INCLUDING CHILDREN?

DEVELOPING A COHERENT APPROACH TO CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION ACROSS EUROPE

With the support of the European Commission DG Employment and Social Affairs

The European Children’s Network
Le Réseau Européen des Enfants
Recent figures show that 21 per cent of dependent children under 18 in the EU are living in a low-income household – that is 16.9 million children. These children usually face a higher risk of living in poverty compared to adults. Children between 0 and 15 years old face a higher risk of relative poverty than any other population group: twice that of adults in the 25-49 age range (Source: European Commission, ‘Building an Inclusive Europe’, COM (2000) 79).

Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of poverty and social exclusion since their physical, mental, emotional and social capacities are still evolving. This impact is harmful during their childhood, but also undermines their future prospects and lifetime chances. It is also damaging to the future of the EU.

In Central and Eastern Europe, children have been greatly affected in recent years by increases in poverty and income inequality, although in some countries they are protected by a legacy of collective provision and more equal incomes.
Euronet commissioned a report to examine the impact of poverty and social exclusion on children in the European Union. It analyses policies which can indirectly as well as directly affect child poverty and social exclusion. The report explores how our perspective would change if we looked at poverty and social exclusion through children’s eyes. It contains a ‘Child Audit’ of the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion. The report is available from Euronet in English, French and Spanish.

A selection of the key recommendations includes:

**Poverty through Children’s Eyes**

The EU and Member States need to rethink of poverty and social exclusion from a child’s perspective. This is not done at present.

- **Impact of Social Exclusion on Children**
  - Children’s experiences of exclusion from the world of other children, their exclusion from access to rights and the impact this has on them in the present need to be investigated.
  - Children’s perceptions of poverty and social exclusion must be a key factor in developing policies on child poverty and social exclusion. Many children in low income families simply cope with the circumstances that face them. Their real feelings may be more clearly revealed by their reduced expectations in the present and their low aspirations for the future. Children in poverty are often stigmatised and feel ashamed.

- **Promoting Children’s Participation**
  - Children should be involved in decision-making processes on issues which affect their lives and in particular efforts should be made to involve those children who are poor and excluded. Obstacles to effective participation should be removed.

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‘The main weakness is that child poverty is still denied or non-existent for most politicians, and with a deteriorating economy it will be even more so.’

(Response to Euronet questionnaire, Germany, 2001)

‘If your friends have got something and you can’t have that, you feel like you are left out because everyone else has got it, and they pick on you because you are the odd one out.’

(Quote from C. Willow, Bread is Free: Children and young people talk about poverty, Children’s Rights Alliance for England/Save the Children UK, 2001)

For the world of children, social exclusion and marginalisation are terms that have to do with their age group, their same-age companions rather than with the many words of adults.’

(Conclusions from Euronet consultation, Italy, 2000)
The European Meeting of Ministers in charge of Childhood wishes the introduction of mainstreaming for Childhood and the rights of the child in all policies of the Union.

(Conclusions European Meeting of Children’s Ministers, 9th November 2001)

- **Child Perspective in Statistics on Poverty**: There are still no comprehensive, up-to-date figures on the number of children living in households on low incomes in the EU. Therefore data that show the position of children in poverty and social exclusion need to be developed.

- **EU Level: Legal Base**: The absence of a legal base is a problem in terms of developing a coherent European approach. However, the article on social exclusion in the Amsterdam EU Treaty, the adoption by the European Summit in Lisbon (2000) of children as a target group in the fight against social exclusion and children in several objectives of the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion are all significant steps forward to develop a European approach.

  Euronet recommends that a new article should be inserted into the EU Treaties, so that the EU can contribute to the promotion and protection of the rights and needs of children within existing legal competences of the EU Treaty, whilst respecting the lead role of the Member States.
Member State Level:

Euronet’s ‘Child Audit’ of the National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPs/incl) shows that:

- Few NAPs/incl integrate a concern for child poverty and social exclusion throughout the NAPs/incl, or use the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child consistently as shaping framework.
- Each of the key challenges of the NAPs/incl. - labour market changes, the knowledge-based society, demographic trends and changes in structures and roles in the family/household - has implications for children, but children are invisible in these debates.
- Children are seen as appendages of their parents, rather than as people in their own right, because paid employment and family structures are consistent themes in the NAPs/incl.
- Some NAPs/incl analyse children as a group that is vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion; others highlight certain categories of children (such as disabled children or ethnic minority children).
- The NAPs/incl do not analyse policies which may have damaging effects on children, for example, benefit sanctions for parental refusal to take up opportunities for employment/training.
- The promotion of participation and self-expression by people living in poverty is not systematically addressed in the NAPs/incl, and the need to include children is not acknowledged.

Children in future National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion:

- The European Commission should give guidance to Member States about how to incorporate a child perspective and to set targets for the elimination of child poverty in future National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion (NAPs/incl).
- Member States should ensure that they make children visible and mainstream child poverty and social exclusion throughout their NAPs/incl.
- Indicators of poverty and social exclusion should be developed further at EU and Member State level, to focus more clearly on the position of children.
- All Member States should, on the basis of clear indicators, adopt targets for the elimination of child poverty in the next NAPs/incl.

‘The European Children’s Ministers Meeting underlines the merits of a specific consideration for Childhood in the national plans implemented by the Member States, especially those with respect (…) to fighting social exclusion.’

(Conclusions European Meeting of Children’s Ministers, 9th November 2001)
## Contact People in the Member States

### EURONET Co-ordinator
**Mieke Schuurman**
Rue Montoyer 39
B - 1000 Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +31 187 481396 or +32.2.5124500
Fax: +31 187 487390 or +32.2.5134903
E-mail: mieke.schuurman@tiscali.nl or europeanchildrenetwork@skynet.be

### EURONET Member Organisations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Fax</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DENMARK</strong></td>
<td>Niels Hjotdal</td>
<td>Red Barnet Rantzaugsade 60 DK - 2200 Copenhagen N.</td>
<td>Tel: +45 7020 6120</td>
<td>Fax: +45 7020 6620</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:nh@redbarnet.dk">nh@redbarnet.dk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jari Virtanen</td>
<td>Pelastakaa Lapset r.y. Lapinrinne 2 PL 177 00180 Helsinki</td>
<td>Tel: +358 9 41355400</td>
<td>Fax: +358 9 41355444</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:jari.virtanen@pela.fi">jari.virtanen@pela.fi</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FRANCE</strong></td>
<td>Henri Delaunay- Belleville</td>
<td>COIFRÈDE 3, Avenue de l’Europe 92300 Levallois-Perret</td>
<td>Tel: +33 1 49640910</td>
<td>Fax: +33 1 49640911</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:cofrade@worldonline.fr">cofrade@worldonline.fr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GERMANY</strong></td>
<td>Katharina Abelmann-Vollmer</td>
<td>Deutscher Kinderschutzbund Schifferben 29 D- 30159 Hannover</td>
<td>Tel: +49 511 30485 25</td>
<td>Fax: +49 511 30485 49</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:abelmann.vollmer@dksb.de">abelmann.vollmer@dksb.de</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GREECE</strong></td>
<td>Helen Agathonos</td>
<td>Institute of Child Health 7 Fokidos GR - 11526 Athens</td>
<td>Tel: +30 1771 57 91</td>
<td>Fax: +30 1779 36 48</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:agatinst@otenet.gr">agatinst@otenet.gr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ITALY</strong></td>
<td>Angelo Simonazzi</td>
<td>Save the Children Italia Via gaeta 19 I-00185 Rome Italy</td>
<td>Tel: +39 06 474 0354</td>
<td>Fax: +39 06 478 83 182</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@savethechildren.it">info@savethechildren.it</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LUXEMBOURG</strong></td>
<td>Robert Soisson</td>
<td>FICE 17 Rue Mathias Koener L - 4174 Esch-sur-Alzette</td>
<td>Tel: +352 570 368</td>
<td>Fax: +352 573 370</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:soisson.rob@sl.lu">soisson.rob@sl.lu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NETHERLANDS</strong></td>
<td>Stan Meuwese</td>
<td>DCI/NL PO Box 7529 NL - 1070 AG Amsterdam</td>
<td>Tel: +31 20 4203771</td>
<td>Fax: +31 20 4203832</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:dcincl@wxs.nl">dcincl@wxs.nl</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PORTUGAL</strong></td>
<td>Manuela Enes</td>
<td>Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC) Largo da Memória 14 P - 1300 Lisboa</td>
<td>Tel: +351 218824020</td>
<td>Fax: +351 218850192</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:jferreira@iss.s.pt">jferreira@iss.s.pt</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPAIN</strong></td>
<td>Purificación Llaquet</td>
<td>Baldellou Plataforma de Organizaciones de Infancia Pz.Tirso de Molina, 5-5 dcha 28012 Madrid</td>
<td>Tel: +34 9 1 3695099</td>
<td>Fax: +34 9 1 3695028</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:purilaquet@navegiala.com">purilaquet@navegiala.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SWEDEN</strong></td>
<td>Simone Ek</td>
<td>Rädda Barnen S-10788 Stockholm</td>
<td>Tel: +46 8 698 90 00</td>
<td>Fax: +46 8 698 90 13</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:simone.ek@rb.se">simone.ek@rb.se</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UNITED KINGDOM</strong></td>
<td>Bill Bell</td>
<td>SCF/UK 17 Grove Lane UK - London SE5 8RD</td>
<td>Tel: +44 207 70354 00</td>
<td>Fax: +44 207 7937610</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:b.bel@scfuk.org.uk">b.bel@scfuk.org.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lynn Collie</td>
<td>NSPCC 42 Curtain Road UK - London EC2A 3NH</td>
<td>Tel: +44 207 825 25 00</td>
<td>Fax: +44 207 825 27 63</td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:lcollie@nspcc.org.uk">lcollie@nspcc.org.uk</a></td>
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