

# The Child Guarantee

A tool to tackle family  
poverty?

Berlin, 29 September 2020



## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE COFACE-AGF SEMINAR

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## Imprint

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## Summary

The hybrid held seminar brought together around 80 representatives from 20 countries. It started with a general framing of the Child Guarantee with reflections from European Commissioner Nicolas Schmit, and the presidents of COFACE and AGF, followed by a detailed presentation of the feasibility study findings, reflections from key stakeholders and discussions with participants. Then we put the spotlight on four countries (Belgium, Croatia, Finland and Greece) examining the added value of a Child Guarantee as well as potential (sub-)national policy levers to boost implementation of the Child Guarantee. The event ended with a discussion on key recommendations to ensure an impactful Child Guarantee on child and family well-being.

Hugh Frazer, editor of the [Study on the feasibility of a child guarantee for vulnerable children](#), presented the results of the study as well as elements of study phase 2 and the upcoming [UNICEF pilot projects in 7 countries](#).

Key stakeholders also shared their reflections:

- Martina Kottmann (German Family Ministry)
- Katarina Ivankovic (European Commission)
- Reka Tunyogi (Eurochild)
- Olivier Thévenon (OECD) and
- Natalie Picken (EPIC).

Representatives from family organisations (members of COFACE Families Europe) from Belgium, Croatia, Finland and Greece highlighted proposals on how the Child Guarantee could boost inclusion of children and families in their respective countries. Various issues were covered from policy orientation to implementation and matching the Child Guarantee to current reforms in these countries (e.g. social security, health and social services, child strategies), concrete proposals were made (e.g. the need for reduced VAT rates for child-related products in order to boost affordability for low-income families), as well as the types of services provided to boost well-being of children and families (e.g. the Live Without Bullying platform in Greece).

The recommendations of the discussions and from participants can be grouped in four clusters:

1. The important role of Europe to boost the child and family well-being. The participants agreed that the Child Guarantee, in the form of Council Recommendation, can be a useful framework to support governments (national to local) to address poverty of children and their families with various policy and funding instruments.
2. Future EU and national strategic frameworks on family poverty to develop clear channels for operationalization and guarantees on the ground. Since the term “guarantee” implies a real focus on operationalization which should be a priority in the Council recommendation, it was argued that this would require explicit guidelines. A number of examples were highlighted by participants
3. Interrelated well-being of children and their parents needs to be at heart of the Child Guarantee. In conclusion it was often mentioned that targeting children requires a two-generation approach providing support both to children and their family or carers, namely with a family support stream focused on prevention and early intervention reaching out to families before they enter situations of vulnerability.
4. Urgent need for action to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the discussions it was often highlighted, that the plan of the European Commission to launch the initiative in 2021 is welcomed, but vulnerable children and their families cannot wait.



## 1. Framing the Child Guarantee: Opening reflections

In 2017, the European Parliament requested that the European Commission implement a preparatory action on establishing a possible child guarantee scheme. In this context, the Commission commissioned a [Study on the feasibility of a child guarantee for vulnerable children](#) examining 4 target groups: children residing in institutions, children with disabilities, children with a migrant background [including refugee children], and children living in a precarious family situation. The study examines solutions to improve the well-being of children in these vulnerable situations is based on access to services in 5 policy areas: healthcare, housing, education, childcare, and nutrition.

Access to services is crucial, but factors of children's social risk are related with their home environment and many elements including parents' unemployment and low material level of a family, poor housing and unfavorable living conditions, absence of one or both parents, parents' chronic diseases, disorders of internal interpersonal relations in the family, parents' pedagogical failures, not sufficiently emotional and distrust-based relationships between parents and children, and violence in the close environment. When experiencing these challenges, children face more social problems because their feeling of safety and confidence in oneself and environment are not formed: difficulties in communication, anxiety, lack of self-control, tendency to conflicts, and aggression might increase, while initiative and cognitive activity might weaken.

President von der Leyen is committed to deliver a European Child Guarantee, which is a promising initiative and must offer a renewed opportunity to step up the fight against child and family poverty and boost further the implementation UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In order to fully understand the extent of this commitment, COFACE and AGF co-hosted a [seminar](#) on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2020 in Berlin to learn more about the results of the feasibility study and examine how such a Child Guarantee could be a tool to fight family poverty. The

seminar aimed to present the plans for the Child Guarantee, as a starting point to shape the future scheme from a family perspective and rethink it through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. By examining policy levers in different countries, the aim was to look at the potential for implementation of the Child Guarantee while also fostering cross-country exchanges on national family policies and how they reduce poverty.

### Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights

*"We know that in the EU, close to 1 in 4 children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. But these figures pre-date the COVID-*



*19 crisis. Parents, particularly single parents, carers in poorly paid work, or without a job, are sometimes unable to meet their children's most basic needs. This is not a fact of life we should accept. We have to invest in our children, to break the cycle of poverty, to ensure equality opportunities, and to support their well-being.*

*The European Child Guarantee will form part of the action plan for the implementation for the European Pillar of Social Rights, which will include a series of measures benefitting children, parents and social services."*

[\(For full video speech & transcript click here\)](#)

### Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE

Families Europe, reminded participants that COFACE wants to ensure that all families without discrimination have access to sufficient financial resources, available quality services and adequate time arrangements.



*"To ensure the Child Guarantee is impactful we need to see it aligned with EU social policies for children*

*and families, that should act towards the establishment of the conditions for a family to be autonomous, responsible, stable, active, able to independently perform its functions, and to ensure the welfare of generations. This is the basis for the development of healthy, vital and creative societies. To fulfil this task, Europe and national governments need to prioritise investing in children and families through comprehensive policies with a systematic two-generation approach and take in account the interrelated well-being of children and of their parents.”*

**Daniela Jaspers, Chairwoman of AGF,**



emphasized how the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the outstanding role families play in keeping societies together and overcoming crises.

*“It is especially the target groups targeted by a child guarantee who were particularly affected by the side effects of the Corona crisis:*

- *Children in family situations at risk of poverty*
- *Children with migration or refugee experience*
- *Children in residential care*
- *Children with disabilities*

*They bear the greatest burden in this crisis, which is having such a negative impact on their opportunities for participation and future prospects. Rarely has it been possible to experience so closely what it means for children when there is not enough money to buy the laptop required for digital learning and video lessons or to compete for an existing device with several siblings in order to attend online classes. The child guarantee is not a measure that reacts to the Corona crisis but rather an older idea. With the call for a Child Guarantee, the European Parliament is reacting to the continuously scandalously high proportion of child poverty in almost all EU countries.”*

## 2. What can the Child Guarantee look like?

**Hugh Frazer** started by explaining the road to

the current status of a Child Guarantee. For him, it started with a 2015 report of the European



Parliament which called for every child in Europe at risk of poverty (including refugee children) to have access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition. In this report, the Parliament also called for the establishment of a Child Guarantee. This was due to the weak implementation of 2013 Recommendation Investing in Children, persistent high levels of child poverty and social exclusion, the failure of governments to break the cycle of disadvantage and to use the full potential of EU Funds for implementation of the Recommendation. In 2017, the same year the EU proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission launched a feasibility study on the establishment of a Child Guarantee scheme. In the meantime, negotiations on the future 7-year budget have started, and in December 2018 the European Parliament proposed allocating €5.9 billion of the future European Social Fund Plus+ to the Child Guarantee. The incoming Commission in 2019 then committed to launching a European Child Guarantee. The feasibility study was conducted from 2018-2020, focusing on 4 target groups: children residing in institutions, children with disabilities, children with a migrant background [including refugee children], and children living in a precarious family situation. Various outputs resulted from the study, including 28 country reports, focus groups with children, case studies and more, with the [final report](#) published in June 2020.

Hugh Frazer presented the main findings and recommendations of the study: Action is needed to increase access by children in vulnerable situations to the five policy areas: healthcare, housing,

education, childcare, and nutrition. Failure to ensure access to these five areas has short and long-term negative consequences for children and society. Lack of access to the five policy areas represents a failure to uphold children's

rights. The study highlights that it is feasible to guarantee access to the five areas, and efforts are needed to ensure focus on all children in vulnerable situations. Children who are most disadvantaged need more support and ideally a twin-track approach is needed to increase both access and inclusivity. However, ensuring access to services in the five policy areas on its own is not sufficient: mainstream services also need to be inclusive and of high quality so as to ensure that children in vulnerable situations benefit fully and avoid stigma and segregation. Furthermore, ensuring access to the five areas is necessary but not sufficient to tackle child poverty & social exclusion. The Child Guarantee requires a comprehensive approach at Member State level where the primary responsibility lies, but EU action is feasible to support them (i.e. policy coordination, guidance, financial support). The study sees a clear legal basis for this. Acknowledging that there are existing efforts by the EU to support and encourage Member States to ensure access by children in vulnerable situations, it is stressed that a new EU initiative could bring real added value and a more effective use of EU instruments. For instance, EU funds have considerable potential to play a more effective and strategic role in supporting access to the five policy areas. With an EU political leadership which responds to the popular and political demand for a Child Guarantee, it will be possible to mainstream the implementation of such a new initiative across the European Commission to ensure full use of the policy and funding instruments available such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European structural and investment funds.

The feasibility study highlighted several issues which still need clarification. How to ensure impact of the

## FSCG1 – Main Findings 1-5

- **Action is needed** to increase access by vulnerable situations to the five PAs unscrutinized needs
- Failure to ensure access to the five policy areas has **short & long term negative consequences** for children & society
- Lack of access to the five policy areas represents a **failure to uphold children's rights**
- It is **feasible to guarantee access** to the five PAs
- Efforts to ensure access to the five PAs should **focus on all children** in vulnerable situations



Child Guarantee and Member States' accountability for delivery? The study recommends focusing on the policy outcomes to be achieved by the Guarantee as well as using existing policy levers at (sub-)national level such as family and/or child support programmes and services.

Another clarification is needed for the questions of which children should be covered by the Child Guarantee: all children or specific target groups like children at risk of poverty or in low income families?

Hugh Frazer explained that Phase 2 of the feasibility study is underway, and is focusing on the economics of implementing a possible EU child guarantee scheme. This will include:

- exploring the cost and benefits for the competent authorities to guarantee in practice that all children at risk of poverty in EU have access to the 5 social rights;
- provide a thorough economic and financial analysis of the design, feasibility, governance and implementation options of a Child Guarantee;
- identify understandable and tangible policy levers to achieve the desired policy outcomes and
- create accountability of Member States in each specific component of the Child Guarantee with a focus especially on children at risk of poverty.

More specifically Phase 2 will assess the feasibility of developing targets in 6 policy areas.

Hugh Frazer reflected on the challenges and opportunities ahead, focusing first on key challenges for ensuring the development of an effective Child Guarantee. It may be a challenge to keep the Guarantee high on the EU agenda especially in these challenging COVID-19 times, and to ensure the support of Member States for a Council recommendation and increased EU funds for children. The EU will also need to strike a balance between the promotion of a comprehensive strategic

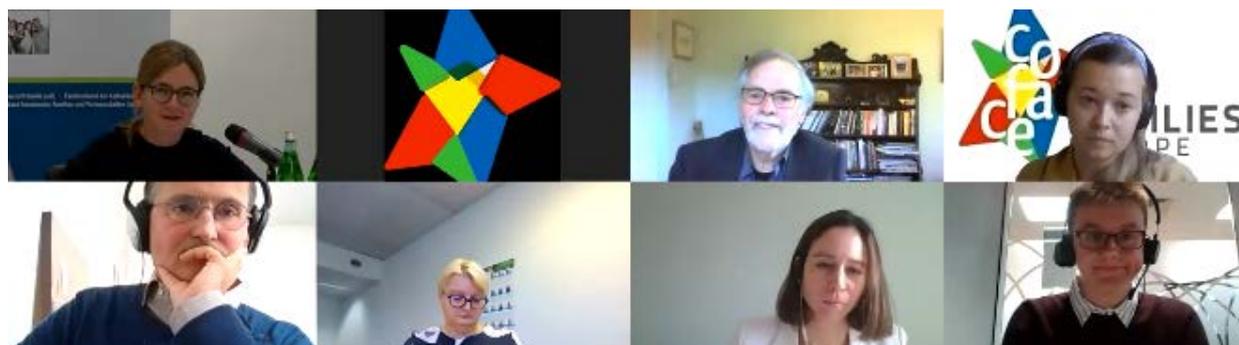
vision for tackling child poverty with a focus on specific and concrete actions that will make a tangible impact where Member States can be held to account for delivering results. He also highlighted opportunities such as the use of the Child Guarantee to encourage Member States to develop comprehensive strategies to combat child and family poverty; the possibility to identify children in need, key barriers they face in accessing services, and boost existing programmes through EU policy guidance and funding; and finally having regular monitoring and reporting on progress of actions to reduce child and family poverty in Europe.

## KEY STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES

**Martina Kottmann** from the German Family Ministry commented on the Child Guarantee from the German government perspective. She highlighted that Germany is constructively supporting the process of setting up a Council Recommendation for 2021. She also addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and their families. She referred to the three main actions taken in Germany to tackle child poverty: enabling parents to achieve work-life balance; targeted financial family benefits as well as social participation of children; and finally access to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Dr Kottmann examined each of the five policy areas from the German perspective, highlighting current measures (e.g. early intervention and detection measures in the healthcare system, housing allowances for low-income families in order to improve housing affordability) as well as new COVID-19 measures to mitigate loss of earnings (e.g. via child allowances, targeted measures to support single parent families, simplified access to basic social security in order to prevent evictions, parental allowances for parents-to-be who have lost their income).

Regarding the Child Guarantee, from her perspective the expectation is that it is a framework that would both reinforce existing efforts to combat child poverty and also take into account the impact of COVID-19, with a focus on children and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Europe need a long-term political strategy to address this. The approach of the Child Guarantee should conceptually recognize the close links between parental labour market participation and the economic stability of families, she emphasises: parents' employment remains the best protection against poverty in the family. To this end, the German presidency of the EU will host an event on how to mitigate and overcome the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on four areas: the financial stability of families with children, the reduction of educational inequalities, work-life balance, and combating violence within families.

**Katarina Ivankovic**, Director C, DG Employment & Social Affairs of the European Commission referred to the publication mid-August 2020 of a European Commission Roadmap on the Child Guarantee. The Roadmap proposes to work on a Council Recommendation in early 2021, adding leisure activities to the current list of 5 policy areas, and focusing specifically on children in need (and not all children) making explicit links to the consequences of COVID-19 on families. The first data indicates the pandemic is interfering with their educational development due to ECEC and school closures. The rapid digitalisation of the lives of children due to the pandemic will also be factored into the development of the Child Guarantee. Evidence also indicates that while digital opportunities can help address the consequences of the pandemic, the digital divide remains important with lack of devices and internet connections for many families with children. Digital is the future, and



hence we need to understand how it relates to vulnerabilities of children, she said.

Ms. Ivankovic explains that the Roadmap refers to inviting Member States to adopt Multi-Annual National Strategies until 2030 implemented through Child Guarantee National Action Plans. The Commission's role would be

- to help build capacity of Member States (training, peer review, mentoring, sharing best practices);
- providing policy coordination across stakeholders, governance levels and policies
- monitor outcomes of implementation;
- providing strategic guidance on strengthened or more targeted use of ESIF funds.

She explained the Roadmap is part of a public consultation of the European Commission, calling on citizens and stakeholders (national/local administrations, service providers, children, and civil society) to provide feedback by 7<sup>th</sup> October. Main input is asked for the topics on the challenges encountered and identify the main gaps that could be addressed at European Union level and to identify areas where the Union can have added value. The European Commission believes the Member States need to break the cycle of poverty, and national action plans would help understand how each country plans to achieve this according to national context. Some countries might opt for an integrated approach, or rather for a scattered approach across different strategies. But it will be important for the Commission to know via such action plans how they plan to implement the Child Guarantee. While there is general consensus on the current 5 policy areas, the target groups will likely depend on the context of each Member State. Even with diverse national approaches, all actions regarding child poverty should be linked to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

**Reka Tunyogi**, Head of Advocacy at Eurochild, the European association of child rights organisations, has followed this initiative since its inception in European Parliament. She highlighted some positive developments, namely the renewed political commitment of the European Commission, and the opportunities offered by the potential

earmarking of a portion of the EU budget (namely European Social Fund Plus) for implementation of the Child Guarantee. Political commitment is important but does not necessarily mean impact on child poverty reduction, as recent experience has shown with the lack of real implementation of the 2013 European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children. The impact of COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis is likely to lead to an increase in child and family poverty, and hence Child Guarantee funds should be included both in the recovery process and in the long-term budget 2021-2020.

Unfortunately, she emphasises, the Commission Roadmap does not adopt the comprehensive approach of the 2013 Recommendation which focused on three pillars:

- access to adequate financial resources in the family,
- access to affordable and quality services, and
- child rights to participate in culture and leisure activities as well as decision-making.

This comprehensive 3-pillar approach is essential to ensure the Child Guarantee has a real impact on reducing child poverty. Eurochild also believes that horizontal principles are needed for designing comprehensive strategies, taking the child's best interest as a starting point, while finding a balance between universal services and targeted measures for vulnerable children. They call on Member States to develop 10-year strategies setting ambitious 2030 targets to reduce child poverty, using Sustainable Development Goal 1 as a basis. The EU social scoreboard was mentioned as possible inspiration for the design of a monitoring framework on the child guarantee. Finally, Reka mentioned the use of EU and national funding for the implementation of the child guarantee, highlighting the Commission's proposal to allocate 5% of the ESF+ in all Member States for tackling child poverty, referencing several ESF+ objectives to be used as levers: ECEC, active inclusion, poverty reduction, access to quality and affordable services and more. A European Child Guarantee based on a coherent mix of policy and funding frameworks would pave the way for effective implementation and real impact on the lives of children and their families.

**Olivier Thévenon**, Head of the Child Well-Being Unit at the OECD Center on Well-Being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity shared some reflections on moving forward with child well-being policies and the role of the Child Guarantee. He believes the feasibility study recommendations are a good basis for discussion and developing the next steps. He started by emphasising that child well-being cannot be enhanced without improving the family and home environment of the children. Olivier referred to the fact evidence points to a worsening of children's well-being since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher levels of child poverty and inequalities, higher family stress, learning loss and school disengagement. This has led to a greater need for universal child and family support namely mental health supports, as well greater need for support among vulnerable children. One major challenge will be how to maintain the delivery of child and family support services during the lockdowns when they happen again.

Different services are mentioned in the 6 policy areas of the European Commission Roadmap, which are all interrelated and reflect the multiple needs of families in vulnerable situations. He stressed that the policy framework and strategic approach matter when it comes to providing children and their parents with the full range of support rather than address different needs separately in service silos. He reflected on key elements needed to achieve comprehensive child well-being policies. This includes developing a data framework for monitoring child wellbeing outcomes and policies, what are the factors of inequalities, mobilising (consistently) the appropriate financial resources (difficult in an economic recession), establishing a clear distribution of policy responsibilities among stakeholders and public administrations, ensuring high quality provision of services to children and families, and finally ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being. The heterogeneity of services at local level and their impact means a huge diversity of provision across countries and regions, which requires better knowledge of how family services are impacting the lives of children. The OECD is currently collecting such evidence and will publish the results early 2021.

**Nathalie Picken** provided the perspective of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC). EPIC is the successor of the European Alliance for Families, supported by European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to carry out independent research to provide policy and decision-makers with the best possible evidence. EPIC is an evidence-based online platform disseminating practices that work in terms of child and family policies in the European Union Member States, contributing to monitoring activities in policy and practice related to the implementation of the 2013 Recommendation for Investing in Children.

Some recent publications include the following:

- [Strengthening the quality of early childhood education and care through inclusion \(2020\)](#)
- [Understanding the housing conditions experienced by children in the EU \(2020\)](#)
- [Embedding a children's rights perspective in policy and decision-making \(2019\)](#)
- [Implementing evidence-based practices effectively – a practical guide \(2018\)](#)

Natalie referred to the importance of evidence-based policy-making, meaning making decisions that are based on the best available information allowing decision makers and stakeholders to make better judgements, which often lead to improved performance and outcomes. She also emphasised the role evidence plays in both designing and implementing interventions and programmes, which will be important in the context of the Child Guarantee.

### 3. Family policy levers at national/local level to implement the Child Guarantee



Representatives from family organisations (members of COFACE Families Europe) from Belgium, Croatia, Finland and Greece highlighted their work and proposals on how the Child Guarantee could boost inclusion of children and families in their respective countries. Various issues were covered from policy orientation to implementation and matching the Child Guarantee to current reforms in these countries (e.g. social security, health and social services, child strategies), concrete proposals were made (e.g. the need for reduced VAT rates for child-related products), as well as the types of services provided to boost well-being of children and families (e.g. the Live Without Bullying platform in Greece).

**Annemie Drieskens**, board member of **Gezinsbond**, reflected on family policy levers in Belgium. Gezinsbond is an independent Flemish family organization with more than 200,000 families as members, 12,000 volunteers in local communities, and 140



professional staff, working for all families based on values of non-discrimination, inclusion and solidarity. Their activities are based on 3 pillars: advocacy, local activities and support services.

1 child in 5 grows up in poverty in Belgium with some families more at risk than others: single parents, large families, families with low levels of education, and migrant families. In Belgium, anti-poverty policy is a shared responsibility between the Federal, Regional and local level. Gezinsbond, committed to a vigorous anti-poverty policy, works with the different levels both on preventing and addressing child/family poverty. Child poverty is family poverty, hence it is important to look at families to tackle child poverty

through an approach referred to as proportional universalism: this means a good basic service for everyone, for all families (universal), with specific attention to the needs of families in poverty (proportional). The first years of life are decisive for children: it must be a priority in policy. That is why it is also essential to support families from the very beginning of their pregnancy (prenatal care). Annemie Drieskens highlighted also the need for a policy for all children, including accompanied and unaccompanied children in asylum and migration. Providing for basic needs, such as adapted housing, food, care and education, is a basic right of every child.

She referred to existing policy levers to implement the Child Guarantee in Belgium, such as increasing job security, the automatic granting of social benefits for families who are in vulnerable situations and child benefits for low-income families. Child benefits are excellent means to support families with children. They, and all social rights, should be granted all automatically to avoid the non-take up that often results in families not getting what they are entitled to. On the other hand, families with children are better supported by taking into account the family composition and the family size when granting the benefit and by increasing the benefit if there are more family members living together.

Research by KUL Prof Pacolet shows that the risk of poverty in single-parent families receiving maintenance is 22.8%, while it rises to 42.6% in families not receiving maintenance. For separated and blended families, there is a Belgian service for child maintenance claims (DAVO) which people can turn to if their partner does not pay the agreed maintenance for the children. Those families can apply to receive an advance payment scheme. After a divorce, Gezinsbond asks for a compulsory parenting plan for all parents and advocates for the objective calculation of the maintenance for children – to this end Gezinsbond launched a Maintenance Calculator as a reference tool.

Annemie referred also to the importance of income-related calculation of ECEC costs for families, and the promotion of accessible and affordable healthcare. Engaging in high-quality, affordable and accessible pre-school and after-school care facilities and

offering free primary care for children is essential for families. Regarding access to affordable healthcare, the Gezinsbond regularly takes action for the introduction of a general third party payer scheme, which effectively lowers the threshold for vulnerable families to seek medical care.

In Belgium, and especially for Gezinsbond, the fight against poverty is a priority and the Child Guarantee could boost these dynamics by supporting the development of child standards and child participation, while boosting affordability of services as well (currently insufficient in Belgium). In order to improve access to services, affordability is important, but NOT sufficient. There are also other barriers, both among families in poverty and among service providers. Attention should also be paid to the structural barriers that hamper access to services for children in poverty. For example, in the case of healthy food, industry must also play its role by making healthy choices more self-evident.

Child poverty is family poverty, and hence the Child Guarantee should also be about strengthening families via parental support and different forms of financial support. In this context Europe has a powerful weapon that has an immediate impact on the family budget for basic goods: reduce the value added tax (VAT) on essential child-related products (e.g. nappies). Gezinsbond believes this proposal should be explored further in the framework of the Child Guarantee

**Silvija Stanić**, Director of Step by Step Parents Association in Croatia, shared impressions on the application of a Child Guarantee in the Croatian context.

Step by Step advocates for the rights and interests of children, including via parental support and educating professionals working with families and children. She gave an overview of the risk of poverty and social exclusion of children in Croatia. According to the Feasibility study numbers, Croatia fits in the third cluster of Member States which has a medium-to-high rate of child poverty, namely 1 in 4 children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. There are huge



regional differences, with 65% of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion living in rural areas. Access to services for families are also low in rural areas. When speaking about the structure of the families at risk of poverty and social exclusion, it is similar to the Belgian reality: single parents with dependent children, and families with three or more children are at greatest risk, as well as Roma families, families with children with disabilities, and families living in rural areas. Of course, the risks multiply when these family types and situations overlap. Material deprivation indicators regarding children from 0-15 years of age show that 22% of children in Croatia lack 3 out of 17 items for their basic daily needs. In most cases, social transfers are the key source for families living in poverty – for 86% of families in poverty, this is the only income. In 2014, the national scheme of social transfers was reformed to become a minimum income scheme replacing previous benefits. Data shows that families with two or more children have lost out as a result of this reform, which does not take into account the number of children in the household of the adult beneficiaries. The minimum income scheme covers only between 32-64% of households at risk of poverty, which is quite low coverage. Important for those families are also child benefits and tax allowances as important income supplements for parents. Yet child benefits are quite low and have stagnated for the last 10 years.

When reading the European Commission Roadmap for a Child Guarantee, it seems like a clear EU commitment to investing in children and reduce poverty, and Silvija believes that at national and EU

levels there are many existing financial instruments to ensure its effective implementation. However, when considering its implementation in the Croatian context there would be concrete steps needed and she highlights some of them.

Croatia has a 2014-2020 strategy for child rights, and also national strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion for same period. Both strategies are coming to an end, so it would be a good moment to



integrate new goals and ideas in a new strategic framework. The Child Guarantee could also lead to reform of Croatian family policy (which dates back to 2004),

towards a two-generation approach and taking into account family diversity. Some operational steps would also be needed to ensure that national frameworks are implemented and their impact on child well-being is measured – this could be an area for the EU Member States to work on together, namely developing a set of indicators and methodology for impact measurement. Another operational step needed would be to work closely with local governments to ensure equal implementation across the country, since many of the services in the Commission Roadmap are delivered at local level - this could be done by developing local plans for implementation of the Child Guarantee. This would help address the regional inequalities and ensure equal geographical access to affordable services in the 6 policy areas. For instance, there is a low percentage of children 0-3 years in formal early childhood education and care (less than 15%) with many regional differences in the costs of those services, from 7% of net average salary in some regions to 16% of net average salary in others. A national framework or action plan would help address these regional inequalities.

**Eija Koivuranta**, Director of Väestöliitto the Family Federation of Finland, highlighted some data and made key recommendations for implementation of the Child Guarantee in Finland. Väestöliitto is an NGO active in the field of social, welfare and health policy aiming to promote well-being and human rights.



Child poverty has been quite debated recently in Finland - in 2017 around 120.000 children out of a population of 5 million were in poverty, especially affecting single-parent families, large families and migrant families. Therefore, these would be key target groups to consider for implementation of the Child Guarantee in Finland, Eija referred to data of the Finnish Central Union for Child Welfare based on testimonies from families themselves collected into a

report called “The best childhood money can buy”. The report was based on a survey conducted from 2018-2019, focusing on parents with children from 7-16 years of age, covering topics like economic well-being, social status, and potential shame. The survey results indicate that absolute poverty is rare; fewer than 1% of families have waited for a school meal to get food to eat. At the other end of the spectrum, one third of families can afford to save their family benefits to use later; however, one third of the families surveyed live without significant savings for unexpected costs. Leisure time has become more commercial meaning also an increase in costs and therefore less children have been able to benefit from such activities. Although Finland has succeeded rather well in addressing poverty, child poverty, family poverty and other negative living conditions are still a continued concern as all families can experience vulnerabilities. Eija pointed to three areas which could benefit from the Child Guarantee while also boosting its implementation and impact on the lives of children. The current Prime Minister has kick-off three important reforms which will impact child and family poverty for the next 10 years at least.

The first is the Finnish Child Strategy 2040 which will cover several government terms. Preparatory work for the strategy was carried out from 2018-2019, testing a new working method to identify a vision and recommendations to cover several government terms, and aimed to achieve a child, young person and family-friendly Finland. The focus of the coming months will be to draw up an implementation plan for this current government term. This will be done by working via a Finnish parliamentary committee in cooperation with civil society, promoting the inclusion of children and their participation in society.

Väestöliitto has advocated for a Child Strategy based on child rights and based on long-term thinking to combat child poverty, guaranteeing good social, health and ECEC services for children, and reducing school dropouts is essential part of this Child Strategy.

The second area is health and social service reform and reorganisation, underway to ensure equal access to high quality services. In this context, basic public

services and preventive work will be strengthened, and Väestöliitto has called for family and child services to be reformed as well, to ensure the right support is provided at the right time and based on 2-generation needs. This includes ensuring family centres are available and accessible near the child, youth and family.

The third area is social security reform: aiming for a clear and well-functioning social security system which is present through changes in people's lives and enables reconciliation of work and social security. This means providing comprehensive, timely, sufficiently high level of benefits and social services, while reducing the need for long-term income support. Väestöliitto's goal is to ensure child and family poverty are prioritised in the agenda of the committee responsible for social security reform - children cannot wait. Large families, single-parent families, unemployed families, and families with special needs like disabilities must be prioritised. In the case of Finland, the Child Guarantee could provide inspiration on how to consolidate existing policies targeting children and their families; it could help increase the participation rates of children in ECEC, and make some health services more readily available for instance mental health services (even more important to address the impact of COVID-19). By investing in basic services, even the need of heavier child protection services could potentially decrease. Low-income families could also be supported in relation to greater affordability of out-of-school and leisure activities.

**Antonia Torrens**, Director of KMOP (child and family centre) in Greece gave some insights into the current challenges and opportunities for added value of the Child Guarantee in Greece.

She referred first to the Social Solidarity Income in Greece launched in 2014 and based on three pillars: income support (financial aid certain groups of beneficiaries), complementary social services, benefits and goods, and labour activation services. Basic benefits also exist in the Health Sector for vulnerable families such as free medical care for uninsured Greek citizens, legally

residing expatriates in the Greek territory, legally and permanent residents in Greece who are not insured in any public or private body, the insured who have lost their insurance due to debts (including for the dependent family members). In relation to public health, law 4368/2016 (article 33) refers to the right of free access to all public health structures for the provision of nursing and medical care to uninsured and in vulnerable social groups. But due to problems for migrant families and unaccompanied migrant children in accessing AMKA (a Social Insurance Registration Number), in April 2020 the government issued a "Provisional Social Security & Health Care Number", and this is still in pilot phase.

Regarding ECEC, Greek structures provide pre-Primary school care to children from the age of 6 months to 6 years. During the last years in Greece some significant interventions took place in preschool education. Firstly, in 2006 the creation of all-day school in Kindergartens. Second, in 2016 also the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs developed a plan for the integration of refugee children up to 15 years old into the educational system. Thirdly, in 2018 saw the introduction of two-year compulsory preschool education from the age of 4. Additionally, units for the creative activity of children in pre-school and pre-school age within the hospitality structures were created. There are mechanisms to ensure disadvantaged children and families get priority admission to ECEC; as well as fee reductions for children with special needs). However, there are still gaps which need to be addressed, namely the lack of a national strategic approach on

ECEC, the regional differences in ECEC supply leading to uneven access to ECEC for all children, the lack of evaluation of ECEC services, the heterogeneity of children's needs linked to socio-economic, education and cultural differences. Antonia Torrens indicated that in the context of the current economic situation in Greece, boosting investing in ECEC should be promoted to address inequalities both in the short and long-term.



## The national context of migrant/refugee children in the Greek educational system

Based on reports of the European Commission (2015)

Massive influx of refugees who hope to cross the Mediterranean sea and have access in Europe. Greece has been at the crossroads of the refugee migrant flow

- 861,630 arrivals in 2015
- 177,234 arrivals in 2016
- 36,310 arrivals in 2017
- 50,508 arrivals in 2018
- 9,223 arrivals in 2019



The national context of migrant/refugee children in the Greek educational system was also discussed. Primary and secondary schools in Greece have no integrated practices for the recognition of prior assessment learning of migrants, refugees, newly arrived asylum seekers or unaccompanied children. Children to a great extent manage to attend pre-school and early primary education, however they fail to attend a higher level courses, since they lack the corresponding level of knowledge. In Greek schools, challenges such as learning a new language, understanding of an unfamiliar educational system and adjusting to it, are not efficiently faced yet.

The Child Guarantee could be used to boost investments and targeted measures also for migrant and refugee children, via a number of measures in the Greek context: The development and implementation of appropriate diagnostic tests, based on the previous experience, knowledge and school background of the children; the support of ongoing evaluation of students' learning and social inclusion progress; the inclusion of newly arrived parents in all aspects of schooling; the training of educators for learning how to better assist children's inclusion; a needs assessment tool should be developed, so as to investigate the current needs of students and educators; the role of municipalities should be strengthened, so as to play an active role for informing the vulnerable populations concerning the services provided for them; finally the role of the intermediators who work with vulnerable populations should also be strengthened, for meeting better the needs of these people.

Live  
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KMOP is trying to support inclusive education and respect of diversity via its "Live Without Bullying" online platform addressed to all children, educators and parents who are confronted with bullying. The support is provided through a mix of measures such as online counseling

for school and cyber bullying; any time and free of charge; anonymous and safe, and across Greece. From 2016 till now this service has helped more than 1600 children and 1400 parents and educators all over Greece.

## 4. Key recommendations from the seminar participants

1. The important role of Europe to boost the child and family well-being

The participants agreed that the Child Guarantee, in the form of Council Recommendation, can be a useful framework to support governments (national to local) to address poverty of children and their families with various policy and funding instruments. Also it can help to establish a regular monitoring of progress and effective impact measurement methodologies to ensure real change in the lives of children. But it was emphasised that this needs to be linked to other key EU frameworks (both legislative and non-legislative) in areas which impact the well-being of children and their families. This may include initiatives on minimum income, Roma, and more; as well as other policy areas further afield such as education, tax, digital, consumer which should be in line with the values of the EU child guarantee, ensuring a positive impact on children and their families (e.g. VAT).

2. EU and national frameworks to develop channels for operationalization on the ground

Since the term "guarantee" implies a real focus on operationalization which should be a priority in the Council recommendation, it was argued that this would require explicit guidelines. A number of areas were highlighted by participants. Attendees were reminded that local authorities, responsible for service delivery to their local citizens in most of the proposed Child Guarantee policy areas, together with NGO support services, are key partners for implementation of the Child Guarantee. Therefore, local action plans on the Child Guarantee would ensure even implementation across countries. Reducing bureaucracy for funding of service providers could help boost the flow of service delivery helping staff to focus more on families and children. Outreach mechanisms could be further boosted to allow for meaningful engagement with families, for instance by setting up family and child

centres in different neighbourhoods and working closely with civil society to reach out to the most vulnerable. Outreach must also be supported by accessible communications such as multilingualism and catering for different disabilities. Making social rights automatic, for instance through direct payments, without expecting families to do further paperwork to take up their rights was considered crucial. The importance of digital dimensions of child and family poverty were raised by some participants, with recommendations to reduce the digital divide through infrastructure and skills.

### 3. Interrelated well-being of children and their parents at heart of the Child Guarantee

In conclusion it was often mentioned that targeting children requires a two-generation approach providing support both to children and their family or carers, namely with a family support stream focused on prevention and early intervention reaching out to families before they enter situations of vulnerability. The support can range from light to heavy according to the needs of the child and family members, should be based on clear quality standards (e.g. the freshly adopted [Council Recommendation](#) on high quality ECEC), and should use a holistic approach building universal support with automatic ways to target families and children who need it the most without stigmatizing them.

### 4. Urgent need for action to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

During the discussions it was often highlighted, that the plan of the European Commission to launch the initiative in 2021 is welcomed, but vulnerable children and their families cannot wait. Measures should urgently be put in place, not least to address the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. National and sub-national governments are being called on to act now. The activation of support mechanisms that automatically grant social rights via income transfers to families in vulnerable situations was often mentioned, just as granting reduced fees for services in line with income levels. Participants argued that by the time the Child Guarantee is launched, governments need to be in a position to report to the EU and their peer countries on how they are progressing to end child and family poverty based on their own national realities and actions. The European level participants found it important that

child poverty measures should also clearly be built into financial instruments for the COVID-19 recovery (i.e. Recovery and Resilience Facility) and in the long-term EU budget from 2021-2027.

A BETTER SOCIETY FOR ALL FAMILIES

# The Child Guarantee

A tool to tackle family poverty?

Berlin, 29 September 2020

