



Save the Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GUARANTEEING CHILDREN'S FUTURE

How COVID-19, cost-of-living and climate crises affect children in poverty and what governments in Europe need to do

Acknowledgments

Introduction

No country, no matter how rich, is free of child poverty. Europe is one of the world's wealthiest regions, yet it is facing increasing numbers of children and families experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Eurostat's latest data shows that almost one in four children in the EU is at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹. And yet, these figures do not fully reflect the detrimental and prolonged toll that the COVID-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, and climate change are having on children's rights and well-being.

On the other hand, the EU is witnessing a unique political momentum for the protection of children's rights. On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted the Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee; the first EU-level policy instrument which aims to address childhood disadvantage and exclusion, and thus prevent adverse effects in adult life. This text requests Member States to provide vulnerable children with free access to high-quality early childhood education and care, free education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, healthcare, adequate housing, and healthy nutrition. The Recommendation also requires Member States to draft National Action Plans to outline how the framework will concretely be implemented in their respective countries until 2030.

Although Member States were expected to submit their National Action Plans by the 15 March 2022, not all of them have. As of March 2023, 19 plans have been submitted (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden), while 8 are still missing (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)².

Child poverty is a barrier to the achievement of a more social Europe, a burden on our society which is condemning millions of children to a life of neglect and missed opportunities. At a time when children's rights are hindered by the cost-of-living-crisis and rising inflation, the multiple consequences of the conflict in Ukraine, the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing impact of climate change, and the increasing levels of child poverty in Europe, the implementation of the Child Guarantee National Action Plans and robust child social protection policies is more urgent than ever³. Indeed, long-term solutions such as quality jobs, strong social safety nets and progressive redistribution are also needed to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage for vulnerable children and to lift them out of poverty.

This report provides an analysis of the state of child poverty in Europe and the progress of the European Child Guarantee and child poverty reduction policies. It builds on the input and insights received by Save the Children members and offices working in 14 European countries⁴ via a questionnaire designed by Save the Children Europe during the period October-December 2022.

A. THE STATE OF CHILD POVERTY IN EUROPE

Child poverty is widespread and worsening in Europe. It impacts every aspect of a child's life: their living conditions, education, relationships, and personal and professional development. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse by increasing the pressure on health and social welfare services, exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities. The conflict in Ukraine added another layer of pressure, resulting in a full-blown cost-of-living crisis. Thereby, child poverty levels are likely to escalate.

Table 1: Child poverty rates from the selected countries available in Eurostat⁵.

Country reference	2019	2020	2021
European Union (EU-27)	22,8%	24,0%	24,4%
Denmark	13,8%	13,4%	14,0%
Germany	15,4%	22,3%	23,5%
Spain	31,0%	31,8%	33,4%
Italy	27,1%	28,9%	29,7%
Lithuania	25,8%	23,1%	21,6%
Netherlands	15,4%	15,8%	14,9%
Poland	16,2%	16,1%	16,5%
Romania	39,1%	40,7%	41,5%
Finland	13,8%	14,5%	13,2%
Sweden	23,0%	20,2%	19,7%
Iceland	14%	12,7%	13,1%
Albania ⁶	23,0%	21,8%	22,0%
Kosovo	DNA	20,7% ⁷	23% ⁸

LEGEND

- ≥13,2 to 14,63
- ≥14,63 to 20,03
- ≥20,03 to 23,1
- ≥23,1 to 25,9
- ≥ 25,9 to 32,87
- ≥32,87 to 51

DNA: Data not available

Note: Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not included in Eurostat database.



Photo: Pablo Blazquez / Save the Children

Table 2: Material deprivation rate (less than 18 years old – data available until 2020), Eurostat

Country	2018	2019	2020	2019 - 2020
Denmark	8,5%	6,7%	7,5%	↑
Germany	8%	6,2%	15,2%	↑
Spain	15,4%	15,1%	18,6%	↑
Italy	16,3%	13,8%	13,0%	↓
Lithuania	21,2%	16,8%	17,8%	↑
Netherlands	5,8%	5,8%	6,0%	↑
Poland	9%	8,1%	6,2%	↓
Romania	35,2%	29,8%	36,1%	↑
Finland	8,8%	7,1%	8,2%	↑
Sweden	6,8%	7,7%	7,1%	↓
Iceland	4,6%	N/A	N/A	
Albania	58,3%	55,4%	51,5%	↓

LEGEND

Among 4% and 10%
Among 10% and 20%
Among 20% and 30%
Among 30% and 40%
Above 40%

According to Eurostat⁹, the risk of poverty or social exclusion for children in the EU (AROPE) increased by 0,4 percentage points, from 24,0 % to 24,4 %, between 2020 and 2021. In 2021 it was the lowest in **Finland** and **Denmark** (13,2% and 14% respectively) and the highest in **Spain** and **Romania** (33,4% and 41,5% respectively). In between are **The Netherlands** (14,9%) followed by **Sweden** (19,7%), **Germany** (23,5%), **Lithuania** (21,6%) and **Italy** (29,7%). Also **Kosovo** is registering increasing rates. Not being covered by AROPE, child poverty in Kosovo is defined using the internationally accepted consumption poverty line of €1.417 per person per day. The general increasing trend is more notable when considering these figures do not fully reflect the detrimental, far-reaching, and prolonged effects that the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine are having on the social fabric of each Member State.

Similar trends can be observed when considering the **material deprivation rate**¹⁰, an indicator defined as the percentage of population with an enforced lack of at least three out of nine

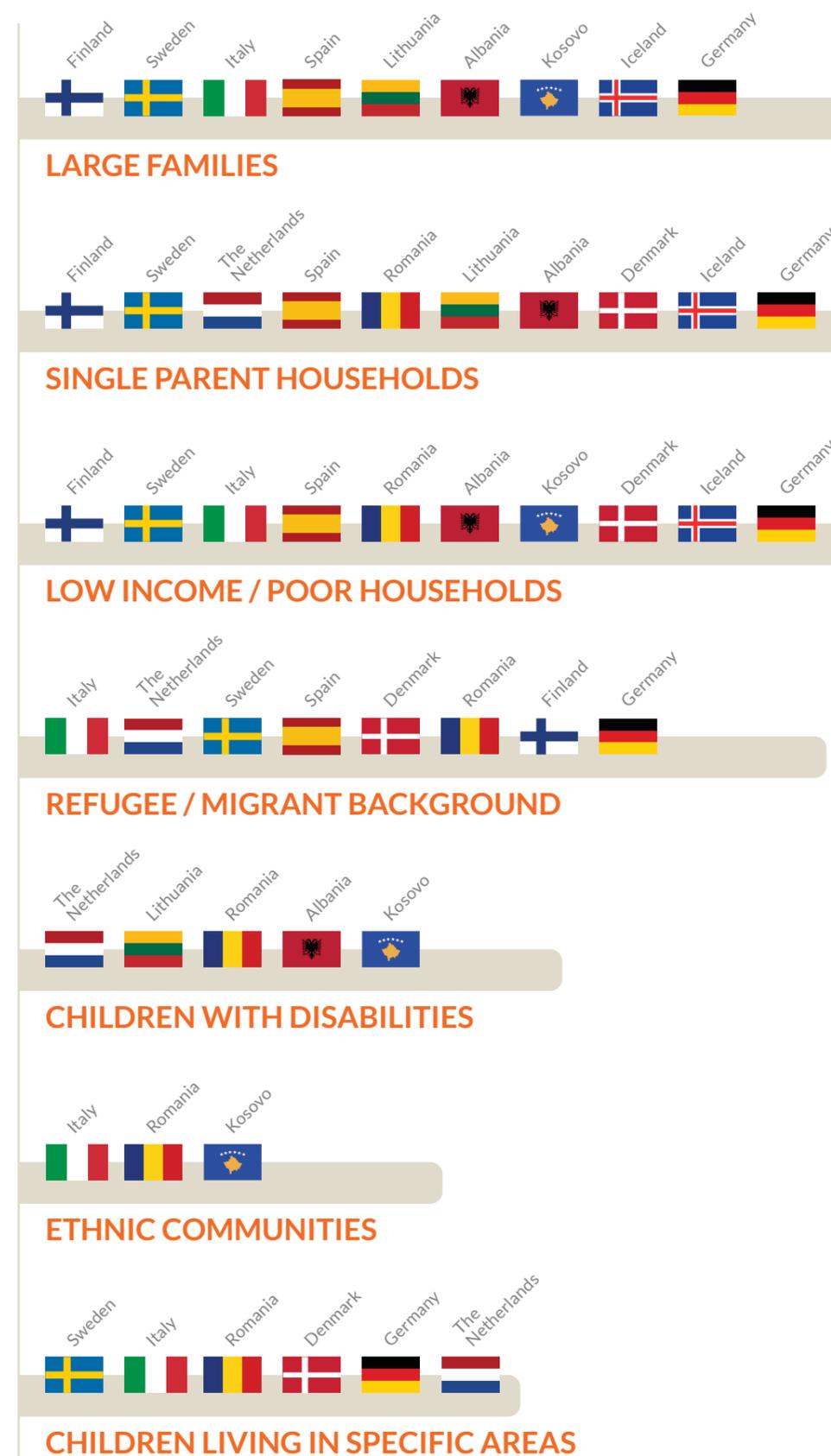
material deprivation items in the ‘economic strain and durables’ dimension. The indicator shows a significant increase in **Denmark**, **Germany**, **Spain**, **Lithuania**, **Romania** and **Finland**, slight increase in **The Netherlands**, slight decrease in **Italy**, and decreasing rates in **Sweden** and **Albania**.

Main groups of children at risk

As reported by Save the Children members and country offices that contributed to the report, the main groups of children at risk are: children living in single parent families, low-income families and large disadvantaged families are among the most vulnerable children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, followed by children with a migrant background (refugees, asylum seekers), children with disabilities, children belonging to ethnic minorities and those living in specific areas (e.g., rural areas).

CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY OR SOCIAL EXCLUSION

As reported by Save the Children members and country offices that contributed to the report.



The impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on children of all ages across Europe. Among the devastating consequences for families is the loss of income and subsequent slide into poverty, more frequent in vulnerable families and in those countries with weaker social protection systems. Data shows that children are severely deprived of critical needs such as access to education, health care, housing, and nutrition.

The fallout from the pandemic has common themes across many countries. Data shows increased anxiety and mental health problems among children, particularly among those from socially disadvantaged families. Remote learning policies increased inequalities, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds facing more difficulties due to the lack of resources and support.

Many families in Europe have also experienced financial difficulties, with 49% of **Albanians** and 32,7% of **Italians** reporting a reduction in economic resources.

All countries took action not only to counteract the impact of the pandemic but also the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the conflict in Ukraine. Initiatives include child benefits, energy allowances, regulating energy prices, tax rebates, public transport discounts, food vouchers, and housing benefits. In **Italy** and **Germany**, over €1 billion and €2 billion respectively were allocated to support the education system, while in **Spain** the government introduced new child benefits and increased the Minimum Income Scheme. In **Albania**, the government doubled the bonuses for families with three or more children (about 15.000 families) and the ones for single mothers with up to two children (about 5.700 women).

Public health and mental health policies and resources were boosted. For example, **Finland** allocated more resources to youth mental health, **Italy** has a “psychological bonus” to support psychotherapy costs, and **Spain** launched a new

national strategy on mental health with a budget of €100 million. In **Albania**, psycho-social aid for families was provided through a dedicated helpline introduced with the support of the government and private donors.

Overall, the work is far from over. Governments must continue to assess the negative impact of the pandemic on children and deliver effective solutions.

The cost-of-living crisis

The conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent increase in the cost of living has brought unbearable challenges to the lives of millions of families, especially those low- and middle-income households that had already suffered during the pandemic. The price of basic food such as milk, cereals, and oil has skyrocketed, obliging families to skip meals and ration food. Money is tight and bills are harder to pay. As a result, millions of children risk living in cold households, not being able to access education, healthcare, or other essential services. Moreover, children in low-income households are three times more likely to suffer from mental health problems.

European countries have launched several emergency measures to address these crises. Albeit appreciated and much needed, these measures are not enough to tackle this child poverty crisis. Ad-hoc actions for short term solutions will simply not work. Effective support needs to strengthen countries’ social welfare systems. Long-term systemic, integrated, and comprehensive changes are now urgent.

The EU’s Child Guarantee, as well as the strategic allocation of EU and national funding, must be the cornerstone of each country’s response to this crisis. Bold decisions are needed. A clear mapping of existing services for children and families is essential to identify gaps, allocate budgets in the short- and long-term, and develop child-centred and sustainable social security systems that will be resilient in future crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The post-pandemic and cost-of-living crises

Governments should invest in children - despite economic and inflationary pressures.

- 1. Increase social benefits and services to all families with children in need – including refugees** – and deliver them at the right time. In most countries they are “too little, too late”. Governments should raise benefit levels in line with the cost of living.
- 2. Ringfence investments in children** ensuring that social systems and interventions are protected from national spending cuts and expanded when inadequate, with a specific focus on investments in early childhood development. Children’s needs must be put first.
- 3. Apply short- and long-term reforms** to child allowance systems, social benefits, price caps, tax breaks, and social tariffs.
- 4. Increase quality and access to social services** to support the children and families hit by the cost-of-living crisis, with specific support for the most affected and vulnerable.
- 5. Financially assist families** having difficulties with utilities, rent or mortgage payments.
- 6. Make rapid structural and comprehensive national reforms using a dedicated new injection of funds.** Allocate additional ad-hoc funds to tackle the multi-level consequences of the conflict in Ukraine. These funds could be borrowed as was done for the post-pandemic recovery or could be set up through national contributions.
- 7. Expand measures that help children get involved in leisure, culture, and sports.** Use European funds to finance the participation of low socio-economic status students in school trips or extra-school activities.
- 8. Target compensation and support interventions for the most vulnerable children** and families rather than uniquely opting for blanket measures. For example, prioritise the most vulnerable families when introducing energy allowances and subsidies.
- 9. Give access to affordable and quality housing for all families with children** by, for instance, capping rent increases, increasing and facilitating access to housing benefits, banning evictions of families with children in vulnerable situations (in the short term) and increasing the stock of social housing (in the medium and long-term). A secure and healthy home for every child should be a priority, also for children in migration.
- 10. Introduce a system of cash benefits or food vouchers** to promote the consumption of healthy, fresh, and nutritious food among vulnerable consumers.
- 11. Beyond financial measures, it is fundamental to enable adequate and timely practical help and support for families in their daily lives.** Information about services – particularly preventive, low-threshold services and mental health services – should be communicated to children and young people, for example using digital channels.
- 12. Pay attention to the voices of children themselves.** Children must be given the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences and offer their opinion on child-oriented solutions. Their rights are fully realised only when their opinions and perspectives are heard – and heeded.

The impact of climate change on children and families

The climate crisis is changing the world as we know it, with grave implications for the rights of children now and future generations of children. Save the Children's Generation Hope report¹¹ shows that the threat posed to children and their rights by climate change is not theoretical; children face a deadly combination of exposure to multiple shocks and slow onset events with high vulnerability resulting from a lack of essential services. Climate change is creating a water crisis, a health crisis, an education crisis, a protection crisis and a participation crisis. It is threatening children's very survival.

European countries¹² have started to approve climate change laws and adaptation strategies. Many, however, still lack comprehensive measures to address the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable. Governments need to ensure that climate and environmental policies are child-sensitive. They also should ensure that climate policies and social policies go hand in hand and do not work against each other. More funds should be allocated to building children's resilience, services and safety nets to protect children.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The climate crisis



- 1. Ensure that climate and environmental policies are child-sensitive:** governments need to evaluate the impacts of climate change on children. Climate policies and social policies must go hand in hand.
- 2. Scale up social protection systems** to mitigate the increasing impacts of climate shocks: make sure that social protection responses are fast and that they can give extra support during emergencies caused by climate change.
- 3. Invest in education infrastructure that is resilient to climate emergencies** to reduce long-term disruption to children's learning process, as well as solutions that increase access, such as digital learning, as well as equity.
- 4. Empower children to participate** in climate mitigation, adaptation, and climate-resilience activities in schools, encouraging children and young people to become part of the solution to climate change.
- 5. Invest in improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services.**



B. THE STATE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHILD GUARANTEE AND CHILD POVERTY REDUCTION POLICIES IN EUROPE

In 2021, EU Member States adopted the European Child Guarantee, a framework to tackle child poverty by ensuring access to basic rights and services for children in need. The Recommendation requires Member States to submit ambitious National Action Plans. To date, 19 out of 27 Member States have submitted their plans. These National Action Plans will work alongside or merge with existing policies to combat child poverty. This section of the report gives Save the Children's assessment of national child poverty reduction policies and the Child Guarantee National Action Plans submitted to date. **Germany** and **Romania** Child Guarantee National Action Plans were not yet published at the time of writing. **Germany** assessed the status quo in the respective fields, while **Romania** evaluated the plan's draft, which was shared with Save the Children **Romania** in January 2023.

Main trends on the Child Guarantee national action plans and child poverty reduction policies.

There are positive measures to be found across all countries assessed. However, there are also shortfalls that vary in size and scope from country to country.

Countries such as **Finland**, **Spain**, and **Italy** have comprehensive Action Plans tied to national child strategies, which can have a greater impact on child well-being. The **Finnish** Child Guarantee Action Plan is part of **Finland's** National Child Strategy, published in February 2021. In the plan, the welfare of children is holistically supported, including free comprehensive and upper secondary education, free school meals, free healthcare, and the subjective right to early childhood education. Most vulnerable and minority groups of children are well defined in the plan. **Spain's** plan includes proposals to combat energy poverty, address school segregation, and improve data collection, but

does not emphasise the affordability of key services and does not have a preventative approach. **Italy's** plan is inclusive and covers ECEC, education, and health, but lacks clarity on funding and targets.

In **Lithuania**, the Child Guarantee Action Plan is based on best practices, but there is no move towards child participation. **Sweden** provides free access to key social services but needs further measures for disadvantaged children and those in migration. **Poland's** plan prioritizes homelessness, mental health, and children in alternative care, and will be funded mainly by ESF+ and ERDF. **The Netherlands** has a single target to reduce child poverty by 50% within four years but does not specify the categories of children in need. The **Danish** Action Plan lacks sufficient attention to child participation and child rights, while the **German** Action Plan is still in development.

Effective implementation of the National Action Plans depends on several success factors. It is crucial to involve all levels of government. A multidimensional poverty index for the most vulnerable minors should be set up. High-quality standards must be established for services provided under the Child Guarantee, and each National Action Plan must have enough resources behind it to make a long-term impact.



RECOMMENDATIONS: The Child Guarantee as a model framework for child poverty reduction policies in Western Balkans

1. Child poverty reduction is a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation is a deliverable of the Pillar's Action Plan, which the Western Balkan countries are encouraged to follow as part of their EU integration process. In this context, the Directorate General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) should **encourage candidate and potential candidate countries to implement the measures included in the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation** to advance their social inclusion policies and pave the way for their integration in the EU.

2. Save the Children will also be calling the **2024-2029 European Commission to propose measures to integrate the implementation of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation as a requirement of candidate countries towards their access to the EU**, in an effort to address inequalities and invest in the EU's future citizens.

The national Child Guarantee service areas

Free Early Childhood Education and Care

Save the Children's assessment of ECEC policies within the Child Guarantee National Action Plans in different countries shows a mixed picture of meaningful achievements and proposals and unresolved challenges. Countries are working to increase participation in ECEC, including providing free ECEC services or increasing subsidies. However, there is still a shortage of ECEC places in some countries and access to ECEC services remains limited for vulnerable groups, such as children with special needs or disabilities and refugee children. The quality and availability of ECEC staff is also a challenge, with a need for increased investment in staff education and training.

The Child Guarantee National Action Plans offer an opportunity to improve ECEC provision, funding, and coordination, but more needs to be done to ensure that every child in the EU has access to high-quality ECEC services.





RECOMMENDATIONS: Free early childhood education and care (ECEC)

1. Countries must aim for **ECEC to be affordable for all families and free of charge for the most vulnerable children.**
2. Any clear comprehensive plan for financing and implementing access to early childhood education should ensure that the **supply of places meets the demand.**
3. **Break down the non-financial barriers** that prevent vulnerable children from participating in ECEC, such as in some countries the requirement to have a permanent address. Adapt communication about ECEC to suit the needs of vulnerable groups.
4. Countries should significantly **invest in education**, including tertiary education, that gives ECEC qualifications and should also invest in recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Ensure that **municipalities**, who often have economic responsibility for early education centres, **are given adequate resources** from the national level to deliver the necessary services.

Summary of countries' main achievements/ positive elements & unresolved issues/ pending challenges in ECEC

Sweden

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Programme "Förskola för fler barn" ("Preschool for more children"): to increase the proportion of children in early childhood education which also includes giving priority to early access for some children in need. When a child turns 3, the municipality automatically reserves a place and informs guardians.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Difficulties for certain groups of children (asylum-seekers, undocumented children, children in temporary housing) to attend ECEC due to, for example, the lack of a formal address.

Italy

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Action Plan states the objectives of 50% coverage for full time childcare, and 95% for full time preschool education.

✓ National standard for staff working in childcare established by law.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Low participation rate in ECEC, especially in Southern Italy.

Netherlands

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Investments to improve quality and participation (objective: to increase the number of participation hours, raise the qualification level of ECEC staff to tertiary level, and evaluate equal educational opportunities).

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Staff shortage.

Denmark

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ High ratio child-caretaker.

✗ Lack of staff with adequate education.

Germany

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ High demand of ECEC services and lack of skilled staff.

Romania

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Limited availability of ECEC places (with high disparities between rural and urban areas).

✗ Insufficient targeting of children from vulnerable families.

Finland

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Low participation rate in ECEC compared to European average levels.

✗ More resources need to be invested in personnel.

Lithuania

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Lack of a concise plan to provide access to ECEC to every child.

Albania

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Difficult access to ECEC for Roma children and children with disabilities.

✗ ECEC very limited/non-existent in rural/remote areas.

✗ High child teacher ratio.

✗ Lack of qualified ECEC staff.

✗ Poor, outdated learning environment and infrastructure.

Iceland

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Low salaries and lack of educated staff.

✗ Important gap between the parental leave (1 year) and access to ECEC.

Free Education

(including effective and free access to school-based, sport, leisure and cultural activities and effective and free access to one healthy meal each school day)

Positive developments are emerging in different countries, such as **Finland's** move to free compulsory upper secondary education for all children up to 18 years as well as the **Lithuanian** government's thorough assessment of problems in the education system and subsequent policies to tackle them. In **The Netherlands**, access to digital education is stimulated by state-sponsored initiatives. **Albania** has made reforms in access to education and raising learning outcomes.

However, there are still problematic areas, such as the shortage of teachers and resources for inclusive education initiatives for minority or vulnerable groups in countries like **Sweden**, **Albania**, and **Iceland**. The national plans and policies need to be more ambitious to tackle these issues. The **Dutch** and **Swedish** Action Plans have significant room for improvement. The **Danish** education system is failing to compensate for children's socioeconomic background and in **Germany**, successful education is heavily dependent on the family's economic background. In **Albania**, the education system has poor infrastructure, the lack of space and materials, and high numbers of early school leavers.

Effective and free access to one healthy meal each school day

The European Child Guarantee recommends that Member States provide at least one healthy meal each school day. Access to school meals ensures adequate nutrition, decreases food insecurity and reduces parents' economic strain. School meals are vital for children from low-income families who do not receive enough quality food at home.

Some countries, such as **Finland** and **Sweden**, provide free meals to all school-goers while others, like **Denmark**, provide subsidies to families in most need. The situation varies within countries too, with some regions offering free meals while others do not. Despite its importance, access to free school meals is not fully guaranteed in many countries. In **Spain**, only 11% of children receive free school meals. In **Italy**, 53,5% of primary school students eat lunch at the school canteen. Still, there are huge differences between the North and South of the country and within regions as well, with some municipalities in the South registering rates under 6%¹³. **The Netherlands** does not provide school meals but has recently made a €100 million investment for the most at-risk schools. **Albania** does not have any provisions for free or affordable food in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Free education and free school meals

1. **Ensure the right to education** without restrictions to children in need, such as children with a migrant background, refugees, at risk of poverty or with disabilities.
2. **Reduce or eliminate any hidden costs of school trips and extracurricular activities**, particularly for vulnerable children.
3. **Minimise the financial burden of education** by providing free or subsidised transportation, free access to schoolbooks and supplies, and access to IT devices for children.
4. **Provide free school meals for disadvantaged children in all schools**, with a focus on quality and healthy meals.
5. **Eliminate regional and local differences in the delivery of free education, leisure and extra-curricular activities and free school meals** by ensuring that municipalities and aligned and receive adequate resources for their circumstances.



Summary of countries' main achievements/positive elements & unresolved issues/pending challenges in EDUCATION

(including school-based, sport, leisure and cultural activities and access to one healthy meal each school day)

Sweden

Main achievements & positive elements

The action plan contains objectives related to:

- ✓ The increase in the proportion of children in socio-economically vulnerable families who take part in sports and cultural activities.
- ✓ The increase in the percentage of children who graduate from high school with passing grades.
- ✓ The increase in the support to be received by children with disabilities.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ School segregation.
- ✗ Strengthen equivalent education.
- ✗ Ensure access to education for asylum seekers and undocumented children.
- ✗ Ensure access for all children to meaningful leisure activities.
- ✗ Legislate the provision of free meals in secondary and upper secondary schools.

Lithuania

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Government's official acknowledgement of the education system problems (i.e. low quality, non-inclusive, lack of staff, lack of extracurricular/leisure activities) and policies to address them.

Denmark

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Lack of resources.
- ✗ Too many children per teacher.
- ✗ High hidden costs of education.

Italy

Main achievements & positive elements

The Action Plan states targets to:

- ✓ Increase full time education in primary schools.
- ✓ Reach out the most vulnerable children through inclusive educational practices.
- ✓ Reduce dropout rates.
- ✓ Reduce the share of NEETs.
- ✓ Guarantee universal access to one school meal in primary schools and offering canteen services for lower secondary schools.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Increase funding in education.
- ✗ Establishment of "Educational Intensive Areas" endowed with adequate resources. Defining funds needed to expand the services and how running costs will be covered.

Spain

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Access to free school meals.

Netherlands

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Legal obligation to allow all children to take part in the activities organized by the school regardless of the school contribution payments.
- ✓ National Programme for Education, which provides schools with additional resources to purchase digital tools.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Shortage of teachers.
- ✗ Decline in basic skills and increasing differences in performance levels between schools.
- ✗ Increased stress among young students.

Finland

Main achievements & positive elements

Two important policies have been introduced in the Action Plan:

- ✓ Upper secondary education for all children until 18 years.
- ✓ Finnish model of hobbies in all regions enables every child to have one free leisure activity in connection with school days.

Romania

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Hidden costs of public education persist and, in many cases, generate financial burdens that vulnerable families cannot cope with.
- ✗ School lunches have been piloted since 2016, but the pandemic together with capacity challenges faced by schools hindered the access of vulnerable children to this programme.

Germany

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Lack of teachers and skilled staff.
- ✗ Lack of free school lunches and a consistent policy in every federal state.

Iceland

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ High cost of participation in leisure and sport activities.
- ✗ Lack of support for children with disabilities - especially those with mental and behaviour problems.

Albania

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Improvements in the access to education and in raising learning outcomes through the implementation of several reforms (development of a competency-based curriculum framework, teacher standards and a school evaluation indicator framework).

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Poor infrastructure, lack of space in classrooms, lack of educational material, furniture, and playgrounds.
- ✗ High drop-out rates.
- ✗ High numbers of out-of-school children (Roma and Egyptian, children from families engaged in seasonal migration, returnees, young carers, children contributing to the family income, early married girls, children with disabilities).
- ✗ Lack of resources for inclusive education.
- ✗ Lack of data.
- ✗ Access to free school meals.

Free quality healthcare

Nearly all Member States ensure, in principle, free access to healthcare for all children. Some countries offer free primary healthcare services only. Overall, access is not always effective, especially for disadvantaged children¹⁴.

The priorities that emerged loud and clear from Save the Children's assessment of different countries are the challenge of mental health and the bigger efforts needed for children in vulnerable situations

COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns and restrictions on social life have also drawn attention to the silent epidemic of mental ill-health among European teenagers. Mental illnesses including anxiety and stress disorders are increasingly affecting younger children. Free healthcare also means providing free therapy and counselling to children who need it.

National Action Plans in countries such as **Spain, Italy, and Finland** highlight the need to address mental health in children. However, mental health services are underfunded in several countries, leaving many children without support.

Children in vulnerable situations, such as migrant families and low-income families, need access to quality, accessible, and affordable health services. **Italy's** Action Plan focuses on access to health care for migrant children, while **Finland's** reform of healthcare and social welfare services aims to combine the services for children in need of multiple services – such as children with disabilities. **The Netherlands** has launched a new programme to help families in vulnerable situations, while the **Swedish** Action Plan highlights the need to lift barriers to healthcare access.

In **Albania**, the main health challenge is the low availability of specialist services, particularly in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Free quality healthcare

- 1. Tackle the mental health crisis** head on. Plug deficiencies in National Action Plans such as lack of resources for mental health interventions and lack of effective initiatives. Reduce waiting times for mental health services a specific focus of all Plans.
- 2. Expand and reinforce youth support services.**
- 3. Train GPs and teachers** to be able to detect mental health problems early. This will accelerate care and lower pressure on specialised psychiatric and psychological services.
- 4. Establish mental health programmes in schools.**
- 5. Provide all children and adolescents with unrestricted access to health care**, including health promotion, screening and preventive services, and rehabilitation.
- 6. Ensure National Action Plans make specific mention of measures for vulnerable children.** For example, remove financial, administrative and language barriers to healthcare for vulnerable families and ensure support for children with disabilities and children with chronic illnesses to access healthcare and support services.



Summary of countries' main achievements and positive elements & unresolved issues/pending challenges in HEALTHCARE

Finland

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Forthcoming reform of healthcare, social welfare, and rescue services.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Access to mental health services of children and young people.

✗ Unmet needs of children and families who need multiple services (e.g. children with disabilities).

✗ Lack of financial and personnel resources in healthcare and social services.

Italy

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Great attention is given in the National Action Plan to the issue of mental health of children, psychosocial development, and guarantee of access to health care to migrant children and attention to children with disabilities.

✓ Health services for children's first 1.000 days of life.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Improve prevention measures for vulnerable families.

Netherlands

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The "Solid Start" programme (Kansrijke Start) to help parents in vulnerable situations in the period prior to, during and after pregnancy.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Discrimination and double standards of the health insurance system.

✗ Mental health problems of children and long waiting lists.

✗ Shortage of certain categories of health workers.

Spain

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The focus of the Action Plan lies on mental and visual health and includes a commitment to gradually eliminate monetary barriers to medicine access among children in vulnerable situations.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Access to specialized services for migrant families.

Romania

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The community health network is a promising good practice in reaching vulnerable children.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Huge disparities in availability of health services between rural and urban areas (including school health network).

✗ Scarce availability of public/free of charge rehabilitation services for children with disabilities.

Sweden

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The Action Plan highlights the most important problems such as the health inequalities between different groups of children and the low access to child psychiatric services.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Access to mental health services for all children and adolescents is difficult due to long waiting times.

✗ Underutilization of healthcare by some groups of children (children with migrant background, placed in foster care and/or children who have a parent with lower socioeconomic status).

✗ Reform and additional resources needed.

✗ The possibility to access health care without a personal identification number.

✗ The possibility to access an interpreter when calling health care.

Denmark

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Access to mental health. The psychiatric sector is underfinanced, leaving long waiting lists and many children without support.

Iceland

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Antenatal care and free dental care for children.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Mental health (lack of support and long waiting lists).

Albania

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The new Plan of Action on Health Promotion 2022-2030 to renew health promotion through social, political, and technical actions.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

✗ Proper evaluation of health interventions.

Sufficient and healthy nutrition

Child malnutrition, whether due to poor nutrition or lack of food, is a serious problem for children's health and growth. The Child Guarantee aims for effective access to healthy nutrition. The Recommendation underlines the need to support access to healthy meals also outside of school days, limit advertising and availability of 'junk' foods and disseminate information on healthy nutrition to children and families¹⁵. Making nutritious food more affordable and increasing access to leisure activities should be central to National Action Plans.

Finland has deployed food aid measures, **Iceland** has lowered taxes, and **Italy** has put in place income support – all to help people afford nutritious food. The National Action Plans vary in their approach but, overall, there is room for improvement. **Spain** and **Italy** have focused on providing free meals in primary schools but measures for ensuring adequate nutrition outside of school are missing. Furthermore, **Spain** and **The Netherlands** put forward positive plans to improve access to leisure activities and to educate children and families on healthy lifestyles.

Albania has improved key nutritional indicators among children and established a national monitoring system for effective interventions. The effectiveness of these interventions must be closely monitored.





RECOMMENDATIONS: Sufficient and healthy nutrition

1. Ensure that **basic welfare and income support are sufficient** for families to buy healthy food – considering the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on food prices.
2. Explore ways to **make nutritious food more affordable**, including reducing taxes on fruit and vegetables.
3. National Action Plans and health policies should aim to **increase nutritionists specialised in children** within the public health system to help reduce obesity rates.
4. **Invest in preventative approaches** that cover awareness campaigns in schools as well as a focus on healthy nutrition during pregnancy, breastfeeding, and early childhood.
5. **Ban the advertising of unhealthy products to children.**

Summary of countries’ main achievements /positive elements & unresolved issues /pending challenges in **NUTRITION**

Italy

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ The Action Plan contains income support measures which are essential to increase the capacity of families to purchase adequate and healthy food (although these measures with the corresponding objectives are present in the Plan within the area of Fighting Poverty and Ensuring Adequate Housing).

Germany

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Insufficient welfare benefits for healthy nutrition.

Netherlands

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Declaration of the aspiration to achieve a healthy generation by 2040.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Abolishment of VAT on fruit and vegetables (foreseen by 2024).
- ✗ Children’s exposure to unhealthy products (despite the Food Advertising Code).

Romania

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Food aid is included in the draft National Plan.

Spain

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ Measures towards access to leisure and school activities in the Action Plan represent an adequate approach to address nutrition and healthy habits in an integrated manner.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Fiscal measures to tax unhealthy products.

Finland

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ The Action Plan includes food aid measures.

Iceland

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ National guidelines and supervision of school canteens.
- ✓ Recommendations on nutrition and healthy lifestyle habits elaborated by Directorate of health.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ High price of healthy food.
- ✗ Increased obesity among children.

Albania

Main achievements & positive elements

- ✓ National health strategy and Action Plans (2021-2030).

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Prevalence of overweight and obesity.
- ✗ Lack of monitoring and evaluation systems to evaluate the interventions.

Adequate housing

Decent housing is a necessary condition for families and children to escape poverty and improve their lives. The lack of adequate housing can affect a child's physical and mental health and lead to accidents, low educational outcomes, and a lack of general wellbeing¹⁶.

The demand for social housing outpaces supply in most countries. Governments are proposing different solutions but they are varied in their effectiveness. Children's needs must be a bigger focus across the board. **Spain, Italy, and Sweden** each have plans to reform their housing systems. **Spain's** plan includes increasing the public housing stock, increasing cash transfers, and fighting energy poverty. **Italy's** plan aims to help families cope with rising housing costs and increase the supply of social housing. **Sweden** is working on a national homelessness strategy but it does not have a specific goal for decreasing homelessness for families with children.

The **Dutch** Action Plan is focused on accelerating the construction of 100,000 new homes per year and preventing homelessness among the adult population, but it does not include any specific policy on children. To ensure decent housing for children, the **Dutch** government should also take other actions such as freezing the rent for social housing and banning evictions for families with children. **Denmark's** public housing sector has decreased from 2015 to 2018, making it hard for families to find affordable and adequate housing. **Iceland's** housing market is owner-based, and public support for housing is limited. It is important to reintroduce the system of social housing for low-income families to guarantee that families with children have access to a secure home.





RECOMMENDATIONS: Adequate housing

1. **Invest in more social housing** and ensure it is good quality social housing in safe, accessible neighbourhoods.
2. **Increase financial support to pay rent and other household expenses.**
3. **Support vulnerable families with energy costs** during the cost-of-living crisis.
4. **Increase coordination efforts** with social services and other key actors that are closer to families with children in vulnerable situations outside the radar of the social housing market.
5. **Consider measures such as tax deductions on the rent** for vulnerable groups and low-income families with children.
6. Enforce the legal provisions **limiting or prohibiting evictions** of families with children as long as appropriate alternative housing is not ensured.
7. Ensure that the **best interests of the child** are considered in decisions about relocations or extensive housing developments that involve moving children.

Summary of countries' main achievements & unresolved issues/ pending challenges in HOUSING

Netherlands

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The Dutch Action Plan focuses on the strategy to accelerate the construction of 100.000 new homes per year and to prevent homelessness.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Shortage of social rental homes and of homes in the so-called "middle rent".
- ✗ Ban on evictions for families with children.

Romania

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The approval of the National Strategy for Housing.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Unresolved issues/pending challenges – high percentage of children living in housing deprivation or in overcrowded houses.

Spain

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ Provisions included in the Action Plan (increase of the public housing stock, increased cash transfers to support housing expenses, ban on evictions of families with children in vulnerable situations without a housing alternative).

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Deficit on social housing.
- ✗ Young people with a past record under the protection system (a priority group with a high risk of falling back into poverty and social exclusion during the transition period between childhood and adult life) not receiving sufficient attention.

Sweden

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ National homelessness strategy (2022–2026).

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Overcrowded and unsecure temporary accommodation.
- ✗ The plan does not include quantitative goals for decreasing homelessness among families with children.

Denmark

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Availability of affordable and adequate housing.

Italy

Main achievements & positive elements

✓ The Action Plan foresees the renovation of public buildings to increase the stock of social housing and to increase the financial support to vulnerable families to pay the rent and other housing expenses.

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Moratorium on evictions for families with children.

Iceland

Unresolved issues & pending challenges

- ✗ Limited public support for housing.
- ✗ Construction of social housing.

The use of national and EU funds

To reach the goals set by the Child Guarantee, European Union funds (e.g., ESF+, ERDF, AMIF, RRF) are made available to complement existing national actions and funding. Several Member States have included in their National Action Plan a section on the use of EU funds to complement their national child poverty strategies and policies. Unfortunately, these sections are often too generic. In all National Action Plans, it should be made clear how proposed activities will be funded. Moreover, all

activities should be properly budgeted to ensure funding is adequate.

Spain will use the RRF instrument to create additional ECEC places for disadvantaged children while **Finland** will use national funds to train ECEC staff. **The Netherlands, Sweden, and Italy** are using the ESF+ to help young people transition into the workforce and improve their education. In **Germany**, the ERDF instrument is being employed to promote equal access to top-notch general education, vocational education and training, and lifelong learning. The RRF will also fund the digitization of **Spain's** education system. The ESF+ is financing healthy meals for

children in **The Netherlands** and supporting unemployed families in **Finland**. The EU and national funds have been allocated to improve housing conditions, such as building new social housing and renovating existing homes, in countries like **Spain** and **The Netherlands**.

In **Germany** the ERDF will be used to improve equal access to inclusive and high-quality general education, vocational education and training, and lifelong learning. The RRF instrument will finance the digitalization of **Spain's** education system and improve its healthcare system. In the area of

nutrition, ESF+ will cover access to healthy meals for children in **The Netherlands** and support unemployed families with food purchases in **Finland**. EU and national funds have also been allocated to improve housing conditions such as building new social housing and renovating existing homes in countries like **Spain** and **The Netherlands**.



Photo: La Pinza Creaciones Fotograficas / Save the Children

RECOMMENDATIONS: Use of EU and national funding

- 1. Closely link ESF+ funds** and Child Guarantee National Action Plans.
- The European Commission and Council should welcome the European Parliament's pledge¹⁷ to set up an urgent increase in funding for the European Child Guarantee with a **dedicated budget of at least EUR 20 billion for the period 2021-2027** and ensure that this dedicated budget is part of the revised MFF and reinforced ESF+.
- 3. CSOs and local authorities should be able to access dedicated parts of the ESF+ funds or other Cohesion policy funding** in support of their wider action against child poverty and social exclusion. As stipulated by FAST-CARE¹⁸ under the specific conditions of addressing the consequences of the conflict in Ukraine (amendment of the Common Provisions Regulation entered into force in October 2022), a portion of the funds should be attributed to CSOs and local authorities operating in local communities. The EU should closely monitor that

such use of funds does not disproportionately benefit one of the two types of beneficiaries. Moreover, the dedicated allocation of portions of Cohesion policy funds to CSOs should also become a wider model in the revision of the MFF to ensure that CSOs have equal access and conditions in all EU Member States.

- 4. Use experiences and lessons learnt** from the Child Guarantee process to feed into the next ESF+ funding period.
- 5. Provide a better and more transparent overview of national funds** dedicated to eradicating child poverty.
- 6. Support the National Action Plans with dedicated national budget** and link it with running services at regional and municipality levels.
- 7. Review the decentralisation management systems** in countries and make any necessary changes that will reduce differences and inequalities in poverty policies between municipalities.
- 8. Promote administrative reforms at regional and local levels** aimed at maximising synergies between the Minimum Income Schemes and regional income support schemes.

Monitoring and evaluation

Indicators to measure child poverty are missing in some Child Guarantee National Action Plans (e.g., **Danish** and **Dutch** Action Plans). Other Action Plans state that their indicators are still preliminary (**Spain**) or will specify them later (**Finland**). In **Sweden**, although the indicators proposed in the Action Plan are relevant, there are no indicators in important areas such as healthcare. **Italy's** monitoring framework includes a complete list of indicators, but data are missing on the incidence of multidimensional poverty.

The targets set by countries differ widely across countries. In **Spain**, there are no targets specified for key initiatives such as school meal provision. This is likely to hinder progress. Likewise, the lack of a target for the ban on evictions is likely to water down the impact of such a crucial initiative. In **Italy**, while there are clear targets set in areas such as ECEC, school meals and full-time services, other areas lack well-specified targets, focusing more on outputs than outcomes. The **Dutch** Action Plan only has one general target: "to halve the number of children growing up in poverty by 2025". While virtuous, it is not possible to monitor and evaluate. Likewise, in the **Swedish** Action Plan, the targets need to be more specific.

To ensure that the Child Guarantee is properly implemented Member States should establish a sound system for monitoring and evaluation; invest in upgrading data collection; define specific targets (and when necessary sub-targets); ensure that indicators in the National Action Plans are coherent with those agreed at EU level and with targets defined in other relevant national strategies and policy initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Monitoring and evaluation

1. **Establish a sound system for monitoring and evaluation.**
2. **Investment in upgrading data collection.**
3. **Define specific targets** (e.g., clearly define/specify what expressions like "a higher proportion" and "more children" exactly mean in quantitative terms) in order to make it easier to follow up on the indicators. When necessary, establish sub-targets.
4. **Ensure that indicators** in the National Action Plans **are coherent** with those agreed at EU level.
5. **Ensure the coherence with targets** defined in other relevant national strategies and policy initiatives touching upon the objective and measures included in the Action Plan.
6. **Set targets at territorial/local level.** This would stimulate the government and the local administration to invest higher resources and direct them towards the areas most deprived, to tackle child poverty more effectively.

Participation of CSOs and children in the development of the framework

In the development of National Action Plans, the involvement of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and children varies by country. Some countries, such as **Finland**, **Spain**, and **Italy**, actively brought CSOs and children on board in a structured and formalised way. In these countries, children participated through workshops, remote events, and electronic surveys and CSOs were included in stakeholder meetings.

In other countries the involvement of CSOs and children was not as structured, with CSOs participating in conferences and providing written input. The outcome of children's participation in the drafting process is somewhat unclear in **Germany**. In **Denmark**, **The Netherlands**, and **Sweden**, the involvement of CSOs was less structured and had less impact, with children not being meaningfully consulted.

The National Action Plans of **Germany**, **Finland**, **Sweden**, **Spain**, and **Italy** indicate how to involve children, families, and CSOs in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plans. Other countries, such as **Denmark** and **The Netherlands**, have not indicated the involvement of children and CSOs. Some countries have put in place different structures to ensure the involvement of children, families, and CSOs in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Participation of CSOs and children

1. **Define clear plans/guidelines for the involvement of civil society organisations**, specifying practical issues, that is, how and when the involvement will take place.
2. In countries where the regional dimension is important, **establish participation channels** not only at the **state level** but also at **regional and local levels**.
3. In these cases, national authorities should support a **harmonised development of governance structures** and ensure that CSOs can contribute to the work of regional and local Child Guarantee coordinators.
Children's direct involvement is necessary to ensure a child rights perspective throughout the process. Although the reports of Civil Society Organisations are used to gather the views of children, to achieve meaningful participation the direct involvement of children is key. Thus:
4. **Prioritise child participation in all phases**, not only in the definition and implementation but also in monitoring and evaluation.
5. **Define clear plans/guidelines for the involvement of children** (specify practical issues, that is, how and when the involvement will take place)
6. **Keep good practice on the radar** (e.g., Save the Children Netherlands's Speaking Minds programme to ensure meaningful child participation in the NAP Child Guarantee).

Conclusive remarks

The interlocked and deepening crises described in this report are bringing unbearable challenges to the lives of millions of families, especially the most vulnerable ones. As a result, millions of children in Europe are experiencing poverty and social exclusion. While this phenomenon varies from country to country, the result is always the same: an unacceptable deprivation of children's fundamental rights. Child poverty is not only a threat to the *future* of Europe. It is also a pan-European emergency *at this very moment*. There is no time to shy away; EU Member States, EU institutions, and European countries must act to ensure their commitment to tackling child poverty goes beyond lip service into tangible policies and programmes.

The Child Guarantee is an unparalleled and unprecedented instrument which creates new synergies within and among countries and can be a role model for child poverty reduction policies outside the EU, particularly for candidate and potential candidate countries. Yet, the work to ensure its proper implementation is far from done. All Member States must – if they have not done so already – urgently submit comprehensive and robust National Action Plans and ensure they are properly implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Their commitment to reducing child poverty should also be demonstrated by setting clear metrics, investing in upgrading data collection, defining more specific targets, and making sufficient, sustainable funding allocations.

Child poverty is a barrier to achieving a more social Europe, a burden on our society, and a condemnation for millions of children to a life of neglect and missed opportunities. This report shows the challenges and makes recommendations to address them. It is now time for EU and national policymakers to work with children and stakeholders and ensure that no child in Europe is left behind.

Endnotes

- 1 Eurostat, [Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion - Statistics Explained](#), 2022.
- 2 European Commission, [European Child Guarantee](#).
- 3 At Save the Children we advocate for a particular approach to social protection, namely Child-sensitive Social Protection (CSSP). We define CSSP as: Public policies, programmes and systems that address the specific patterns of children's poverty and vulnerability, are rights-based in approach, and recognise the long-term developmental benefits of investing in children. For more info please see Save the Children's [Child Sensitive Social Protection: an essential foundation for achieving children's rights and poverty reduction](#).
- 4 EU countries: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Spain, Romania, Lithuania. Western Balkan countries: Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. EEA countries: Iceland.
- 5 Eurostat – Data Browser, [Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex](#), 2021.
- 6 INSTAT, [Income and Living Conditions in Albania - 2021](#), 2022.
- 7 Save the Children Europe, [The Impact of COVID-19 on children in Europe](#), 2020. Child poverty in Kosovo is defined using the internationally accepted consumption poverty line of €1.417 per person per day.
- 8 UNICEF, [Children in Kosovo](#), 2022.
- 9 Eurostat, [Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion](#), September 2022.
- 10 Eurostat – Data Browser, [Material Deprivation rate by age group – EU-SILC survey](#), 2022.
- 11 Save the Children, [Generation Hope](#), 2022.
- 12 This report mentions examples from Finland, Spain, Iceland, Romania, Albania.
- 13 Save the Children Italia, [Crescere in salute](#), 2022.
- 14 European Commission, [Staff working document](#), March 2021.
- 15 European Parliament, [Briefing – Child Guarantee National Action Plans](#), 2022.
- 16 European Commission, [Staff working document](#), March 2021.
- 17 European Parliament, [Resolution on upscaling the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework: a resilient EU budget fit for new challenges](#), 2022.
- 18 European Parliament – [European Council, Regulation \(EU\) 2022/2039 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 amending Regulations \(EU\) No 1303/2013 and \(EU\) 2021/1060 as regards additional flexibility to address the consequences of the military aggression of the Russian Federation FAST \(Flexible Assistance for Territories\) – CARE](#), 2022.

