

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'child poverty'

(2012/C 113/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- reinforces how Local and Regional Authorities are at the forefront of work to tackle child poverty and exploitation, and highlights their crucial responsibility in preventing marginalisation and social exclusion; agrees that child poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires a multi-dimensional response, and proposes that improvements in a small number of key areas such as agreeing minimum income and quality standards can be vital to tackling child poverty;
- emphasises the importance of paid work, but also notes that employment alone does not guarantee a route out of poverty and that further action is required to combat in-work poverty;
- emphasises that all Member States should recognise that child poverty and social exclusion are key barriers to overcome if they are to achieve their Europe 2020 targets in relation to employment rate, investment in research and development, and energy and sustainable development;
- expresses its concern that the economic and financial crisis, and the response of some Member States, is leading to increased levels of absolute poverty, an increase in in-work poverty levels and rising youth unemployment.

Rapporteur Ms Doreen HUDDART (UK/ALDE), Member of Newcastle City Council

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General Introductory Comments

1. supports the Commission's intention to publish a Recommendation to Fight Child Poverty and Promote Child Well-Being in 2012 and welcomes the opportunity to contribute this Outlook Opinion to further the aims of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion; endorses the three policy areas identified as part of the Recommendation on: *Adequate Resources*; *Access to Services*; and *Active Participation of Children and Young People*; notes that, whilst there have been strong political statements by EU Heads of State to prioritise child poverty, this has not always translated into consistent resources, action, targets, and monitoring across all EU member states;

2. reinforces how Local and Regional Authorities are at the forefront of work to tackle child poverty and exploitation, and highlights their crucial responsibility in preventing marginalisation and social exclusion; agrees that child poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires a multi-dimensional response, and proposes that improvements in a small number of key areas such as agreeing minimum income and quality standards can be vital to tackling child poverty;

3. draws attention to the fact that child poverty is not a peripheral or residual issue that will just disappear with economic growth⁽¹⁾; increased growth during the period 2000-2008 did not have a substantial impact on levels of child poverty; that child poverty was a badge of shame for EU society before the economic crisis and is concerned that some member states responses to the crisis may unintentionally increase levels of child poverty; acknowledges that there are particular groups of children who are at high risk of more severe or extreme poverty but emphasises that children themselves form a particular group within society that is often at higher risk of poverty than the general population;

4. One definition of poverty is:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are

⁽¹⁾ *Can Higher Employment Levels Bring Lower Poverty in the EU? Regression based simulations of the Europe 2020 target*, Discussion Paper 6068, Institute for the Study of Labor (Bonn).

so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary patterns, customs and activities;⁽²⁾

5. notes that the most widely used measure of poverty across Member States and in the EU is the "below 60 % of median household income" level; but notes the need to use a range of criteria to measure absolute poverty, and that measures such as social inclusion, access to services, educational attainment and life expectancy at birth be included as established by the Human Development Index⁽³⁾. Welcomes the greater visibility given to poverty and social exclusion in the Europe 2020 Strategy, and agrees that the social dimension should be at the heart of this strategy while recalling that poverty is a threat to 20 million children living in the EU;

6. emphasises that poverty can have devastating effects on children and their experience of childhood as well as their future life chances; welcomes the references to tackling child poverty as a priority of the flagship initiative of *The European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion*, however, regrets the limited commitment to doing this and the lack of a specific target relating to child poverty within the initiative;

7. welcomes the commitment to publish a Recommendation and a Communication on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being in June 2012; supports the proposed framework for the Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-Being; recognises the importance in this context of involving children themselves living in poverty and welcomes the inclusion of Active Participation within the framework, while proposing that the Recommendation and the Communication should emphasise the value of humanitarian organisation such as UNICEF and the role of local and regional authorities in providing services to ensure children are protected from poverty and the accompanying material deprivation;

8. notes that the most vulnerable in our society have been hardest hit by the current financial crisis and evidence suggests that children and particularly young people are disproportionately affected⁽⁴⁾ while pointing out that some children from vulnerable population groups such as street children, single, large, migrant, or ethnic minority families for example Roma are even more at risk of marginalisation, poverty and social exclusion; highlights that while globalisation and increased co-operation between countries can have significant

⁽²⁾ *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Peter Townsend, 1979.

⁽³⁾ The Human Development Index is calculated on the basis of a country or region's gross national income per capita, expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling and life expectancy at birth.

⁽⁴⁾ *How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children & young people in Europe*, EUROCHILD, 2011.

benefits to the lives of individuals, they are often unevenly distributed; efforts should be made so that no one will be excluded from the benefits altogether;

9. notes that a strong policy focus on child poverty in recent years within the EU and supportive political statements by EU Heads of States has not led to significant reductions in the levels of child poverty; and emphasises that political support for tackling the issue needs to be translated into consistent resources, action and targets across all EU member states;

10. emphasises the importance of paid work, but also notes that employment alone does not guarantee a route out of poverty and that further action is required to combat in-work poverty⁽⁵⁾;

11. emphasises that all Member States should recognise that child poverty and social exclusion are key barriers to overcome if they are to achieve their Europe 2020 targets in relation to employment rate, investment in research, development, energy and sustainable development;

12. agrees that, in one of the richest regions in the world in the 21st Century, it is unacceptable that 20 million children are in, or at risk of, poverty, and that⁽⁶⁾ poverty is not simply about being on a low income and going without - it is also about being denied power, respect, good health, education and housing, basic self-esteem and the ability to participate in social activities;

13. emphasises that the UN General Assembly also recognises the particular nature of child poverty. Furthermore, the UN underscores that child poverty means more than simply a lack of money. Child poverty can only be understood as the denial of a number of rights contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27). Most situations of child poverty involve the infringement of the rights to survival, protection, development and participation enshrined in the CRC;

14. points out that according to several studies, an effective policy for redistributing resources to families with children plays an important role in mitigating poverty amongst children. Social transfers reduce child poverty by no less than 44 % in the EU as a whole;

EU Policy

15. wishes to highlight that there needs to be a greater understanding of the cost-benefit advantages of investing in

⁽⁵⁾ See, for example, *A Living Wage for Newcastle*, <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/news-story/a-living-wage-newcastle>.

⁽⁶⁾ *Poverty: the facts*, 5th Edition, Flaherty, J, Veit-Wilson, J and Dornan, P, Child Poverty Action Group, 2004.

tackling child poverty⁽⁷⁾ and exploitation, social exclusion and wider social inequalities; notes the benefits to wider society of greater equality and reduced marginalisation, exclusion and poverty within societies and emphasises the financial and economic and social advantages of investing in children and families at an early stage⁽⁸⁾;

16. supports the Council's conclusions on Tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being of 17 June 2011, which call for combating Child Poverty to be a priority; and supports the Social Protection Committee Opinion of 15 February 2011 which calls for the combating of child poverty to be prioritized in all relevant areas;

17. agrees that there is already a sizeable evidence base on child poverty within the EU; is concerned to note that child poverty levels in member states vary between 11 % and 33 %; and recommends that resources should be used to understand, disseminate and utilise this evidence base, and share best practice across member states;

18. expresses its concern that the economic and financial crisis, and the response of some members states, is leading to increased levels of absolute poverty, an increase in in-work poverty levels and rising youth unemployment⁽⁹⁾;

19. highlights the importance of policies aiming to break the poverty cycle passed on from generation to generation. For this to happen there is a need for cross-cutting policies that involve education and social measures aimed not only at ensuring employment for parents, but which aim directly at the children;

20. calls for greater recognition from the Commission and from Member States that poverty is a shared responsibility and a challenge for society as a whole, and not to be viewed as a stigma or failure of people who happen to be poor or socially excluded;

21. reiterates the call for the Commission to ensure Structural funds include opportunities to improve social housing to strengthen its role in social inclusion policies and confirm that the public service functions of social housing are to be defined at Member State level;

22. agrees that a holistic and integrated approach, encompassing the needs of the different groups, and the particular challenges faced, is required to alleviate and prevent poverty;

⁽⁷⁾ *Estimating the cost of child poverty*, Hirsch, D., Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008.

⁽⁸⁾ See, for example, *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings*, Cabinet Office (UK), 2011.

⁽⁹⁾ *How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children & young people in Europe*, EUROCHILD, 2011.

Adequate Resources

23. supports the view that income poverty is one of the most visible signs of social deprivation which affects children in different ways to adults⁽¹⁰⁾; it is however merely one of many factors of child poverty that needs to be addressed; agrees that there is a lack of understanding of the minimum standards that are necessary if children's rights are to be met; encourages the EU and its member states to evaluate the possibility of addressing the problem in key areas such as income support, access to services and children's participation;

24. notes that countries which spend most on social benefits tend to have lowest child poverty figures; agrees that member states should, where necessary, consider improving child benefits as an expression of intergenerational solidarity, which recognises the inherent value of childhood and an investment in Europe's future;

25. welcomes the proposal to develop a framework of guaranteeing an overall adequate minimum income for all children, taking into account the income of the whole of the household, parents as well as children;

26. stresses the importance of preventive public policies investing in sensible child welfare policies supporting the upbringing of empowered individuals, capable of integrating in society and into the labour market, rather than focusing on the consequences of their social exclusion and poverty;

27. reiterates the importance of resources other than transfers; parental participation in the labour market can only help lift children out of poverty if wages are adequate to do this, and can conciliate the diverse work patterns of parents; invites member states to welcome the proposal to add a recommendation on legislation relating to adequate income and ensuring "decent" work⁽¹¹⁾ and proposes that employment protection legislation should form part of this recommendation; highlights, however, that some people are not available to the labour market and are unable to work and transfers need to recognise this;

28. recognises that universal child benefits are the most effective way of providing income support to families with children and that these should be coupled with targeted benefits for those most in need⁽¹²⁾;

29. calls for greater clarification on "adequate" and encourages Member States and the Commission to agree on

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Child poverty – family poverty: Are they one and the same?*, EUROCHILD Policy Position, 2011.

⁽¹¹⁾ See, for example, *The low-pay, no-pay cycle: understanding recurrent poverty*, Shildrick, T et al, *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 2010.

⁽¹²⁾ See, for example, *Child benefits in the European Union*, J. Bradshaw, *Poverty* (139), CPAG, 2011.

EU standards, or establish an agreed methodology for determining the costs of a child and for defining adequate resources to prevent and combat child poverty; proposes that any definition should include consideration of: adequate for *who*, adequate for *how long*, adequate for *what*, and *who says what is adequate*⁽¹³⁾;

30. strongly supports the suggestion that member states should be urged to use great care when increasing conditionality and using sanctions in the benefits system so as to avoid penalizing children and leaving them without the necessary resources; notes that this approach often adds to the stigmatization of those families and children living in poverty and the perception that poverty is caused by personal failings or shortcomings; notes that the economic crisis has led to significant increases in unemployment, stagnating household incomes and a rising cost of living in many member states; highlights the important role that advice services can play in maximising household income and notes that in some member states these services may be under threat;

31. agrees that a good work/life balance for parents is critical to the well-being of children and society, as both income poverty and "time poverty" can harm children's development; agrees that precarious employment, unsociable working hours and low paid jobs for parents can have a detrimental impact on adult life and child development⁽¹⁴⁾;

Access to Services

32. welcomes the emphasis on ensuring all children have access to good quality services at a crucial stage in their development and notes that health, education, parenting and family support, housing and protection are key services which are most often delivered by local and regional authorities;

33. recognises the importance of early childhood education and childcare and of the quality of early childhood services; highlights that effective and early intervention and support throughout childhood and adolescence (and at *critical moments* in particular⁽¹⁵⁾) can have a significant beneficial impact on child development; notes that some local and regional authority services such as nurseries, schools, libraries and after-school clubs are vital to improving child well-being but, in many member states, will be under threat from austerity programmes;⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹³⁾ "What do we mean by 'adequate' benefits?" J Veit-Wilson, Chapter 14 in J Strelitz and R Lister [eds], *Why Money Matters. Family income, poverty and children's lives*. Save the Children, London, pp 125-132.

⁽¹⁴⁾ See, for example, *Precarious work: risk, choice and poverty traps*, R. MacDonald, in *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood: New perspectives and agendas*, A. Furlong, 2009.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Understanding youth exclusion: critical moments, social networks and social capital*, Shildrick, T.A. & MacDonald, R., *Youth & Policy*, 2008.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Id.

34. welcomes the proposal to strengthen the role of education in preventing and breaking the poverty cycle by removing all financial barriers to education, ensuring equal opportunities, and by providing necessary additional support to compensate for any disadvantage; recognises the importance of equal access to education related provisions, which are invariably provided by local and regional authorities, such as free-school meals, free books and education materials, financial support for participation in school trips and cultural activities for children from low income families and those at risk from poverty;

35. underscores the role that childcare can play in tackling child poverty. For the children themselves, childcare can enable them both to enjoy interaction with other children and childcare workers and to benefit from this. Children's cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development can improve as a result, and the effects appear to be long-lasting;

36. highlights the devastating impact that poverty can have on children's health⁽¹⁷⁾; is concerned that there is, according to the Commission Communication on health inequalities a limited focus on children's access to health with a general lack of awareness and insufficient policy priority and commitment on tackling health inequalities; proposes that the importance of improving children's health, including mental health is emphasised in the Recommendation and Communication; agrees that children should be specifically targeted within broader efforts to reduce health inequalities and that universal access to health care for poor and socially excluded groups should be assured, including for all children;

37. shares concern that environmental issues such as pollution, traffic, contaminated land and unsafe drinking water often disproportionately affect children living in poverty; welcomes the proposal to make every effort to avoid the ghettoisation of children experiencing poverty and social exclusion and to promote a social mix in housing; welcomes the proposal to include children and their families and communities in planning; suggests that the introduction of minimum standards for housing children, taking into account the primacy of children's rights, should be considered in the Recommendation;

38. agrees that member states should ensure that children are not removed from their families due to the families lack of resources to care for the children and acknowledges that guaranteed adequate resources would ensure that this did not happen; cautions against adding to the stigmatization associated with poverty by linking poverty too closely with familial abuse and highlights the important role of local and regional authorities in child protection;

Active Participation of Children and Young People

39. strongly supports the emphasis on the active participation of children and young people in the proposed Recommendation; agrees that there are obstacles to participation for all children and that these are multiplied for children who are disadvantaged and it is likely that traditional approaches to consultation may fail to engage with them, however, an active participatory approach should be encouraged in families, communities, NGOs and the private sector in order to reinforce commitment in all society;

40. proposes that children's participation should include opportunities to contribute to and influence decisions that affect their lives, involvement in sport and recreational activities to improve health, social life and personal development and participation in cultural opportunities to build skills, raise awareness of cultures and cultural diversity to build a more inclusive, less discriminatory society;

41. calls on national governments together with local and regional authorities to play their part in ensuring that children and young people have the right environment for learning, development and recreation, together with a wide range of opportunities, which is a prerequisite for their active participation;

42. agrees that one barrier to tackling child poverty is the lack of public and political awareness about the issue and its impact on children and their families and wider society; is concerned that this is reinforced by limited and in some cases negative media coverage of poverty, little awareness of or support for children's rights and by a lack of long term vision and pre-occupation with short-term electoral gains (young people are not voters); notes that in many countries it is not part of the political culture to focus on children or to see a child as a whole person;

43. highlights the work that takes place in and by local and regional authorities to ensure that children are included in decision making processes about issues that affect their lives; however there is still much to be done in order to guarantee the rights of children to be heard in any matters affecting them in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;

Recommendations

44. recommends the introduction of a specific target relating to child poverty as a priority of the flagship initiative of *The European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion*; and the adoption of a comprehensive strategy against child poverty and social exclusion that includes national, regional and local levels and fit into the broader Europe 2020 as well as the set-up of a monitoring framework based on sound indicators, also linked with the existing reporting mechanism under the UNCRC;

⁽¹⁷⁾ See, for example, *Health Consequences of Poverty for Children*, Spencer, N., *End Child Poverty*, 2008.

45. reiterates the need for specific reporting from Members States on child poverty and proposes - subject to the development of diagnostic tools to assess the severity of risk and hardship which are recommended for use by local and regional authorities, that this be included in Members States' reporting requirements under the Europe 2020 strategy; highlights that the CoR Quick Survey of 19 April 2011 found that many respondents viewed the potential introduction of obligatory priorities in future regional programmes as a positive development that could raise the profile of poverty and social exclusion at local, regional and national levels;

46. recommends that the allocation of Structural Funds takes cognisance of the importance of projects and services which fight child poverty and promote the well-being of children and their families; particularly where minors or young people are subject to physical or mental disorders, exploitation, substance misuse, immigration, crime and other factors which

increase their vulnerability; and, improves the participation of these children and families, and tackles negative perceptions and stigmatisation of poverty;

47. recommends that Local and Regional Authorities need to be actively involved in shaping decisions and policies on support for families, the provision of services and the active participation of children and young people as they are key players in the implementation of national and European policies locally;

48. recommends that in order to share best practice, the Commission develops and sustains an on-going dialogue with the CoR and allocates funds to enable CoR to publish, in collaboration with organisations such as Eurocities and Eurochild, reports documenting successful projects to tackle child poverty from across Local and Regional Authorities in the Member States.

Brussels, 15 February 2012.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Mercedes BRESSO
