioritised within the political agenda at the European Union (EU) and national level. As part of its work, Eurochild monitors policy developments in the social field, promoting children's rights and supporting those most vulnerable. However, the critical situation of children and families in Europe has shown that policy commitments alone do not suffice.

Child poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, which cannot be effectively addressed without a comprehensive understanding of the issue, which takes into consideration its root causes. Eurochild believes that a strong link exists between the alarming rates of child poverty and the lack of a coordinated, multidisciplinary and integrated approach based on preventive measures and the provision and availability of quality services for children and their families, such as education, health and child care. It is not only about the amount of resources invested in children, it is very much about reforming the system, making it more empowering for children and their families, and allow them to live a more autonomous life.

How can policies tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being become more effective and achieve better outcomes for children? This paper provides an overview of recent opportunities at the EU level, potentially capable of influencing and shaping policies to address child poverty and social exclusion. Although such instruments constitute important first steps, it is still difficult to translate them into concrete actions. Therefore the question is how to ensure a shift in mentality, from principles to practice.

The negative impact of poverty on children and families can only be prevented if sufficient resources are allocated to this purpose. It is argued here that specific evidence and compelling arguments proving the strict correlation between investing in children and better outcomes in the long run are needed to urge institutions, EU or national, to translate policy commitments into reality.

Two case studies are presented as an example which shows how advocacy and research can help gathering such evidence: the Opening Doors for Europe's Children campaign (hereafter 'Opening Doors'), and the Childonomics research project, two initiatives led by Eurochild and its partners, which aim to collect evidence and good practices demonstrating that strengthening the prevention system not only is sustainable and cost-effective, but also has a stronger impact on breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality.

Setting the context – key EU policy levers and funds

At the EU level, several initiatives that represent important policy levers are already in place. In many instances, however, the gap between theory and practice is still significant.

The adoption of the **European Commission Recommendation on “Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage”** (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Recommendation’) in 2013 as part of the Social Investment Package was an important milestone (European Commission 2013).

With its three pillars and its multidimensional approach to child poverty, it constitutes a key policy guidance which has been used at Member State level to influence policy reform and the way the EU **structural and investment funds** (ESIF or ESI Funds) are used.

The momentum created by the Recommendation fostered the establishment of the EU Alliance for Investing in Children in 2014, which was coordinated by Eurochild and made up of 24 European networks of social NGOs and organisations sharing a commitment to end child poverty and promote child well-being across Europe.

This Alliance was specifically set up to engage national stakeholders in the process of implementing the Recommendation – through making maximum use

of Europe 2020 and the Structural and Investment Funds. It also produced an Implementation Handbook that provides evidence of integrated approaches to breaking the cycle of child poverty across Europe, and an Advocacy Toolkit to be used by organisations at the national level to influence policy reform and investment (the EU Alliance for Investing in Children, 2014; 2015).

The EU governance and structural funding were supposed to reinforce the implementation of the Recommendation, but in reality, the Recommendation has slipped down the list of priorities and the follow-up has been weak. The current political climate at the EU level continues to support a rather narrow political agenda, which has become less favourable to supporting children's rights. EU institutions are neither following up on past initiatives nor coming up with new initiatives to tackle child poverty and promote child well-being. While there is some focus on specific issues (e.g. asylum and migration) to provide such organisations as Eurochild with the opportunity to explore new areas of work, the attention to broader policies on children rights seems to be missing.

The provision on “ex ante conditionalities”, i.e. a set of conditions to be fulfilled by Member States in order to spend EU funds on a given priority effectively is an important factor in the regulations for the **Structural Funds** programming period 2014–2020. One of these conditionalities, under the thematic objective “Promoting social inclusion combatting poverty and any discrimination”, is intended to promote investment in deinstitutionalisation. In countries where the European Commission has identified a specific need, Member States have to put in place policy frameworks on poverty reduction which include measures for the transition from institutional to community based care. One of the priorities of Eurochild, through the Opening Doors Campaign, is to make sure that Structural Funds are being allocated and spent on measures that will reduce the reliance on institutional care and that will contribute to the development of high quality family and community based care in EU Member States.

The **European Semester** – the EU's governance framework to coordinate fiscal, economic and social performance across EU Member States – appears to be taking a much more limited and short-term perspective defined solely by jobs and economic growth. As Eurochild noted in its 2016 report on the European Semester (Eurochild 2016), children remain largely invisible in the Semester process, they are rarely mentioned in Country Reports and National Reform Programmes, and even when mentioned, specific measures are missing. There has been no improvement in the Country Specific Recommendations since 2015, most references to children are indirect (e.g. employment), and Ireland is the only country with a specific recommendation on child poverty.

Currently, new instruments are being developed and implemented at the EU and international level, and they have the potential to become important tools to trigger policy change and deliver better outcomes for children.

The European **Pillar of Social Rights** is a new initiative by the European Commission, which aims at establishing a framework to identify and promote common

principles, within the Eurozone, in the fields of employment and social policies. Eurochild's goal is that the Pillar is underpinned by a child-rights based approach, which should result in investing in children and child well-being being considered as a priority, supporting the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

The **Child Guarantee** is a measure proposed by the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament. They propose the creation of a new EU fund for tackling child poverty, which would guarantee that every child in Europe has equal access to free quality health care, free quality education, free quality childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition. In Eurochild's view the Child Guarantee has the potential to become a catalyst to reinforce national positive approaches to tackling child poverty, and to play a strategic role in helping the EU, Member States and sub-national governments to allocate their resources for investment in children more efficiently. For a Child Guarantee to be effective it needs to contribute to the overall goal of preventing and addressing child poverty, therefore Member States should develop national child poverty action plans, supporting the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently adopted a **General Comment on "Public budgeting for the realisation of children's rights"** (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2016). The General Comment provides the official guidance on how States are to implement the obligations they undertook to uphold the rights of children under their jurisdiction. It states that the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires financial resources to be invested and that children's rights should be taken into consideration in every step of public budgeting. The General Comment has become a powerful instrument for advocacy for children's rights, which added much needed political weight to the existing EU Recommendation on Investing in Children.

The European Commission released its mid-term review of the **Multannual Financial Framework 2014–2020 (MFF)** in September 2016, identifying job growth, migration and security as the main priorities for the next three years. Given the lack of any references to children and the strong focus on macroeconomic issues, Eurochild will advocate for children's rights to be mainstreamed in the **post 2020 MFF** of the EU, as it constitutes an opportunity to promote a child rights-based approach to policy and budgeting. The next EU budget should give a higher priority to child poverty and well-being, as a mean to achieve other targets, such as economic growth, and set up a mechanism to track spending on children.

In an increasingly complex European context, the role of the EU institutions should be to provide a sense of direction. Although the above mentioned measures, initiatives and funds represent important instruments that can be used to leverage policy making, better coordination between the EU and its Member States, and stronger political will are needed to translate such commitments into concrete action. For children in Europe to thrive, the EU must step up and embrace its role as an overarching institution acting as a driver for change. The EU can play

a strategic role in showing Member States how investing in children can bring an economic return, and States should be required to report on their progress by demonstrating how public budgeting impacts on children and their families.

Opening Doors and Childonomics are two of the main initiatives currently being developed by Eurochild and its partner organisations. While Opening Doors is an advocacy campaign aimed at supporting national efforts to end institutional care for children and to strengthen families; Childonomics is a research project set to develop a model to measure and evaluate the costs of child welfare and protection systems against expected outcomes for children. Both initiatives are expected to shine light, by gathering evidence and good practices, on the link between investing in children and positive outcomes for children, their families, and society in general.

Opening doors for europe's children – strengthening families, ending institutional care

Opening Doors for Europe's Children is a pan-European campaign advocating for strengthening families and ending institutional care, by leveraging EU funding and policy, and building capacity of civil society organisations. The first phase of Opening Doors was ran jointly by Eurochild and Hope and Homes from 2013–2015 in 12 mainly Eastern and Central European countries. The Campaign's aim has been to strengthen the advocacy capacity of national partners, in particular using the leverage of the EU policy and funding influence to support national deinstitutionalisation strategies, including investing in prevention, family support and quality alternative care. Phase II of the Opening Doors Campaign was officially launched in December 2016. It is a partnership among 5 international organisations: Eurochild, Hope and Homes for Children, SOS Children's Villages International, International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO) and FICE Europe and civil society organisations across 15 European countries. In its second Phase the Campaign has expanded in Western European countries in an effort to break the myth that institutional care only concerns Central and Eastern European countries. Also, in the context of the current refugee and migrant crisis, the Campaign will call for quality care alternatives to institutional care for migrant, unaccompanied and separated children

While there are no official figures available, it is estimated that across the EU, approximately 500.000 children are growing up in institutional care (Eurochild, 2010). Institutions can be defined as segregating residential care facilities for children without parental care. They are often impersonal; they impose a rigid, standardised routine which depersonalises children and deprives them of the love, affection, care and attention they need to thrive. Living in such conditions can have devastating, long-term consequences for children, but also for their families and for society in general (Opening Doors for Europe's Children 2014). It is important

to mention that institutional care does not always refer to the size of the institutional care setting. That is why, at the European level, we often refer to the term “institutional culture” which indicates the characteristics mentioned above. This culture can be found in big institutional care settings as well as in smaller homes.

Eurochild and Opening Doors strive to advocate for national authorities to take concrete steps towards deinstitutionalisation. The latter does not mean simply the closure of institutions. Deinstitutionalisation is a change in mentalities, aiming to shift the focus on children's rights and on quality of care. While the rigid institutional model only reaches a limited amount of children, who are often forgotten or get lost in the system, becoming vulnerable to abuse; a family and community-based care system is based on the idea that all children should have access to quality preventive services, family ties should be maintained, and interventions should target children's specific needs through personalised care plans.

For that to be successful, deinstitutionalisation measures need to focus on prevention, intervention, and follow-up. Prevention means that providing support to families should be a key priority: the care system should only be a last resort measure. Quality and availability of community services should be improved and services should be integrated, placing the best interests of the child in the centre of decision-making. National authorities should follow the UN Guidelines on Alternative care “necessity and suitability principles”, i.e. that they should take all necessary measures so that children will be separated from their parents only when it is absolutely *necessary* and in their best interest. When a child requires alternative care, national authorities should guarantee that the care settings must meet general minimum standards and that the child is provided with the *most suitable placement* based on the child's individual needs (Cantwell et al. 2012). Intervention measures should be focused on an individualised approach for every child as needs are different. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for children in care, and children should actively participate in the decisions that impact their lives. Family-based or family-like care are preferred, but as a matter of principle children in care must receive the best possible care solution according to their needs. Life after care is equally important as young care leavers are among some of the most vulnerable groups of children due to the frequent lack of a support system for children leaving care. Transition from care to independent living must be carefully planned with participation of children and young adults, and it must be supported for as long as necessary. In other words, fewer children should enter the system by having in place mainstream services in the community; those in care should be provided with high quality family or community based care according to their individualised needs and long-term; sustainable solutions should be put in place to support those who leave the system.

Deinstitutionalisation, however, is not an easy process. There are many barriers, both political and economic, that prevent progress. National authorities often lack political will to put in place coordinated measures, also due to a general lack of know-how and of a shared understanding of deinstitutionalisation. Moreover,

from an economic perspective, the current crisis has resulted in austerity measures that, combined with the common and mistaken opinion that institutions represent a low-cost option, have contributed to halting the deinstitutionalisation process in Europe. The fear of people losing their jobs by the closure of institutional care settings is an additional barrier to deinstitutionalisation process (Eurochild, Hope & Homes for Children, SOS Children's Villages 2014).

Poverty is one of the main reasons for separating children from their families and placing them in institutional care. For the transition from institutional to family and community based care, a holistic and multidisciplinary approach is essential. For deinstitutionalisation to become a reality, social welfare, healthcare, and education, as well as poverty and inequality must be addressed. Lack of equal access to services and the growing poverty rates in Europe are intertwined and constitute contributing factors to the increasing number of families and children at risk.

In most instances, however, policies, driven by short-sighted financial considerations, tend to focus on perpetuating care systems that not only negatively impact on children and their rights, but are neither cost-effective. Opening Doors advocates for financial resources to be invested in prevention and alternative family care: the economic argument is that investing in preventing measures and in integrated protection systems that focus on providing better services – e.g. early intervention, inclusive education, family support and re-integration – is more sustainable and effective in the long run, positively contributing to breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality.

The Opening Doors campaign works towards achieving such goals by building partnerships at international and national level to advocate for change in national policies and public spending. It builds the capacity of national organisations to leverage existing EU policy tools, as well as EU funding programmes to support progress at national level, making the case for a shift from a system based on institutions to family and community-based care, supported by more effective public budgeting and resource allocation.

Childonomics – Measuring the long-term social and economic value of investing in children

With support of the OAK Foundation, Eurochild is currently coordinating the 'Childonomics' research project¹, which aims to measure the long-term social and economic return of investing in children. This project, which also fits in the framework of the European Commission's Recommendation on Investing in Children, will develop and test an economic model to measure the costs of different child

1 For updates see <http://www.eurochild.org/projects/childonomics/> (last accessed 04.05.2018).

welfare and protection system interventions against expected outcomes for children, families and society as a whole. Particular attention is given to preventing the separation of children from their families, supporting their reintegration and reducing reliance on institutional care.

The economic model – which is being developed by academics – is based on the need to protect and promote children's rights in public policy and budgets. The Childonomics approach will be developed and tested in two national contexts to calculate return on investment in child and family support services. Malta and Romania were selected as partner countries due to recently introduced reforms and a strong political interest in child and family policies. Political leaders recognised the need to build a stronger evidence base to support policy and spending choices and better understand the effectiveness of public spending on child protection.

The aim of Childonomics is that it will provide a framework for considering the social and economic cost of a change in policy in the short and long term, and can thus be used as part of the planning process for policy and practice change. It can also be used as part of a strategy for reform of systems that do not provide sufficient support for parents and children hence they lead to poor outcomes for children such as those that can result, for example, from high rates of children living in institutional care or other placements outside of parental care that may not meet their needs.

This cutting-edge, policy-relevant research project will hopefully equip the Eurochild network and the wider community to deliver results for children and help to strengthen the evidence-base that underpins our child-rights advocacy.

Conclusions

For advocacy to be truly effective and change the prevailing mind-set, organisations such as Eurochild need to be rigorous in the way they diagnose the problem, understand the impact their work could have on policy-making, set realistic objectives for policy influence, develop a plan to achieve those objectives, monitor and learn from the progress they are making and reflect this learning back into their work.

This can be done by building a strong bridge between advocacy and campaigning, policy, and research, which should be twofold: on the one hand, it is necessary to understand the role of different stakeholders (civil society, researchers, policy makers) in supporting positive change, and how to ensure coordinated cooperation. On the other hand, civil society organisations need to adopt sound and rigorous research methods to support their advocacy activities and influence policy-making. Over the past few years, Eurochild has been encouraging a broader understanding

of how evidence can and should have a key role in social policy experimentation, social innovation and social entrepreneurship initiatives at the EU and national level (Eurochild 2015).

If the goal is to ensure the allocation of adequate resources for prevention measures and comprehensive child protection systems, then evidence is needed to demonstrate the economic value, also in terms of social outcomes, of such use of public financial resources.

If the overall policy framework promotes greater investments in social inclusion and equality, the volume of children entering the child protection system will be smaller and costs reduced in the long-term. The model we are advocating for around investing in universal services and social protection mechanisms, through projects such as Opening Doors and Childonomics, is based on the firm belief that investing early can reduce the necessity for targeted interventions in the long run.

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