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**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Improving the social inclusion of children by implementing the European Child Guarantee at local and regional level**

**(Own-initiative opinion)**

(C/2024/3669)

**Rapporteur:** Enzo LATTUCA (IT/PES), President of the Province of Forlì-Cesena and Mayor of Cesena

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

**Introductory comments**

1. notes with alarm that child poverty is one of the most serious social challenges of our times. Children make up around 20 % of the population of the EU, with around one in four at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Children therefore constitute the most vulnerable group, being particularly affected by poverty and social exclusion. This situation has worsened due to the economic impact of the pandemic and the increase in the cost of living;
2. notes that poverty in Europe is therefore closely linked to age and family make-up, with the challenges, vulnerable groups and indicators varying greatly across the EU's Member States and regions; calls, in any case, for a particular focus on policies aimed at supporting families with children and concerted action to ensure that the poverty reduction targets set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights are met;
3. confirms that there is a significant disparity in child poverty rates within the Member States, highlighting the complexity of the challenges that arise in the different regional and urban settings, which points to the need for a holistic and varied policy response. Notes, moreover, as confirmed by the latest UNICEF Report Card 18, that wealthy countries do not necessarily have low rates of child poverty; on the contrary, some of the richest countries have seen a significant increase in child poverty in the last ten years;
4. welcomes the increase in social investments in the European Union and in particular the efforts to encourage the building of crèches and childcare services across the EU. Not only do these investments improve Europeans' quality of life, they also have a positive impact on the economy, helping to create jobs, support parenthood and reduce gender inequality;
5. points out that there is a real risk that the target set in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, calling for the number of children at risk of poverty in Europe to be reduced by five million, may not be met. Calls, lastly, for the tax rules to be revised in order to stimulate the investments needed to support families and children in precarious situations;
6. stresses the strategic importance of investments in the early years of people's lives, especially in the first 1 000 days of life, in order to lay the foundations for the development of healthy individuals and prosperous societies, and that this requires the EU and the Member States to deliver funding and legislation that is up to this task. Spending money on services for children is therefore an investment, not an expense: it is a strategic action intended to enhance the development of society as a whole and to create equal opportunities for all, bridging the educational gap between children from families with different income levels and promoting equal educational opportunities from an early age;
7. also stresses that measures to combat child poverty, in particular access to early childhood education and care services, also play an essential role in addressing gender inequality and helping to increase women's participation in the labour market, which is often hampered by insufficient childcare support;

8. points to situations of particular concern when it comes to emergencies. These situations include wars that have a direct impact on Member States' economies and societies, such as the Ukraine and Middle East crises. They further expose children to risks of abuse, exploitation and deprivation of basic care, making targeted and properly funded measures even more urgent;

9. among the measures put in place by Europe under the European Pillar of Social Rights, refers, in particular, to the European Child Guarantee: the Council Recommendation adopted on 14 June 2021, which is primarily aimed at ensuring that a greater number of children in need can access basic services such as education, decent housing, healthy nutrition and healthcare, as part of a holistic approach to tackling child poverty and social exclusion;

10. welcomes both Phase III of the Preparatory Action for the Child Guarantee (carried out with support and technical assistance from UNICEF) and the presentation by all Member States of their national child guarantee action plans. While the plans vary greatly, the leading role of local bodies is a common denominator. The local level plays a crucial role in managing many key services, such as early childhood education and care, and social care and healthcare, as well as in measuring whether targets have been met, processing and collecting data, exchanging good practices and monitoring progress; it is also instrumental in ensuring that children and civil society organisations have a voice in the policy-making process;

11. regrets that some Member States submitted their national plan almost two years after the original delivery deadline and that in other Member States the submission of the plan was not followed by implementation and the roll-out of practical measures to put it into effect. Hopes, moreover, that – together with the European institutions – local bodies will be able to spur on the Member States to implement the plans and calls for the European Commission to effectively and resolutely monitor both the roll-out of policies linked to the European Child Guarantee and, in particular, the effective and consistent use of funds allocated to combating child poverty under the ESF+;

12. considering the major impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on children and families, calls on the European Commission to increase the share of the ESF+ allocated to the initiative and to continue funding support packages for children in emergencies, with particular support for local bodies dealing with crisis management.

### **The role of local authorities in combating child poverty and in implementing the European Child Guarantee**

13. considers that, given that the Commission intends to monitor implementation of the national child guarantee plans every two years (March 2024), the European institutions should ensure that the Member States have the necessary resources to be able to deliver on the key task of investing in children, and can focus on the implementation phase of the national child guarantee plans and the central role of local authorities, especially with the upcoming European elections in mind;

14. recognises the strategic role of local bodies in understanding the specific local features that cause child poverty within their communities, and calls on the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Member States and local bodies to support the implementation of local and regional child guarantee action plans that take into account the specific features of each region and community, promote the social inclusion of children and seek to deliver a minimum package of basic services to be provided to the most vulnerable children, including early childhood education and care, school meals, social care and healthcare;

15. considers that combating child poverty requires an understanding of its causes, which are complex and varied: this is why the action taken must be structured around several levels, going beyond the local context. It is therefore essential to have detailed data on the incidence of poverty in different areas, both in order to allocate resources and support where it is needed and to implement EU strategies;

16. supports a multilevel and decentralised governance model, taking into account the principle of subsidiarity and respecting national-level competences, that provides for an increasingly active and decision-making role for local bodies in managing resources and planning effective social, health and education policies, especially in direct response to children's needs;

17. calls for the promotion of joint projects and partnerships, including Public-Private Partnerships under oversight of a publicly accountable body, at local level for the provision of public services, with the aim of making these services more accessible and better aligned with children's needs, and stresses the need to provide ongoing training and support to local authority staff in order to improve their skills and efficiency in the implementation of programmes dedicated to children;

18. calls for it to be made easier for local authorities to directly access European funds aimed at children, by simplifying procedures and cutting red tape, and recognises the importance of local involvement in spending decisions and in the roll-out of initiatives, with particular reference to the European Social Fund+ as well as to the Technical Support Instrument and NextGenerationEU;

19. stresses the need to provide local bodies with more technical assistance in relation to child policies, both through the exchange of local and regional good practices and through capacity-building and monitoring activities. The technical assistance could be financed through the European Social Fund and should have as its primary objective the linking up of European best practices, 'available' to local authorities and regions that have a lower capacity and a lower level of skills but wish to invest resources in policies aimed at children, in particular in early childhood education and care;

20. calls for a continuous focus in European and national programmes on investing in, and more closely coordinating, the development and upgrading of services for children in the inland areas of regions, in particular in areas with a higher risk of depopulation;

### **Main challenges and actions**

21. among the various services referred to in the European Child Guarantee, wishes to focus here on those directly managed by local bodies, such as early childhood education and care and nursery school (which in some Member States is directly integrated into the education system), nutrition and health. Considers that setting the objective of local bodies creating a minimum package of essential services – guaranteed, universal and free of charge, and including childcare, an affordable, high-quality school canteen free of charge for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and a proper health system – is the best way to ensure equal opportunities for children resident in Europe, while also noting the significant financial implications of such services;

22. deems it particularly strategic to invest in stepping up the provision of educational services, making them free of charge (or, where not possible, affordable) for all children resident in Europe in order to reach the Barcelona target (of 50 % public coverage by 2030) and thereby reducing unequal access, particularly for the most vulnerable children, with the aim of tackling educational poverty;

23. considers it a priority to guarantee access to healthy, sufficient and high-quality food through universal access to school meals for all children resident in Europe, and to recognise affordable school meals (free of charge for children from disadvantaged backgrounds) as a fundamental and universal right in all educational establishments for the 0-6 year age group and in primary schools (6-11 years old);

24. considers it crucial to increase targeted investment to support children's physical and mental health, with programmes going beyond the health field, including sport and leisure activities and especially activities accessible to children with disabilities;

25. in the area of health, considers it a priority to adopt inclusive and targeted approaches to addressing the specific challenges faced by children and families with disabilities. The services, family support, participation and training must be accessible, in particular, to children with disabilities and to the local bodies to which they increasingly turn and which often lack the necessary tools and resources to guarantee basic rights;

26. highlights the importance of including and supporting certain specific categories, such as children without legal status, children belonging to minority groups, homeless children, children in alternative care facilities, children with disabilities, refugee children and children with migrant backgrounds, as well as of targeted measures for vulnerable children in cross-border settings and support for local bodies in coordinating reception services for refugee children.

### **Participation and involvement**

27. calls for the tools that enable the participation of children and the general public to be strengthened in order to increase awareness of children's rights and the inclusive participation of children and young people in community life and in shaping policies relating to children. To this end, the broader dialogue between local authorities, educational institutions, civil society and children's and youth representatives should be bolstered, to ensure that the voice of children is heard at all stages of decision making affecting them;

28. supports the European Parliament's proposal for the establishment of a European Children's Capital, modelled on the European Capital of Culture, with a specific focus on children, their rights, and opportunities for democratic participation, while recognizing the importance of promoting the rights and well-being of children at the local and regional levels and acknowledging the success of initiatives such as the European Capital of Culture in fostering cultural exchange and development;

29. stresses the need to organise public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives on children's rights, with financial and logistical support from the EU, stepping up communication efforts and strategies;

30. recognises the complementarity between the European Child Guarantee and the Youth Guarantee and urges the Member States to ensure consistency and synergies between anti-poverty policies and active labour market policies, covering people's whole lives from childhood to adulthood;

31. calls on the Member States to involve all of the relevant stakeholders in the roll-out of the national action plans. The local child guarantee plans need to be supported by strong local partnerships that include the public entities that provide the services together with other local community stakeholders, including parents, schools and private-sector entities;

32. considers it essential that local players are also involved in needs-analysis and monitoring, as research on child poverty and social exclusion and quality of life at national and regional level may not provide comprehensive data on this issue at local level, partly due to the sample size sometimes being limited;

33. for the purposes of more effective monitoring, stresses the need for the European Commission and the Member States to publish continuous updates on the work and results of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and its Indicators' sub-group (ISG) as regards establishing monitoring and evaluation indicators specifically for the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

Brussels, 18 April 2024.

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO