

Measuring and monitoring: a child-rights perspective

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1. Assessment of the policy debate at European level

Poverty and social exclusion has long been a concern of the European Commission and Member States. Over recent years, child poverty in particular has emerged as a top political priority at EU level. Breaking the cycle of inter-generational inheritance of poverty is a key objective of the EU's agenda on social inclusion.

It is a crucial time: 2010 will be the European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion and it will be the year the EU has to adopt a new vision for 2020. Apart from raising awareness and visibility of the extent and impact of poverty, this Year will be crucial in achieving a political legacy of a stronger Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC) that includes targets against poverty and more effective tools for mutual learning, participative governance and consensus building. A clear objective of the Year should be to make targets setting a central and highly visible feature of the Social OMC to truly advance EU social commitment. A poverty target – at EU, national or local level – can be an important tool in shaping a shared vision and leading to policies and programs that can make progress towards achieving the goal. A target can be a key tool for catalyzing action.

Governments need to be held accountable to their commitment to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion in general, and child poverty and social exclusion in particular. Setting clear targets and improving monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is essential to appraise progress, assess impact and design effective policy measures. The framing of targets also needs to be carefully thought through and ensure that the most in need are taken into account. To work, targets need to be clearly stated and well-being outcomes regularly and transparently measured. A target is enhanced when all levels of government participate.

Demonstrating that monitoring and evaluation is valuable and a good investment is essential. To start, data collected must be relevant to the problem that we are trying to solve and meaningful to the people affected. Communicating evaluation findings is also critical: it should be simple, concise, and where possible, demonstrate a cost/benefit analysis. This helps get public and political buy-in.

* Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work focuses particularly on the fight against child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

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Eurochild broadly agrees with some important issues which have been raised in the discussion paper:

- Active inclusion is one tool in the armoury against poverty and social exclusion. It does not replace the overall focus of the Social OMC which is much broader and inclusive of all populations groups. Employment provides only an imperfect defence against poverty.
- So far poverty has mainly been understood and recorded as income poverty and the dimensions of social segregation as well as the child's well-being not taken into due consideration. A clear framework for benchmarking Member States' progress on child well-being - including education, health, housing, environment, participation, peer and family relations, risk behaviour, material deprivation and income - should be set. Indicators for poverty measurement should be revised and supplemented by these aspects as have the people concerned to be involved in the process of data collection.
- Targets are to be achieved to capture media attention on the problem, advance the public discussion and commit the European Member States to long-term cooperation. Indicators need to be translated into language, formats and media that convey clear messages to policy-makers and the general public.
- National, regional and local integrated strategies to tackle poverty as well as partnership between administrative authorities, including local communities and associations, should be established. It means that measures are taken in a coherent and mutually reinforcing way.

Although we share the general lines and statements, we believe that the paper fails to value childhood in its own right and to address policy from a child-centered perspective. We believe that for a Europe without poverty, ending child poverty is the most sensible place to start. To reach this ambitious goal, a child-centered approach is essential: an approach which focuses on children's rights rather than charity; an approach which values and responds to children's own views and experiences.

Children are instrumentalised by the forward-looking perspectives where the focus is on children as "future adults" or "members of the next generation". The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) makes clear that children's immediate well-being is important in its own right. The emphasis on the well-being of children does not deny the relevance of a child's development toward adulthood. However, focusing on preparing children to become citizens suggests that they are not citizens during childhood, a concept that is hard to reconcile with a belief in children's rights.

The UNCRC offers a normative framework for understanding children's well-being. Its four general principles fit closely with conceptualisations of child well-being. The first of these is non-discrimination. Article 2 of the UNCRC argues for recognizing the life situations and well-being of excluded groups of children, such as those with disabilities, children in institutions, or refugee children, and to disaggregate available data by age, gender, ethnicity, geography and economic background. The second principle, the best interest of the child (article 3), itself implies the use of the child as a unit of analysis and strengthens children's role as citizens in their own right. The complexity of children's lives is reflected in the third principle, that of survival and development of the child (article 6). The UNCRC promotes a holistic and multidimensional view of child development and well-being, giving equal weight to children's civic, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and stressing that these rights are interrelated, universal and indivisible. The fourth

principle calls for respecting the view of the child (article 12), acknowledging children's rights to be heard and to have their view taken into account in all matters that affect them.

All EU Member States need to measure the progress that they are making in implementing the UNCRC.

Each Member State should have child-specific targets systematically linked to well-being indicators of a good quality. Continual monitoring using common indicators are crucial to keep Member States on track. But the indicators we have so far on income poverty and material deprivation do not tell us much about children's overall well-being – their health, their relationships, their civic involvement and participation, their leisure activities, their environment, their feelings, their sense of identity and their confidence in the future. In the French case study, the indicators used in relation to children and young people¹ are inadequate to reflect child well-being as Eurochild understands it.

On behalf of the European Commission, an international study is being carried out by TARKI Social Research Institute in Budapest and Applica in Brussels to follow-up the report prepared by the EU Task-Force on child poverty and well-being². The study, which is expected to be finalised by the beginning of 2010, will *inter alia* identify a set of comparative social indicators that best reflect the multi-dimensional nature of child well-being and that are available in all (or at least most) EU countries. This important input will feed into the work of the Indicators Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee with a double objective: a) fill in the "child well-being" slot in the EU social inclusion portfolio with a limited number of indicators; and b) agree a larger set of indicators which the European Commission and Member States will be able to use for in-depth national or EU reporting on the situation of children.

2. Applicability

We welcome France for setting quantified targets to reduce general poverty and introducing a scoreboard of poverty indicators that record trends, monitor progress and stimulate partnership between different levels of governance including national, regional and local authorities.

The construction of the French Scoreboard of poverty indicators to be published annually is in line with what Eurochild is advocating for and, therefore, it is a very relevant experience for us. Eurochild supports the development of an annual scoreboard on child poverty and well-being to give greater visibility to the indicators, to keep track of developments, to help assess progress and to provide comparative analysis across the EU. Nevertheless, we argue that the reporting process could be improved with the periodic provision of more detailed country specific information, which would allow an in-depth and systematic follow-up of the progress achieved.

As far as the French approach is concerned, Eurochild is concerned about the choice of taking the anchored poverty rate as the main indicator to assess progress towards the government's goal of reducing poverty by a third within five years. As underlined in the discussion paper, the choice of "anchored in time" poverty measures creates the incentive to focus on economic growth rather than income redistribution as the principal policy driver, thereby probably stimulating

¹ Poverty rate anchored in time for children and young people, child poverty rate and youth poverty rate, share of youngsters with untreated tooth decay.

² Social Protection Committee (2008), *Child poverty & well-being - Current status and way forward*, Report of the EU Task-Force on "Child poverty and well-being": http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_inclusion/2008/child_poverty_en.pdf.

inequality and, possibly, reducing social cohesion. Although the French government is sensitive to this latter possibility, including measures of relative poverty to capture this effect, priority is given to “anchored in time” measures and the scoreboard contains few direct measures of inequality.

A very strong point of the French approach is that the scoreboard of poverty indicators has been given a legal basis, although so far there is a little evidence on the technical effectiveness and policy utility of an instrument that was implemented only in May 2009. Another example we can draw lessons from is represented by Wales, which has recently made a legislative proposal to tackle child poverty for all devolved public bodies. This creates a new sense of national purpose in tackling child poverty and is indeed a good practice.

The Republic of Cyprus also offers an example of good practice where targets have been used to good effect. The government has been successful in maintaining low levels of poverty among families with children and in reducing poverty among single-parent households.

3. Important questions being raised in stakeholders' organisations

- **UNCRC as an overarching framework**

Using the UNCRC as an overarching framework for policy development ensures a child-centred, multidimensional approach. We do not need to re-invent the wheel. The UNCRC can help up as a mirror to see whether we are really fulfilling our aspirations for children.

In 2006 the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs published a report with a series of indicators to monitor the situation of children and young people in Spain covering the key areas that affect their lives and using a multidimensional perspective³.

- **More child-centred indicators and subjective measures of well-being**

Despite progress, there are still some shortcoming in relation to child poverty and well-being. Child-specific data is still limited and the little information available is not used to the full and is too often not sufficiently (if at all) accessible to potential data users. It is essential that the portfolio of indicators used for monitoring the Social OMC includes a whole range of non-material indicators covering the various aspects of child well-being. More child-centred indicators (for which the child is the primary unit of observation) and more analysis of child-specific data are needed to give a more holistic picture of children's rights and the realities that shape their lives.

Eurochild also advocates to involve and engage with children and young people themselves in the development of indicators and in ensuring that indicators can include information on children's views and perception. The *“potential interest of interviewing directly children on their own experience and perceptions of poverty and well-being”* was already highlighted in Recommendation 13 of the Task-Force report; the Task-Force called for more exchange of good practice and know-how in this field.

³ Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales (2006), *La infancia en cifras*, Instituto de Infancia y Mundo Urbano, Madrid.

- **Evidence-based targets**

Identifying quantified objectives and setting targets help to define concrete goals against a clear timeline for their achievement. This view is fully supported by Recommendation 1 of the Task-Force report.

Evidence-based targets should represent a country's commitment vis-à-vis the Union to move towards the EU overall objective of making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion in general, and child poverty and social exclusion in particular.

- **Annual publicised scoreboard on child poverty and well-being**

Eurochild supports the development of an annual scoreboard on child poverty and well-being which would provide an overview of the concrete policies and measures put in place by Member States, the achievement of targets, as well as identifying the role and responsibility of the actors involved. This is aligned with Recommendations 3-5 of the Task-Force report. Links with the UNCRC reporting process should be made whenever possible. The scoreboard should be regularly reviewed in order to reflect progress and determine future action both at EU and national level.

- **Regular monitoring and evaluation on child well-being at all stages of child development**

High quality data on child well-being needs to be collected at all stages of the child's life cycle and across all dimensions of well-being.

As stated in the Task-Force report (Recommendation 10), there is a particular need to collect data and monitor the situation of the most vulnerable children who, due to their circumstances (living in institutions, separated from parents, leaving care, caring for sick or disabled parents) or characteristics (children with disabilities, children from migrant and ethnic minority families), are most at risk of falling into poverty.

The Welsh Assembly Government published in 2008 Children and Young People's Well-being Monitor for Wales, which uses seven core aims based on the UNCRC⁴. The Monitor reports on progress towards child poverty targets and identifies evidence gaps, within the context of what else is known about children's circumstances and experiences in Wales. This exercise offers an example of the attempt to link together the high level monitoring of indicators related to children's well-being with policy and programme evaluation to embed it with policy-making.

- **Setting new strategic goals for the post-2010 Lisbon architecture**

The reflections on indicators should contribute to setting new strategic goals for the post-2010 Lisbon strategy and shifting the focus from "growth and jobs" to "sustainable and social" priorities.

⁴ These themes are: early years; health; education; access to play, sport, leisure and culture; rights and entitlements; safe home and community; ensuring no child or young person is disadvantaged by poverty.

4. Key issues for debate

- **Children as a priority**

The rights of children must be a particular priority: (a) because of children's particular vulnerability and dependent status; (b) because childhood is a particularly sensitive period of change that has long-term impact on outcomes; (c) because it provides an opportunity to break inter-generational transmission of disadvantage; and (d) because it recognizes children as citizens today and emphasizes their agency over their lives. Child well-being and respect for children's rights is a litmus test for a vision of Europe where employment and the economy are at the service of social progress and overall well-being. Action to fight poverty should be integrated into national strategies for children that Member States are called on to produce as a key requirement of the UNCRC implementation.

- **Deepening of the Social OMC**

Progress has been made in describing child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and in relating it to child well-being outcomes, and there is a political commitment to further explore this area. It does exist a wealth of data which we need to use and build into the Social OMC. This would help in "deepening the OMC" and getting real progress in the area of child poverty.

The challenge is now how to use the knowledge, the understanding and the analytical data which have been improved through the Social OMC to move on; how to capitalize the resources and ensure that all expectations are not undermined and the comparative work and analysis which have been done so far are not lost.

- **Stakeholders' involvement**

Active participation of and collaboration with public authorities, municipalities, social services, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on child welfare, childcare agencies both private and public, and any other groups participating in the formal care system is critical to the design of an information system as well as its monitoring and implementation. The involvement of children's rights organisations and their coordination at national level need to be strengthened.

A crucial issue for the development of indicators on children's well-being based on the UNCRC is the involvement of children and young people themselves and their families. It is the responsibility of researchers and policy-makers to work with children and young people using innovative and age-appropriate strategies so that they can contribute to the policy-making process.

How can we capture the views and perceptions of children themselves and recognize the importance of children's own agency to influence their environment and their lives?

Structured mechanisms through which children and young people are consulted on a regular basis must be created and a legal basis for enabling their systematic involvement at different levels – local projects, community but also at national level – should be provided. Mechanisms need to ensure that all groups of children are engaged – including the most vulnerable, such as children in public care, children with migrant background, ROMA children, etc..

- **Vertical integration/coordination**

A vertical coordination between different governance levels is needed for a better monitoring of children's well-being but the challenge is how will that happen consistently, efficiently and at a high level of quality? Integration of policies at local level is essential because this is the

level with the most likely impact on the lives of people. Policies directly affecting children – health, education, family support, early years – are not always the competence of state level government.

Scotland offers an interesting example of vertical integration. After the latest Scottish elections, a landmark Concordat was agreed between the Scottish government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA). This marked a significant change in the relationships between national and local government across the country. No more would central government require local authorities to submit data on a huge range of prescribed indicators, irrespective of how relevant these might be to one local context. “Ring-fencing” of funds for specific purposes would also come to an end. Instead, local authorities would agree local priorities, allocate their collective resource accordingly, and set locally appropriate targets. These were to be presented to the Scottish government in what was to be termed a “Single Outcome Agreement”. These 32 Agreements – one per local authority – had to be consistent with “Scotland Performs”, the national performance framework.