

NEEDED MORE THAN EVER:
EU Alliance for Investing in Children's recommendations
to ensure the successful implementation of the Child Guarantee

On the 20th of June, the Child Guarantee National Coordinators will gather in Brussels to discuss the implementation of the **European Child Guarantee**. With this statement, the EU Alliance for Investing in Children (Alliance) aims to analyse the latest development of this timely instrument and provide recommendations to ensure its success.

The Child Guarantee comes at a crucial time. In 2021, **19.8 million children** in the EU – or **one in four** – were **at risk of poverty or social exclusion**. The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living and the climate crises are exacerbating existing hardship and inequalities. As a result, these numbers are expected to **increase further**. By ensuring that children in vulnerable situations and their families have an adequate standard of living and access to quality services, the Child Guarantee is a **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to fight child poverty and social exclusion and build a more robust Social Europe. Proper implementation of this instrument is thus needed more than ever.

A pan-European crisis

Child poverty is a long-standing **pan-European crisis**. Europe is one of the world's wealthiest and most progressive regions, yet no state is free from child poverty. While the situation varies from country to country, the result is always the same; **children's rights are not respected, protected, or fulfilled**. Poverty affects every aspect of a child's life, negatively impacting their material living conditions, education, relations with their families, and their personal and professional development. Even temporary deprivation experiences can have devastating consequences for a child, lasting a lifetime, if not generations.

For example, children born and growing into poverty and social exclusion are more likely to experience a wide range of **health problems**, including poor nutrition, chronic diseases, and mental health problems. There are well-established links between critical socio-economic determinants of health - such as poverty, deprivation, and exclusion - and childhood obesity, children's respiratory diseases, mental health, and psychosocial well-being. Child poverty is a risk factor for poor health in the short, medium, and long term, exacerbating children's risk of becoming ill earlier, taking longer to recover, and dying prematurely. Poverty also puts an additional strain on families, which can lead to parental mental health, parent-child bonding and relationship problems and financial difficulties, adding to an extra indirect impact on children's lives.

The **early years** of a child's life are crucial in determining children's physical, mental, social, and emotional development. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development and are highly influenced by children's environments, early experiences, and interactions. These experiences affect brain development, shaping children's cognitive, social, and emotional capacities. Poverty, exclusion, and discrimination can lead to toxic stress in early childhood and affect children's development. Early intervention and supportive and caring relationships with caregivers are critically important to protect infants and young children from the damaging effects of poverty, insecurity, and neglect. Nurturing care for very young children – including health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving and safety and security – provides the foundation for children to reach their full potential and shapes their preparation for school and adulthood. The lack of adequate conditions has long-term consequences on children's physical and mental development, resulting in social and economic inequalities affecting the rest of their lives. Investing early in nurturing care for all children is therefore essential for their healthy development – physical and mental. Research shows that access to early childhood intervention, family support and access to quality and inclusive Early Childhood

Education and Care are particularly significant for **children with disabilities**. Comprehensive and empowering family-centred Early Childhood Intervention creates supporting environments, in and outside the home, and provides access to relevant services. It can also foster child development, facilitate a positive transition from home to preschool, social inclusion for children and families, and prevent institutionalisation.

An exacerbated crisis

COVID-19 hit children hard, not only regarding health and social impacts but also from the lockdown measures taken to control the emergency. For example, children in alternative care were particularly affected by the pandemic. The lockdowns have exacerbated the many factors that lead to child-family separation, among them poverty, abuse, neglect, illness, and death. Moreover, some governments responded to this crisis by reducing or closing residential care services. For many children in alternative care this meant a hurried and often unprepared return to their families of origin, often without the underlying conditions for their original placement in care being addressed.

Even if the pandemic is often perceived as a crisis from the past, children and families are still dealing with its **long-term impact**. The loss of jobs and income were heavy blows for many families, while vulnerable families were put even more drastically at risk. Families experienced increased fragility, isolation, and lack of access to health and education services. At the same time, children were severely deprived of critical needs such as access to education, healthcare, housing, nutrition, sanitation, and water. Several Member States refused to provide migrant families – especially those who were undocumented – access to vaccines. These situations continue and lead to increased vulnerability, stress, abuse, family breakdown and the potential need for temporary or long-term alternative care placement.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to increased inequality and social exclusion, exacerbating existing challenges, especially for children and families in vulnerable situations. For example, poor housing, economic disadvantage, lack of access to online learning, and the health crisis have had detrimental consequences on young **Roma children**'s well-being and development. Many could not follow online education and were expelled or forced to repeat the school year because of missed lessons. **Children with disabilities** and their families also faced additional risks during the pandemic, including disruption of services and support, exclusion from general health information and services, and inaccessibility of services.

The conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and increases in energy prices and the cost of living have resulted in the worst **cost-of-living crisis** in a generation. Many families struggle to put food on the table and risk skipping meals. The increase in the housing sector has led to many families being left with a smaller budget for food. Tenants living in poor energy-performing rental accommodation are at particular risk as they face the triple challenge of increased rents, energy and living costs. This impacts the lives of children and young people who also feel the stress that their parents live in managing the budget.

8% of EU households cannot afford necessities due to an overburden of out-of-pocket health care payments. More than 40% of household disposable income is spent on health, affecting one's ability to afford food, housing, and heating. Less disposable income and higher food prices make it difficult to afford sufficient food and access healthy diets. This forces them to skip meals and ration food, and swap healthier options for cheaper, more energy-dense, ultra-processed foods. Particularly, children and youth living in poverty are denied the key conditions for a healthy life. In particular, children with a migrant background are twice more likely to live in or at risk of poverty. This damages child development and increases the risk of chronic disease in adolescence and later life. Coupled with the pandemic impact on education and the decline in youth mental health, the cost-of-living crisis is likely to further worsen children and young people's long-term prospects. Rising costs

associated with accessing quality early years education and care have a greater impact on low- and medium-income households.

This situation substantially impacts the **mental health** of children and young people: symptoms such as anxiety and depression are increasingly frequent, and the rate of the medicalization of our young people is also worryingly high. With more children and young people pushed into poverty because of the cost-of-living crisis, an increasing number of them are set to see their mental health worsen. Moreover, the decreased purchasing power makes access to mental health services even more difficult.

The poorest children suffer the most since inflation hits marginalised and vulnerable groups most severely. For example, 24% of people with disabilities are energy-poor. The cost-of-living crisis considerably impacts **children with disabilities** and support services for children with disabilities. The lack of support and adequate funding from the authorities to deal with the price increases negatively impacts on support services' resilience. Moreover, the cost-of-living crisis is making it more difficult for families – in particular the most vulnerable ones – to cope with the costs associated with education. For example, numerous **Roma families** cannot afford costs such as clothing, nappies, transportation, and hygiene products. Cuts in national spending on social protection and public services have left vulnerable communities such as Roma in a dire situation that determines poor health and lower educational outcomes. Some **migrant families** - especially but not only undocumented families – do not receive the support of social protection measures. This is because these measures often exclude them or jeopardise their residence permit.

Climate change is often perceived as a threat to children's future, or a phenomenon connected with countries outside the EU. And yet, the climate crisis is already taking a severe toll on the life of children in Europe. **Extreme weather events** such as heatwaves, floods, droughts, and rainfalls are hitting Europe hard, creating problems for children and severe obstacles in their ability to access to key services. For example, the probability of extreme weather events in Italy has increased by 9%. From 2010 to 2021, 1.181 extreme weather phenomena were recorded, negatively impacting 637 municipalities. Towns and cities are 5 to 10°C hotter than the countryside. These events particularly affect populations at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including children. Global warming contributes to the noticeable spread of ticks, tick-borne and vector-borne **diseases**. At the same time, several countries expect more floods, bringing **large-scale health risks** such as water contamination and making roads impassable, **limiting access to schools** and **other essential services**.

While **air pollution** affects everyone, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable because their bodies, organs and immune systems are still developing. Air pollution damages health during childhood and increases the risk of diseases later in life, yet children can do little to protect themselves or influence air quality policies. People of lower socio-economic status tend to live, work and go to school in places with worse air quality and higher noise levels. In many cities, poorer communities are exposed to **higher temperatures** due to the urban heat island effect. The exposure of children at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion is particularly concerning on account of cumulative vulnerability factors potentially exacerbating the health impacts of air pollution.

Children at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion

A key component at the heart of the Child Guarantee is its focus on the groups of children more at risk. Indeed, some groups of children are more exposed than others to child poverty and its negative impact on their rights and well-being. For example, 29% of **Roma children** live in households where someone went to bed hungry at least once in the preceding month. One in four young Roma children under six feel discriminated against at the playground. In comparison, 60% do not have access to quality early years services. 80% of Roma

are at risk of poverty, 22% live in households with no tap water, and 33% have no indoor toilet. This is the situation most Roma children grow up in.

Poverty and lack of access to basic services severely impact Roma children's physical, mental, and emotional development and increases the chances of lagging behind in all aspects of their adult life. Additionally, many Roma neighbourhoods are segregated or isolated, with no childcare facilities nearby. Roma parents and their children are often turned away due to institutional antigypsyism. Additional complicating factors include the lack of identity papers or a fixed address, lack of information about registration processes and available services, and language barriers.

Even if poverty is not the only reason why children are separated from their families and placed in alternative care, it is an important risk marker for entry into **alternative care**, as it increases the vulnerability of children and their families and may lead to a situation where the parental caregivers can no longer provide adequate care for the children. While this is a reality for some children, poverty should never be considered an acceptable reason for children to be placed into alternative care. It is key that families and children can access individualised and targeted services and social protection to prevent family breakdown. Child-family separation and the placement in care will affect the development and well-being of children. Research tells us that care-experienced people are more likely to experience worse mental health and physical well-being and higher rates of early death, lower education qualifications, higher levels of unemployment and financial and material poverty, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Single-parent households are also among the most exposed to the detrimental impact of poverty. According to Eurostat, 44.1 % of the EU population living in single-adult households with dependent children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021. This is 21.6 percentage points higher than the average for all households with dependent children (22.5%). This can be partially explained by gender dynamics, the gender pay and pension gaps, as 85% of single-parent families are headed by women. Single-parent families are at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion and bear a higher probability of transmission of poverty over several generations.

Children with disabilities and their families remain disproportionately more likely to live in poverty, as research demonstrates a strong relationship between low income, social exclusion and disability. In addition, children with disabilities face difficulties accessing quality inclusive education and key services for other reasons, such as non-inclusive school systems, negative attitudes in the community and institutionalisation. The 2021-2030 Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also highlights that many children with disabilities in Europe are still segregated in special schools and/or institutions. Getting accurate data on this topic is difficult, as children who live in institutions are often left out of statistics and thus invisible to policymakers.

Migrant children and children with a migrant background are rightly recognised by the Child Guarantee Recommendation as at greater risk to poverty and social exclusion. In 2022, 32.8% of children whose parent(s) were born outside of the EU lived at risk of poverty., as did 37.2% of children whose parent(s) have a foreign nationality. This is two to three times as high as their peers. They are also more likely to leave school or training early and are more likely to be guided towards vocational training despite their individual capabilities or interests. This has an impact on their ability to earn well later in life and provide for their own children. Migrant children and their parents can also receive less government support than other families in poverty because support measures often depend on the child's or the parent(s)'s residence status or permit. For example, many countries promote access to early childhood education and care through tax cuts and income-based admission fees, which families with an irregular status cannot benefit from. Some residence permits do not allow the person or their family to seek the necessary support for them or their children.

The European Child Guarantee

By calling on EU Member States to guarantee access to basic rights and services for children in vulnerable situations, the Child Guarantee is a **pivotal, innovative, and timely** framework to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. For this reason, after years of negotiations, evidence-based advocacy, and hard work, the Alliance welcomed the adoption of the Child Guarantee and was pleased to notice that most of our requests made over the last years were included in the final text of the Recommendation.

After working with national members to develop this instrument, the Alliance networks are firmly convinced that the Child Guarantee has the great **potential to make a difference** in the EU and national approaches to tackling child poverty. The EU Child Guarantee is a key tool to aid political and funding boosts to tackle child poverty and its impact on children's health, equity, and well-being from a short and long-term perspectives.

The Child Guarantee provides stakeholders working to end child poverty with different unprecedented **opportunities**. The necessity to work on the framework is creating in different countries an important occasion to **discuss and analyse** what child poverty means at the national, regional, and local levels and how it should be addressed. The necessity to work on the children most at risk has offered a unique occasion to **identify groups of children often left behind** by broader instruments and strategies. In several countries, the framework has been used by committed policymakers and CSOs to **highlight the severity of the situation**, request urgently needed policies, and demand more conspicuous investments in children. Where this is not the case, the instrument is used as a tool to **put pressure** on policymakers and request them to live up to their commitments. The instrument also supports **multi-sectoral collaboration** on addressing child poverty and should be seen as a unique occasion of **peer learning** within and among EU Member States. Moreover, having national plans as **living documents** which will remain in force for at least until 2030 allows the instrument to adapt to the changing situations at the national, regional, and local levels and provides stakeholders with a combined short-term and long-term perspective.

For example, in **Portugal**, the Child Guarantee system put in place by the government includes the participation of children, young people, and civil societies and the setting up of **Child Guarantee local centres** within the scope of the local councils of social action, promoting an important integrated and multidisciplinary approach that ensures a closer, concrete connection with the reality experienced on the ground, and a solid cooperation with the local social networks. The **Spanish** plan includes the setting up a **National Observatory on public policies of child rights** to support the development and implementation of the child Guarantee in the country in cooperation with CSOs.

Moreover, numerous national plans include important actions to ensure access to services for **children with disabilities**. For example, the **Spanish** plan refers to the Spanish National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy, which aims to have no children under ten years old living in residential care and mentions the implementation of the Plan for Inclusive Education, which should adapt education centres for children with disabilities. **Poland** will continue de-institutionalising psychiatric care for children and adolescents and increase the role of community services. The **Maltese** plan establishes community living, tailor-made plans, and regular assessments, which are foreseen to establish the possibility of the child returning to the family of origin. Access to education and local services, aftercare services for children in care aged 15-17 years and plans to support the person leaving institutional care to facilitate their independent living are also mentioned.

Challenges and recommendations

While the Child Guarantee offers unprecedented and paramount opportunities to strengthen the fight against child poverty, significant obstacles must be addressed.

Two years after the adoption of this historic instrument, **five action plans still need to be submitted**. Moreover, several plans presented to the European Commission **do not present new measures** to tackle child poverty but merely list existing instruments or vaguely refer to future efforts. Other countries still need to start concretely implementing the foreseen measures, risking turning comprehensive and well-structured plans into a list of good intentions. In order not to miss the opportunity offered by this instrument,

- We call on the EU Member States to live up to their political commitment by submitting and implementing ambitious and comprehensive **national action plans**. As living documents that will remain in force for at least until 2030, these plans should be **regularly reviewed and updated**, ensuring a rights-based, integrated, and multidimensional approach and a deep interconnection with the national, regional, and local scenarios they relate to.

The main aim of the Child Guarantee is to support children in vulnerable situations. Yet, several plans **fail to identify, reach, and support the children identified as at greater risk of poverty and exclusion** by actors working with and for them. Municipalities risk not receiving the support they need to implement the measures included in the plans, especially in the most rural areas. For example, in different countries children in vulnerable situations risk not having access to education because they don't have access to transportation means to reach their schools. All plans should thus ensure that public transport is accessible to all children, including children with disabilities, children living in rural areas, and all children with a migrant background. Furthermore, children with a migrant background are insufficiently covered by most of the plans. For example, one plan states that access to early childhood education and care is achieved by offering childcare in a return centre. Hence,

- We call on the EU Member States to capitalise on the Child Guarantee to reach and support the **most vulnerable, racialised, and disadvantaged children**, ensuring that all identified categories of children in need and their families have guaranteed access to the high-quality key services, where and when they need them. National efforts should address intersectional inequalities, exclusion and discrimination of children and families, and ensure that services are accessible to, and meet the needs of, those who face the most significant barriers in accessing essential services.

The measures included in the national action plans can only be achieved with **adequate funding from the EU and national governments**. And yet, numerous plans do not clearly indicate the funds that will be used to achieve their goals, seriously jeopardising their concrete implementation. Hence,

- We call on the EU Member States to ensure that national measures to curb child poverty are **adequately funded by EU and national funds**. We also support the European Parliament's pledge to increase funding for the Child Guarantee as part of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework revision. In addition to EU funds, Member States should ensure a steady and **committed line of financing to address child poverty in all dimensions**. Furthermore, providing high-quality services also means investing in the training and well-being of the formal and informal carers supporting children and their families.

One of the main challenges identified by the Alliance networks while working on the Child Guarantee concerns the stark need for a clear national framework for **data collection** and **indicators and targets** specifically focused on children in vulnerable situations. Hence,

- We call on EU Member States and institutions to ensure the proper **monitoring and evaluation** of the Child Guarantee at both EU and national levels by setting clear, multi-sectoral, and comparable metrics, investing in efficient and effective data collection, and defining more specific targets. Data should be collected in the best interest of the child, without putting children and their families at risk. The monitoring and evaluation system must reflect the multidimensional nature of the Child Guarantee and include the different areas covered by the framework. Data should be disaggregated by target and age groups, gender, and include children from birth to age six. Additional maternal and child health indicators would be important to measure access to quality pre- and post-natal care and support for all mothers and infants.

The Child Guarantee Recommendation clearly emphasises the critical importance for EU Member States to engage with various stakeholders while designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the Child Guarantee national action plans. Regrettably, the Alliance has registered a **worrying lack of meaningful participation processes and transparency** in developing the national action plans and we are concerned that this will also be reported in their implementation. Hence,

- We call on the EU Member States and institutions to ensure meaningful, continuous, safe, inclusive, and transparent **participation processes with multi-sectoral stakeholders** - such as children, CSOs, support services, parents, and carers - in implementing, assessing, and evaluating the Child Guarantee. **Specific outreach practices** are needed to ensure children listed as the Child Guarantee **target groups** and their families are involved. Member States should also ensure stronger participation from **national authorities** working in the areas covered by the Child Guarantee, who often still lack an understanding of what the Child Guarantee is and how it could be used. For example, the public care actors are interested in the framework but still lack the capacity to work with it and cooperate with different social actors in its implementation.

Child poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon which must be tackled through a comprehensive and integrated approach. For this reason, the Child Guarantee should be connected and integrated with broader instruments and strategies at the EU and national levels. Hence,

- We call on the EU Member States and institutions to ensure a successful and integrated interplay between the Child Guarantee, **national frameworks and strategies, and the EU social and equality agenda**, particularly in sight of the 2024 European elections. This includes the European Semester, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the EU Cohesion Policy, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the need for a more ambitious **EU target on child poverty** and a rights-based plan to secure a fair and socially just transition. The implementation of the Child Guarantee should also work in synergy with the European Care Strategy and the revised Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care, the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, the EU Framework for Roma Equality, Participation, and inclusion, the Anti-racism Action Plan, the EU4Health Programme, the EU comprehensive approach to mental health initiative, national childhood obesity and NCDs prevention plans and frameworks for actions.

Conclusions

The **compounding crises** described in this statement bring unbearable challenges to the lives of children and families, especially the ones in vulnerable situations. As a result, millions of children are at risk of - or already experiencing poverty or social exclusion.

Child poverty is not an intangible threat to the future of children, but a **concrete crisis** undermining their rights at this very moment. For this reason, an instrument such as the Child Guarantee is **more urgent than ever**.

To secure its success, the priority is to acknowledge and address the main challenges that emerged while developing the framework and **turn this commitment into effective measures to eradicate child poverty**. The Alliance networks and their members at the national level stand ready to work with EU Member States and Institutions to ensure the success of this framework and guarantee that no child will be left behind.

This statement was endorsed by:



The EU Alliance for Investing in Children (Alliance) brings together almost 30 European and international networks sharing a commitment to end child poverty and promote child well-being across Europe. At a time when over a quarter of children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the Alliance provides expert support in the development of EU and national policies, legislation, and funding programmes in line with the European Commission Recommendation ‘Investing in Children - Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’ and all horizontal principles included therein. We are united by our commitment to a multidimensional, rights-based approach to tackling child poverty and promoting well-being.

Since the initial discussions on the possibility of creating a framework to support the most vulnerable children in the EU, the Alliance has ceaselessly advocated for a robust and comprehensive European Child Guarantee. After years of negotiations and evidence-based advocacy, we enthusiastically welcomed the EPSCO Council's adoption of the Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, which includes most of the requests and recommendations made by the Alliance.

The Alliance is now committed to ensuring that this unprecedented European framework will be translated into tangible national policies to support the most vulnerable children in all EU Member States.