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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
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Subject:	Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion - Council Conclusions

Delegations will find attached the Council conclusions on "Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion", adopted by the Council at its meeting held on 21 June 2018.

**Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for
reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion**

Council Conclusions

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT

1. Promoting and protecting children's rights, combating child poverty and social exclusion and providing all children with equal opportunities irrespective of their social, cultural, ethnic or otherwise backgrounds, are fundamental objectives of the European Union. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights proclaims that children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being and that in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration;
2. The European Union and its Member States have made a commitment to reduce poverty and social exclusion, including among children, in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy. In 2016, 24.8 million children in the Union were still at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This remains an important concern, as not only does child poverty negatively affect the immediate well-being of children, but also society as a whole. Children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely to do well in school, to enjoy good health and to realise their full potential later in life. For the society, child poverty and social exclusion threaten children's development and lead to an inability to harness the best of their talents and it could also require support for those in need throughout their lives;
3. The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed in 2017, calls for fighting poverty from a rights-of-the-child perspective, setting as a principle that children have the right to protection from poverty, that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities and that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality;

4. With setting the "Barcelona Targets" the European Union and its Member States have made a commitment to ensure the provision of formal childcare to at least 90% of children in the Union between the age of 3 and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under the age of 3 by 2010. These targets were reaffirmed in the European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020. The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training also set up an objective at least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) to participate in early childhood education by 2020.
5. The early years of a child's development are critical in shaping children's health, learning, behaviour, social inclusion and they influence their entire life course. In this context, early childhood development policies and services are among the key tools for preventing and tackling poverty and social exclusion, breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and promoting social mobility;
6. With the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all countries shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right to access to essential services for early healthcare, including early preventive healthcare, nutrition and well-being with a particular focus on the rights of children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
7. The commitment to eradicate poverty, ensure healthy lives, eliminate violence and sexual exploitation and promote well-being for all at all ages, and to provide inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels, including in early childhood, is an integral part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals;
8. Investments in early childhood development are highly cost-effective because they prevent future public expenses to overcome the consequences of a lack of education, skills and employment leading to poverty and social exclusion;

STRESSING THAT

9. Fighting child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being require a multidimensional and integrated approach, based on three main pillars, including access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services and children's right to participate as stated in the Commission Recommendation 2013/112/EU on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage";
10. Investing in early childhood education and care is of high importance not only for reducing inequalities at a young age, but also for preventing the risk of poverty and exclusion in adulthood by laying the foundations for successful lifelong learning, social integration and employability. Participation in early childhood education and care is beneficial to all children, but is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds as it is crucial for better school adaptation and learning as well as preventing and tackling inequality through early intervention. Children from minority groups and low-income families are often much less likely to be enrolled in early childhood education and care. It is therefore essential to guarantee equal access to quality universal services to children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
11. Early childhood development interventions need to be child-centred and targeted to all aspects of a child's development and well-being. Integrated and multi-sectoral policies are needed in order to support children's growth and health, to ensure early detection of difficulties and early interventions, including access to universal preventive health services and rehabilitation services, to guarantee quality early learning opportunities, to prevent neglect, violence and other risks. Good coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems is essential in that respect;

12. Integrated and coordinated approaches at the level, where early childhood development services are delivered, and particularly at local level, are essential. The availability of trained service providers and experts is of crucial importance. Investments in regular training of professionals, including with a view to a better interaction and partnership with parents¹, as well as work with children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, are beneficial to improving not only the access to services, but also their quality;
13. As the parents are the persons being primarily and foremost responsible for a child's health, well-being and development, they need adequate support. Promoting social inclusion programmes and labour market participation of fathers and mothers, provision of financial support and access to services are very important. Family-centred approaches are needed. Well-designed national work-life balance policies, such as parenting-related leaves and flexible working arrangements, can also support both parents' participation in the labour market, as well as encourage more equal sharing of caring responsibilities between mothers and fathers. The availability, accessibility and affordability of quality early childhood education and care services makes it easier for parents to reconcile their professional and caring responsibilities and hence enables them to stay in or return to paid employment, which is in many ways of importance for the well-being and development of children;
14. Early childhood education and care services are a key component of early childhood development policies, but not only formal caregivers and educators bear responsibility for the overall early child development. Parents need to be well informed, supported and guided, including before the entry into the formal system, when the child is cared for at home. In this context, outreach activities are crucial, particularly for the most vulnerable communities. Practices that deepen the partnership between parents and early childhood education and care services have a particularly positive impact for children from disadvantaged backgrounds;

¹ All paragraphs in this Conclusions referring to parents are also relevant to guardians and primary caregivers.

15. The combination of universal policies promoting the well-being and development of all children and targeted policies directed at, but not stigmatizing, the most vulnerable families is a key element in the development of effective strategies. Practices that stimulate multidisciplinary approaches, mobile community work, home visits, training in parenting skills, family counselling and guiding, involvement of mediators from disadvantaged groups and communities, the provision of free access to services and incentives for take-up of services could contribute not only to the inclusion in early childhood education and care, but to the general improvement of family care and child well-being and development;
16. As children with disabilities or with special needs face multiple barriers, early intervention and supporting parents through home-based and community-based services is essential. Children with disabilities may not only experience problems in relation to not being included in the educational system but also in relation to access to the physical environment, as well as prejudice and stereotypes. Without timely and appropriate support, protection and measures to promote inclusion, these difficulties can become even more severe and trigger lifetime consequences in terms of increased poverty and exclusion for both parents and children;
17. Children separated from their parents and/or families need to be offered with equal chances for development and learning. Deinstitutionalisation of child care, providing family-based and community-based care, services and assistance, investing in prevention services and family support and strengthening the child protection systems are essential for giving these children a better start in life;
18. While the responsibility for the organisation and the content of early childhood development policies, as well as overall child welfare and protection policies and services, remains with the individual Member States, the cooperation via the Open Method of Coordination can contribute to delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights, which requires a strong action at European, national, regional and local level;
19. The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) make an important contribution to the implementation of child policy reforms, sustained through funding from national budgets;

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO

20. Continue promoting the rights of the child and child and family-centred policies by keeping them high on the policy agenda, including post-2020, and support Member States in implementing their national policies;
21. In line with the division of competences laid down in the Treaties, promote the implementation of child-related principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and in particular on the right to protection from poverty, the right of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities and the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality;
22. Continue to promote and enhance the dialogue between Member States, experts, social partners and civil society and to facilitate mutual learning and exchange of good practices in the relevant fields. This includes the prevention of child poverty, early childhood development policies, including integrated approaches across different policy domains, high quality early childhood education and care services, as well as the impact of digitalisation on early childhood development;
23. Continue and strengthen the analytical work and monitoring on child poverty and child well-being and development related topics in close cooperation with the Member States;

ENCOURAGES THE MEMBER STATES, taking into account their specific situations, to

24. Ensure equal and equitable access to universal early childhood education and care services of good quality for all children by continuing to improve:
 - their availability, taking into account regional differences and needs,

- their accessibility and affordability by a balanced mix of universal and targeted policies, services and various incentives, as well as measures to overcome obstacles and barriers,
 - their inclusiveness by including children with different backgrounds, special educational needs or disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation, and
 - their quality by promoting the professionalisation and good working conditions of the workforce in early childhood education and care settings, enhancing the development of early year's curricula or pedagogical guidelines which enable all children to develop their full potential, ensuring equality of treatment and opportunities of boys and girls, promoting monitoring and evaluation of settings in the best interest of the child, and applying suitable governance structures;
25. Apply integrated and child-centred approaches targeting all aspects of child development and well-being and further strengthen the coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems, as well as integrated and coordinated service delivery at local level;
 26. Continue to support parents through the promotion of labour market participation and work-life balance, provision of family financial support and access to various services, including family counselling and assistance;
 27. Continue to provide multidisciplinary support to children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds – such as Roma children, legally resident children from third countries or children with disabilities or with special needs, as well as to children in alternative care and children victims of violence and abuse;
 28. Promote parents' involvement and practices that establish and deepen partnerships between parents and early childhood education and care services, as well as practices facilitating the reach out to parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities;
 29. Continue to improve existing data collection and monitoring at national and local level on essential indicators of early childhood development and on services provision;

30. Strengthen the involvement of and cooperation between all relevant public, private and civil society actors in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of early childhood development and well-being policies;
31. Make better use of European Structural and Investments Funds (ESIF), and especially the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), depending on national circumstances and policy agendas in order to support policies for preventing and combating child poverty and social exclusion;

CALLS ON THE SOCIAL PROTECTION COMMITTEE TO

32. Continue, within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, to facilitate and stimulate the gathering and sharing of ideas, knowledge, experience and good practices on integrated early childhood development policies and their impact on reducing poverty and social exclusion, including through thematic reviews and through the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Peer Review Programme;
33. Continue to monitor and provide adequate analysis on specific child poverty and child well-being and development related topics, including through the European Semester;
34. Continue its cooperation with the Employment Committee, the Education Committee and other committees and high-level groups at EU level on the topics of joint competence related to the monitoring of social developments and the reduction of poverty and social exclusion.

References

- EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;
- European Pillar of Social Rights;
- Council Conclusions on the "Social Dimension of Education and Training", 2010;
- Council Conclusions on "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow", 2011;
- Commission Recommendation 2013/112/EU on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage";
- Presidency conclusions, Barcelona European Council, 15-16 March 2002;
- European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020;
- Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training 2020;
- European Parliament Resolution on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty, 2015;
- Council Conclusions on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, 2011;
- Council Conclusions on Accelerating the Process of Roma Integration, 2016;
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);
- UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals;
- Commission Communication on "Next steps for a sustainable European future: European Action for Sustainability", 2016;
- Eurydice "Tackling social and cultural inequalities through early childhood education and care in Europe", 2009;
- Proposal for "Key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care", report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission.