

Brussels, 16 December 2025
(OR. en)

16798/25

LIMITE

**SOC 845
JEUN 254
EDUC 506
ECOFIN 1738
ANTIDISCRIM 130
FREMP 390
COHOM 198**

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Draft Council Conclusions on investing in children: strengthening child well-being, social inclusion and combating child poverty in the European Union

In preparation of the Social Questions Working Party on 8 January, delegations will find attached a set of draft Council Conclusions on investing in children: strengthening child well-being, social inclusion and combating child poverty in the European Union, prepared by the incoming Cyprus Presidency.

**Investing in children: strengthening child well-being,
social inclusion and combating child poverty in the European Union**

Draft Council conclusions

RECALLING THAT:

1. **Recognising child well-being as a cross-cutting EU priority means** systematically taking into account the promotion of children's rights, as enshrined in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which applies to EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, and to Member States only when they are implementing EU law — across EU action in areas such as health, education and protection, in accordance with the EU's competences. Social, economic, digital, and environmental policies, among others, can meaningfully improve children's lives and future prospects and produce intergenerational benefits for health, well-being, the economy, our societies and democracies. This holistic approach places children firmly at the centre of Europe's sustainable, inclusive, and forward-looking development agenda.
2. **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, which all EU Member States have ratified, recognizes in its Article 27 the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social well-being, and continues to provide guidance at EU level for promoting and safeguarding child well-being across various policy areas.
3. **The European Union continues implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. It places the principles of equality and non-discrimination, poverty reduction and eradication, ending all forms of violence against children, and the promotion of child well-being at the core of its efforts to ensure that every child grows up in dignity.

4. **Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights recognizes that children have the right to protection from poverty and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.** Poverty deprives children of educational opportunities, childcare, access to healthcare, adequate food and housing, family support and protection. Breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and poverty is a fundamental challenge.
5. **The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** sets out three EU headline targets welcomed by the European Council, including the target on poverty reduction: by 2030, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, of which at least five million should be children, compared to 2019 levels. To contribute to this EU-wide target, all Member States set national targets on poverty reduction. 21 Member States also set complementary child targets on poverty reduction. Further progress is needed to reach the 2030 EU child poverty objective, as the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion slightly increased in 2024, compared to 2019.
6. **The Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee aims to prevent and combat social exclusion among children in need and break the cycle of poverty transmission.** It recommends that Member States guarantee to provide all children in need with effective and free access to high-quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, healthcare, at least one healthy meal each school day, and effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

7. **The EU strategy on the rights of the child focuses, inter alia,** on protecting the rights of all children and securing access to basic services for children in vulnerable situations. It aims at ensuring that children's rights to protection, participation and well-being are protected and promoted in all EU and national policies. While embedding a child perspective in all EU actions, including globally, it focuses particularly the participation of children in shaping policies that impact their lives, reducing child poverty, promoting equal opportunities, safeguarding children from all forms of violence¹, and protecting and empowering them in the digital society.
8. **The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on pathways to school success,** which aims to prevent early school leaving, increase academic achievement and promote well-being at school.
9. **The Council conclusions of 27 May 2025 on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era,** which calls on EU countries and the Commission to better protect the mental health of children and adolescents by promoting the safe and healthy use of digital tools and by creating a healthier, safer and more age-appropriate digital environment.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT:

10. **In her 2025 State of the Union address,** President von der Leyen underlined the urgent need for an ambitious European Anti-Poverty Strategy, laying out a plan to help eradicate poverty by 2050, reinforced by a strong Child Guarantee to shield children from poverty.

¹ As further detailed in the Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems, C(2024) 2680 final.

11. **The forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** should serve as a key instrument to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion and to support the achievement of the Union's 2030 headline target and 2050 ambition. This Strategy should play a crucial role in promoting child well-being, tackling the root causes of poverty with a life-cycle approach, strengthening social inclusion, and advancing the Union's commitment to equality and social justice.
12. **While progress has been achieved in the implementation of policies to enhance equal opportunities since the adoption of the European Child Guarantee in 2021**, with reforms especially in the areas of early childhood education and care and the provision of school meals, more efforts are still required to support all children in need.
13. The implementation of the Barcelona targets for 2030 should continue, with a specific focus on promoting quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), closing the gap between the end of parental leave and legal entitlement to ECEC, as well as the gap in ECEC participation between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and their better-off peers.
14. **Children living in poverty remain more likely to face barriers to accessing services essential for their well-being**, including early childhood education and care, inclusive education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing. Starting their lives at a disadvantage has long-term implications for their development and future prospects. The transmission of disadvantages from childhood to adulthood generates a societal cost. On average in the EU, it is estimated to amount to a loss of 3.4 % of GDP annually². Tackling disadvantages from early years is a cost-effective investment, contributing not only to the inclusion and well-being of children and their higher socioeconomic outcomes when they are adults, but also to the economy and society as a whole.

² OECD, [The economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage in European OECD countries \(EN\)](#).

15. **Family well-being offers stability and support to children, laying the foundation for personal growth.** Families are central to fostering resilience and addressing vulnerabilities that affect both children and adults and play a critical role in developing coping strategies and supporting healthy development for children. Effective anti-poverty policies should take a holistic approach to household needs, acknowledging the competing pressures of time, income, and employment that often challenge the stability and well-being of low-resource families. These challenges are further compounded by demographic shifts and the green and digital transitions, which require policies that support families in adapting to changing labour markets, new skill demands, and evolving care responsibilities, thus contributing to safeguarding children’s well-being and equal opportunities.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

CALLS ON THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their competences and taking into account national circumstances, TO:

16. **Promoting child well-being by strengthening economic resilience.** As highlighted in the Draghi Report on EU Competitiveness, Europe’s strength and long-term prosperity depend on inclusion and fairness. Investing in children is therefore not only a social obligation, but also a strategic investment in Europe’s future competitiveness, stability, and cohesion.
17. **Accelerate progress towards the EU 2030 child poverty objective,** while having in mind the importance of access to services, parental participation in the labour market and income support as key components of policies to address the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

18. **Strengthen the implementation of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee.** It provides an effective policy framework to enhance equal opportunities for the well-being of children in need. A strong emphasis should be put on closing remaining gaps, in line with the national action plans and national progress reports, through appropriate investments and reforms. Member States are urged to accelerate implementation of their national action plans and enhance synergies with EU instruments such as the European Social Fund Plus and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
19. **[Enhance the implementation of other EU initiatives of relevance to the well-being of children and particularly those in the most vulnerable situations, such as the European Affordable Housing Plan and its follow-up actions,** to improve the living environments and conditions of families and children and foster inclusive communities built on social cohesion, meaningful interactions, and equal opportunities. Both indoor and outdoor spaces should be designed to ensure that every child, including children in vulnerable situations, can thrive and reach their full potential, contributing to an inclusive, fair, resilient, and democratic society.]
20. **Support the implementation of the Union of Skills** to equip children and young people across the EU with the skills they need to succeed in their educational and professional lives, specifically through the Basic Skills Action Plan to support children and young people struggling to acquire basic skills. Special emphasis is given to attracting more girls and young women in STEM studies and digital skills, via the STEM Education Strategic Plan.
21. **Strengthen the participation of children in policymaking on matters that affect their lives,** building on the EU Children's Participation Platform. Children should be actively involved in policymaking by establishing mechanisms that enable the meaningful participation of children from diverse backgrounds, including those in vulnerable situations, ensuring that their views help shape policies promoting well-being and equal opportunities across the Union.

22. **Ensure an integrated approach to child well-being across all relevant policy areas at all levels, with a specific focus on children in vulnerable situations.** This includes efforts to mainstream the well-being of children across policymaking and promote stronger coordination between various services. This can be achieved by strengthening the governance of the European Child Guarantee and supporting national Child Guarantee coordinators with adequate resources and mandates enabling the effective implementation of integrated policies. In addition, existing platforms such as URBACT and Urban Partnerships can reinforce mutual learning about child well-being policies among local authorities. Attention should also be paid to strengthening integrated child protection systems to prevent and combat all forms of violence³.
23. **Adequately fund policies supporting the well-being of children, particularly the most vulnerable, including by harnessing opportunities offered by EU funding.** It is key to ensure that reforms and investments funded by national budgets address the European Pillar of Social Rights priorities, including the target on poverty reduction and principle 11, and the European Child Guarantee. In addition, Member States should allocate adequate amounts to the fight against child poverty and the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. Ensuring that sufficient attention and resources remain focused on children's well-being is essential to uphold and strengthen Europe's social model.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

24. **Strengthen support to Member States in combating child poverty and implementing the European Child Guarantee,** including by further promoting mutual learning and the exchange of good practices, in cooperation with the Child Guarantee coordinators, local authorities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, to enhance the well-being of children in need. In line with the Barcelona targets, continue supporting Member States in investing in accessible and quality (ECEC) services, with a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations.

³ Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems, C(2024) 2680

25. **Continue supporting Member States, including through the Social Protection Committee and together with international and civil society organisations, in improving the quality and availability of data, monitoring child well-being and implementing the European Child Guarantee.** Explore ways to enhance the evaluation of long-term effects of child-related reforms and investments, supporting evidence-based policymaking and reinforcing efforts to ensure that every child has equal opportunities to thrive and reach their full potential.
26. **Promote initiatives and actions that strengthen a safe, inclusive, and empowering digital environment for all children,** in line with the principles of child well-being online. Emphasise the importance of ensuring online safety, protecting children from online violence, exploitation, and harmful content, while also fostering digital literacy, resilience, and participation. Encourage the development of comprehensive EU measures, awareness-raising, education, and cooperation with relevant stakeholders, to ensure that the green and digital transition supports children’s rights, safety, well-being, and full development in the online and offline worlds alike.
27. **In cooperation with the Member States and relevant stakeholders, develop comprehensive guidelines on how to act in emergencies,** ensuring that all measures are adapted to the specific needs of children and safeguard their best interests. Such guidelines should cover all types of crises including natural and man-made disasters, health emergencies, armed conflicts, and humanitarian situations, and ensure continuity of access to essential services, protection, psychosocial support, safe evacuation and family reunification procedures, child-sensitive risk communication, and measures for early warning and coordination, thereby reinforcing the Union’s commitment to upholding the rights and well-being of children in all circumstances.
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