



**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Empowering Local and Regional Authorities in Integrated Child Protection Systems**

**(Own-initiative opinion)**

(C/2024/3670)

**Rapporteur:** Peter KAISER (AT/PES), Governor of Carinthia

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

**Prioritising child-sensitive social protection systems**

1. reiterates its full support for the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee <sup>(1)</sup> and the EU strategy on the rights of the child <sup>(2)</sup>. These initiatives, alongside the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child <sup>(3)</sup> and the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are hugely important. They aim to actively involve the Member States and local and regional authorities in combating child poverty and strengthening children's rights, thereby making the EU fairer and more inclusive. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child understands the term 'child' to mean 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier';
2. underlines the need to give high priority to child-sensitive social protection systems in anticipation of the forthcoming European Commission recommendation on integrated child protection systems <sup>(4)</sup>, which has been identified as a priority initiative for the Commission's 2024 Work Programme. These protective measures should fully comply with the principle of subsidiarity. They should be context-specific, child-centred and implemented at the most appropriate level of governance. This will facilitate cooperation and coordination between local, regional, national and EU authorities so that they can create integrated child protection systems that effectively protect children's well-being in accordance with Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in terms of preventing violence and protecting against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion across the EU;
3. highlights the link between child protection and poverty, as poverty and social exclusion can make children more vulnerable to violence. In consideration of children's vulnerability and child labour caused by poverty, the goals of the ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour should be reaffirmed. Stress, limited resources and limited access to support services in impoverished environments can help increase the risk of violence against children. Addressing these interrelated issues requires comprehensive strategies that combine child protection and poverty reduction;
4. emphasises how important asserting children's rights is to achieving SDG 16 for sustainable development, ensuring that no child is left behind and giving specific priority when implementing the Agenda 2030 SDGs to vulnerable children who are particularly at risk of poverty, violence and social exclusion;
5. stresses the need to develop exemplary approaches aimed at strengthening efforts to protect children and improving their access to essential services; in this regard, strongly supports including local and regional authorities in initiatives to raise awareness and exchange best practices across the EU;

<sup>(1)</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9106-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>(2)</sup> COM(2021) 142, 24 March 2021.

<sup>(3)</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>(4)</sup> Based on Article 292 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

6. urges the Commission and the Member States to ensure that the EU strategy on the rights of the child receives the strong financial support it needs, emphasising the key role of child protection. This financial commitment is of the utmost importance to ensure robust child protection services aimed at both preventing economic vulnerability and protecting children from abuse and violence;

7. emphasises that child protection overlaps with various issues such as health, including mental health, poverty, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, gender, education and justice, as can be seen in the 2030 Agenda SDGs, and that a comprehensive approach is essential to fully address these overlapping issues;

8. stresses that children must be given due consideration in the European Semester to ensure that child policies are comprehensive, fair and forward-looking and ultimately benefit both current and future generations. The CoR welcomes the fact that the goal of eliminating child poverty and child labour is included in the European Semester process with a view to contributing to the well-being and future of the EU as a whole;

9. strongly calls for multi-level coordination, in line with the Hague Convention of 1996 on the International Protection of Children <sup>(5)</sup> and SDG 16, where local and regional authorities, law enforcement agencies, and healthcare, education and social services work together to respond effectively to child protection concerns; in this regard, advocates the establishment of data collection and data monitoring systems, including at regional level and any other level with child protection competences, to track progress, identify trends and effectively allocate resources;

10. calls for gender issues to be an integral part of child protection policies, taking into account SDG 5. The focus should be on protecting girls from gender-based violence, including human trafficking, religious violence, sexual exploitation and practices such as child marriage, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Moreover, gender-sensitive policies should be pushed forward, with enforceable legislation to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls;

11. stresses the importance of being particularly aware of specific needs and challenges from an intersectional perspective, e.g. regarding migrants and children with disabilities, and therefore of the need for inclusive support measures, e.g. in relation to (physical) accessibility, language barriers and the significant impact of any trauma suffered by children;

12. recognises the importance of awareness-raising measures for people who work and volunteer with children in various fields (social services, legal systems, education, sport, leisure) to prevent abuse, harm and victimisation and promote best practices, thus helping to make cities and regions more inclusive and safe for children in line with SDG 11;

#### The role of local and regional authorities in child protection

13. emphasises that child well-being and protection systems are the most effective at local and regional level, and they must involve social services, health institutions, schools and community organisations;

14. recognises the crucial role of local and regional authorities in protecting vulnerable children from violence in their communities and stresses the importance of taking community action to protect children and of promoting a zero-tolerance culture for violence against children; calls for research and needs analyses to be conducted regularly to identify specific vulnerabilities and risks that disadvantaged children in the community are exposed to and to adapt measures accordingly;

<sup>(5)</sup> Convention on jurisdiction, applicable law, recognition, enforcement and cooperation in respect of parental responsibility and measures for the protection of children (OJ L 151, 11.6.2008, p. 39).

15. supports the establishment of local child support centres, ensuring that they are accessible and provide confidentiality for those reporting abuse and seeking help; also recommends making use of mobile outreach teams who can assess the risks to children and offer support to families in need;

16. stresses the need for a comprehensive approach involving close cooperation between relevant stakeholders working with children (e.g. in the fields of education and training, health, social services, justice systems, law-enforcement, sport and leisure) and local and regional authorities that promote dialogue with communities in order to improve the protection of children's rights; moreover, calls for EU-funded local and regional information campaigns aimed at raising awareness of the need for an integrated child protection system that prevents violence against children and takes into account economic vulnerability among children, benefiting both society and all children;

17. urges the competent authorities in the Member States to establish effective and accessible child and youth protection services that prioritise safe and inclusive environments, preventive measures, early intervention and support for vulnerable families; therefore recommends setting up safe spaces within communities that provide children with refuge and support when they are experiencing violence or abuse;

18. stresses how important it is for local and regional authorities to provide resources and actively take part in initiatives aimed at promoting positive practices for bringing up children, with a particular focus on promoting non-violent forms of discipline and preventing harmful behaviour; advocates making it easier to set up support groups for those bringing up children to give parents and caregivers basic guidelines for positive discipline and stress management;

19. emphasises the role that local and regional authorities play in devising and improving strategies that foster cooperation between youth welfare authorities, law enforcement authorities and media organisations in order to effectively handle cases of missing children, including situations where children are not visible in the system for various reasons, such as fear of violence, persecution or irregular immigration;

20. underlines that the role of local and regional authorities here is to enable schools in their areas to implement comprehensive child protection measures, which should include robust measures to combat bullying online and offline, in order to provide a safe learning environment for all pupils; in particular, stresses the need for accessible and inclusive support services for children with mental health problems; to that end, emphasises the importance of national and, where appropriate, regional school-based programmes that inform children about their rights, how to ensure their personal safety and how to report abuse, while at the same time training educators to identify signs of abuse;

21. reiterates the call for all available resources (e.g. the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, InvestEU, ReactEU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and Erasmus+) to be fully <sup>(6)</sup> used to effectively implement integrated child protection systems; points out that all Member States should allocate at least 5 % of their ESF+ funds to targeted measures and structural reforms to combat child poverty, but this threshold is just a minimum requirement and Member States should be encouraged to use a higher percentage of the ESF+ for this purpose; stresses that, according to the ESF+ Regulation, the financing rate for support for the most deprived people must be 90 %, which should facilitate access to this funding for the development of integrated protection systems for children in this category;

<sup>(6)</sup> Report on reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion in times of crisis for children and their families, A9-0360/2023, European Parliament.

### A safe environment for children

22. underlines how important it is to eradicate all forms of violence, be it physical or mental, against children, both in physical spaces (such as in their family life, at school, in sporting activities and in leisure time) and in the digital world (including cyberbullying, online abuse and other emerging digital risks linked to artificial intelligence and virtual worlds), and to develop preventative approaches by promoting decent treatment of other people and by creating protective environments for children and adolescents in all areas of their lives. The CoR highlights that young people are particularly vulnerable to specific forms of violence;
23. calls on the European Commission to strengthen its direct funding mechanisms and simplify procedures to make it easier for local authorities to access EU funding, in order to promote faster and more targeted action to combat child poverty;
24. stresses the need for child-friendly justice systems with inclusive procedures to ensure children's right to be heard in all matters that affect them, if necessary with access to legal aid, encompassing free and effective legal assistance (including legal counselling and representation), free interpretation and translation services and support;
25. calls for child protection authorities and public bodies to closely monitor children and be prepared to combat violent behaviour in children and assist in the reintegration of young offenders. The CoR stresses that decisions concerning monitoring must be preceded by an assessment of the child's best interests, and that the measures adopted to combat violent behaviour in children should be evidence-based;
26. emphasises how important it is to provide children who have been victims of violence with easy access to social and mental health services to help them recover;
27. acknowledges the call made by the Children's Participation Platform <sup>(7)</sup> for children to feel safer in schools. Beyond schools, stricter measures are needed for safe playgrounds and parks and street lighting, as well as more information and training for adults and children on safe online behaviour;
28. referring to the EU strategy on the rights of the child, calls on the competent authorities in the Member States to establish measures aimed at protecting children and adolescents in the digital sphere, addressing various issues such as limiting access to inappropriate content, monitoring algorithms and automatic processing systems, adopting prevention measures for safe and responsible use, ensuring the age-appropriate design of online products and services, and providing responsible digital citizenship education;

### Participation and empowerment of children

29. reiterates how important it is, as pointed out in the EU Strategy on the rights of the child, for children to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, and urges the Member States and regions to improve children's participation at all levels by providing suitable resources; in this regard, welcomes the EU Children's Participation Platform, which is an example of good practice for listening and increasing children's participation – for them and with them – and specifically follows up on the recommendation for citizen participation made at the Conference on the Future of Europe; welcomes the importance of ensuring a continuum of support between child and youth participation, as promoted in the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy <sup>(8)</sup> and recalled in the Communication on the European Year of Youth 2022 <sup>(9)</sup>;
30. calls on the European Union, in particular the European Commission, to strengthen the financial instruments available to assist local and regional authorities in their approach to unaccompanied minors, in view of the significant increase in the number of unaccompanied minors on their territory, and to harmonise EU legislation on their protection and care;

<sup>(7)</sup> See Feeling Safe | EU Child Participation (europa.eu).

<sup>(8)</sup> Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1).

<sup>(9)</sup> COM(2024) 1 final, 10 January 2024.

31. highlights one of the main findings of the children's consultation carried out under the EU Children's Participation Platform, namely that children want to be involved in decision-making processes on how to ensure their safety at home, in schools, in local areas and in healthcare facilities; calls for an inclusive approach to increase the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes that affect them, while respecting diversity in age, gender, ethnicity and disability and ensuring that their voices are heard and taken into account;
32. emphasises another important finding from the children's consultation, namely the need to establish and maintain a variety of direct communication and feedback channels for children, which should be seen as a key feature of integrated child protection systems;
33. points out that child welfare should guide all relevant policies as well as all measures at local, regional, national and international level in order to ensure both compliance with international and EU children's rights standards and coherent policies for protecting children at all levels;
34. highlights the importance of taking a long-term approach to guaranteeing child protection, by instituting measures and policies that promote stability and continuity in services for children; encourages Member States and, where they have competences in this domain, regional and local authorities to review their child protection practices and policies regularly, taking account of European recommendations and international best practices, with the aim of continually improving their response to the needs of children and families.

Brussels, 18 April 2024.

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

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