



Proposal for recommendations on the European Child Guarantee

The European Public Health Alliance, the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), through its initiative the Romani Early Years Network, welcomes the European Commission's commitment to strengthen the protection of vulnerable children through the development of the European Child Guarantee and Council Recommendations aiming to set up a policy framework to combat child poverty and exclusion.

Child poverty is a major concern preventing children's optimal development, especially in the earliest years of life (0-3 years). This is particularly true for children with disadvantaged backgrounds, greatly vulnerable to inequalities in education, including early childhood development care and health - both identified as fundamental areas of intervention within the EU Child Guarantee.

Although it advances access to essential services of good quality for all vulnerable children, some population groups deserve stronger political commitment and social investment due to their greater exposure to poverty and social exclusion, such as Roma. This is the largest ethnic minority in Europe and it faces disproportionate rates of deep and generational poverty having long-term consequences on health, education and other social outcomes. A survey¹ released by the Fundamental Rights Agency in 2014 revealed that 90% of Roma children live at risk of poverty and social exclusion. 40% of them face notable nutritional risks and suffer from malnutrition. The results of the recent study published by FRA are also alarming: 38% of Roma and Travellers live in households where people struggle to meet their needs and 23% of them live in severe material deprivation.²

Therefore, we call on the European Commission to expand the scope of the EU Child Guarantee in order to provide a comprehensive and holistic framework for tackling child poverty and exclusion comprising measures targeting Roma children, especially those between 0 and 3 years of age. We reiterate our recommendations³ issued in July 2020 for integrated policies addressing the social determinants of health from the earliest years of life to achieve positive and sustainable results on poverty and social exclusion. We urge the European Commission to incorporate a number of measures to safeguard vulnerable children, including Roma enjoy stronger protection against poverty and exclusion.

Developing a comprehensive and holistic policy framework for tackling child poverty and exclusion

The EU Child Guarantee has identified health and education as essential factors for combating child poverty. Nevertheless, the complexity of social and economic issues causing deprivation requires a holistic approach looking beyond these two sectors. Child poverty should be tackled from the earliest years of life through a comprehensive policy framework for Early Childhood Development (ECD) with a focus on children between 0 and 3 years; quality and inclusive education, health and social protection systems; as well as effective mechanisms for protection against all forms of discrimination. This holistic approach contributes to address major issues such as unequal access to employment, education and training, adequate housing; social inequalities; lower availability and accessibility of social services increasing poverty and exclusion. Policy measures in health and prevention, but also nutrition, child

¹ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-employment-1_en.pdf

² <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/roma-travellers-survey>

³ <https://epha.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/healthy-from-the-beginning-recommendations.pdf>



safety and protection, decent housing, early learning and responsive caregiving play a fundamental role in eradicating poverty and ensuring a good start for every child.

Developing, implementing and monitoring integrated multiannual strategies with annual action plans, including binding indicators and measurable targets

Such strategies advance a common approach towards child poverty, strong cross-country cooperation and joint efforts of all Member States which has already been emphasised by the European Commission in its recommendations issued in 2013.⁴ These strategies must promote synergies between relevant policy areas (employment, health, education, environment, urbanism, food and agriculture) to achieve sustainable results on poverty reduction. The action plans must be in line with the EU commitment to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.

Allocating adequate funding to combat child poverty and social exclusion

We welcome and support the European Commission's calls on Member States to allocate 5% of ESF+ funding to eradicate child poverty and exclusion and urge national governments to secure adequate funding through ESF+ and national budgets. Moreover, we call on them to create policy synergies in order to allocate additional funding to child poverty through the European Regional Development Fund and Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument.

Adopting a rights-based approach

Many social and economic factors are responsible for child poverty and exclusion, but evidence demonstrates that some population groups and communities, such as Roma, migrants and children with disabilities are more vulnerable to both deprivation and social exclusion due to lower human rights protection and discrimination. Therefore, the EU Child Guarantee must comprise monitoring and reporting mechanisms to tackle discrimination that vulnerable children and their parents experience across Europe. Ensuring effective child's rights protection, including equal access to services is an indispensable step for achieving sustainable results on poverty and social exclusion.

Expanding the scope of the Child Guarantee

Although health and education are essential factors for poverty reduction, the Child guarantee must advance comprehensive policy measures promoting equality and non-discrimination principles to enable "very child to enjoy equal access to quality healthcare, including regular paediatric visits, consultations with nutritionists, psychologists and health professionals, regardless of the ethnic, social or administrative status of their parents."⁵ Every child must enjoy equal access to quality education "regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation [...]".⁶

Justification:

According to principle 16 of the European Pillar for Social rights "everyone has the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality." However, access to healthcare and prevention remains an obstacle for those living below the poverty line or experiencing social exclusion. This is a challenge for children between the ages of 16 and 18 leaving compulsory education. Many are not eligible to apply for national health insurance which in most of the Member States depends on

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112>

⁵ Healthy from the beginning-ensuring a good start in life for all Roma children, July 2020.

⁶ Principle 3 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.



employment benefits, especially in countries where Universal Health Coverage has not been adopted. The lack of health coverage is particularly worrying for pregnant girls who need pre- and post-natal care as well as psychological support.

Availability, accessibility and affordability of relevant health and prevention services are not always ensured, especially in isolated areas or because of lower access to medical coverage.⁷ Frequent out-of-pocket payments creating financial hardship for disadvantaged families, deprive children of enjoying timely and good quality healthcare and prevention. As a result, child mortality, non-communicable disease and premature deaths are higher among Roma. Shorter life expectancy is another evidence about the severe inequalities Roma experience in EU Member States.⁸ It further raises the need for stronger political commitment to tackle holistically poverty and social exclusion starting from the first years of life.

To guarantee equal access to quality healthcare and prevention, education and training for all, the EU Child Guarantee must **incorporate principle 3 of the European Pillar for Social Rights in the Council Recommendations**. Access to education of good quality depends strongly on EU and national measures guaranteeing child's rights, including protection against discrimination. The Council Recommendations should encourage EU Member States to end ethnic segregation of Roma children and ensure their equal treatment in healthcare and prevention, education, including early childhood education and care.

Implementing targeted measures for Roma children

Justification:

Article 3 of the EU Pillar of Social Rights stipulates that “[...] equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered”. The EU Child Guarantee must incorporate targeted measures to break the cycle of generational poverty and social exclusion. In the EU-27, Roma are particularly disadvantaged in accessing quality education and enjoy less protection of their rights. Systemic discrimination against Roma have been observed in many EU Member States and manifests itself in different forms, such as spatial isolation, ethnic segregation in schools and hospitals, and placement of Roma children in educational settings and classrooms for children with special needs. Such practices deprive Roma of enjoying adequate health and social protection; learning opportunities and improve their social and economic conditions in adulthood.

Despite having been declared illegal by the European Court of Human Rights, ethnic discrimination in school persists across Europe. Since 2014, the European Commission has initiated infringement procedures against many Member States for ethnic segregation of Roma children, however these discriminatory practices have not been combated and continue to widen the social gaps between Roma and non-Roma.

Ensuring equal opportunities for child participation in policy and decision making

Justification:

Making the EU Child guarantee more integrated and inclusive requires the involvement of those most affected by child poverty – vulnerable children. Nevertheless, child participation is rarely accessible to the most excluded children, such as Roma. They have lower opportunities to raise their voices due to

⁷ <https://epha.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/marmot-review-10-years-on-lessons-for-the-eu.pdf>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/social_determinants/docs/2014_roma_health_report_en.pdf



many obstacles such as spatial segregation, social isolation, school dropout leading to low educational attainment, poor access to digital devices and equipment. The lower accessibility of existing consultation mechanisms (surveys, interviews, public consultations etc.) due to language barriers, digital literacy, technical equipment further widen this gap. Consequently, we urge the European Commission and national governments to provide accessible and inclusive consultation mechanisms in/through mother tongues; a child-friendly language and adequate tools to safeguard that the most excluded children are not left behind.

Additional information:

Title of the initiative: Basic services for children in need - European Child Guarantee

Type of initiative: Roadmap consultation

Date of submission: 7 October 2020

Key documents supporting the recommendations above:

Healthy from the beginning: ensuring a good start in life for all Roma children, July 2020

The Marmot Review 10 Years On: New EPHA study on its lessons for the European Union

The **European Public Health Alliance** is the leading NGO alliance working to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe. It aims to deliver equitable solutions to public health challenges, build public health capacity and reduce health inequalities. EPHA represents over 90 members, comprising of health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals and disease groups dedicated to improving public health through advocacy and policy development at European and national level.

The International Step by Step Association is the largest international early childhood professional community for Europe and Central Asia, powered by leading early childhood experts. ISSA unites and supports close to 100 organisation to deliver high-quality early childhood services equitably. ISSA also hosts the **Romani Early Years Network (REYN)** - a Europe-wide initiative that aims to:

- Strengthen the competences of early childhood professionals working with Romani and Traveller children by promoting professionalism in early years
- Ensure access to quality early childhood services for Romani and Traveller children
- Increase and value diversity in practice and workforce by leveraging EU funds and policies, and by developing strategies to attract more Romani and Travellers in the ECD workforce.