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Subject:	Council Conclusions on Investing in children: Strengthening child well-being, social inclusion and combating child poverty in the European Union

Delegations will find in the annex the Council Conclusions on Investing in children: Strengthening child well-being, social inclusion and combating child poverty in the European Union, approved by the EPSCO Council at its meeting held on 9 March 2026.

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

Council Conclusions

RECALLING THAT:

1. **Recognising child well-being as a cross-cutting EU priority means** systematically **investing in children and promoting** 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, social inclusion, education and child protection, in accordance with the EU's competences. Social, territorial, educational, economic, digital, climate and environmental policies, among others, can meaningfully improve children's lives and future prospects and produce intergenerational benefits for health, well-being, the economy, and ultimately our societies and democracies. This holistic approach places every child 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 guide EU action to promote and safeguard child wellbeing across various policy areas. This commitment extends to the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities that EU and EU member states have ratified, ensuring that children with disabilities enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

3. **The European Union continues implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** The Agenda places the principles of equality and non-discrimination, gender equality, poverty eradication, and freedom from violence and exploitation of children, at the core of its efforts to promote well-being for all at all ages, and to ensure that every child grows up in dignity.
4. **Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights recognises 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 often deprives children of equal access to inclusive educational opportunities, access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), access to health and social services, adequate food and housing, family support, child protection and access to information. 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, compared to 2019 levels. The Action Plan further sets an objective, that at least five million of the reduction should concern children. To contribute to this EU-wide target, all Member States set national targets on poverty reduction. 21 Member States also set complementary targets on child 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, in accordance with national competences to provide children in need¹ with effective and free access to high-quality ECEC, 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 adopted by the Commission** aims at ensuring that children's rights are protected and promoted in all EU and national policies. It focuses, *inter alia*, on the rights to protection, participation and well-being of all children and securing access to basic services for children, without any discrimination. By embedding a child rights perspective while considering the best interests of the child in all EU actions, including globally, it focuses particularly on the meaningful, age and development stage appropriate participation of children in shaping policies that impact their lives, reducing child poverty, promoting equal opportunities, safeguarding children from all forms of violence², fostering child-friendly justice and protecting and empowering them and promoting their participation in the digital society. Recognising child well-being also requires protecting children from ongoing conflicts and their consequences, affecting not only those directly involved but also those who witness such events and feel fear and uncertainty about the future.

¹ The European Child Guarantee asks Member States to identify children in need, taking into account specific disadvantages experienced, in particular, by: (a) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (b) children with disabilities; (c) children with mental health issues; (d) children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; (e) children in alternative, especially institutional, care; (f) children in precarious family situations.

² As further detailed in the Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (April 2024).

8. **The Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on Early Childhood Education and Care: the Barcelona Targets for 2030** provides targets on participation rates of children in ECEC to be reached by 2030, while recommending the Member States to take measures to ensure accessible, inclusive, affordable, and high-quality ECEC, take the necessary steps to close the participation gap in ECEC between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and the overall population of children. The Recommendation also recalls the importance of childcare availability that is compatible with the child's well-being and development and allows both parents to participate in the labour market, including covering the period between the end of adequately paid or compensated parental leave and legal entitlement to ECEC, contributing to reducing the gender pay gap, and supporting single-parent households.
9. **The Council conclusions of 9 June 2022 on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** which seeks to improve the protection of children and fulfil the rights of all children. The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success, which aims to promote better and more equitable educational outcomes, by reducing early school leaving, increasing academic achievement and promoting well-being at school.
10. **The Council conclusions of 27 May 2025 on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era**, which calls the Member States and the Commission to better protect the mental and physical health of children and adolescents by promoting the safe and healthy use of digital tools and by creating a healthier, safer and age-appropriate digital environment.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT:

11. **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 European Child Guarantee to shield children from poverty.
12. **The forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy is expected to take a holistic approach** and 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, while fully respecting the principle of subsidiarity and the diversity of national systems and approaches in reaching this target, as well as the Commission ambition to help eradicating poverty by 2050. This Strategy, along with the strengthening of the European Child Guarantee, should play an important role in promoting child well-being, tackling the root causes also of child poverty with a life-cycle approach, acknowledging the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion, strengthening social inclusion, and advancing the Union's commitment to equality and social justice, recognising that child poverty requires targeted, child-specific responses beyond general poverty measures.
13. **While progress has been achieved in the implementation of policies to enhance equal opportunities of children since the adoption of the European Child Guarantee in 2021**, with reforms especially in the areas of ECEC, and the provision of school meals, more efforts are still required to support all children, and particularly those in need.
14. ECEC is the first stage of the education system. It is critical for laying the foundations for lifelong learning, educational success and social inclusion, and significantly reducing inequalities. Enhanced efforts, in line with national circumstances, are needed to improve quality, accessibility and affordability of ECEC for all children, in particular those in vulnerable situations.

15. **Poverty**, among other factors, may exacerbate factors such as neglect, violence, social exclusion, physical and mental health, access to services and limited access to protection and support mechanisms.

16. **Children living in poverty remain more likely to face barriers to accessing services essential for their well-being**, including ECEC, as well as early childhood skills development, inclusive education and training, information, school-based activities, accessible healthcare including mental health, healthy nutrition, physical activity and adequate housing and extracurricular or leisure activities. These barriers may manifest differently for girls and boys, depending on their individual circumstances, age and living environment and are often worsened by regional differences, especially gaps in service availability, access, and quality between urban and rural areas. 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 annually³. Tackling disadvantages from early years is a cost-effective investment, contributing not only to the inclusion, cognitive development and well-being of children, their higher socioeconomic outcomes and social mobility when they are adults, but also to the economy and society as a whole.

³ OECD, [The economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage in European OECD countries \(EN\)](#).

17. The wellbeing of families 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. They play a critical role in developing coping strategies and supporting healthy development of children which should be addressed early on, with particular attention to the earliest stages of childhood. For children at risk, separation from the family should be considered only as a last resort, when it serves the best interest of the child, following the provision of appropriate support. A horizontal approach to child protection requires the availability to suitable family-based and community-based care, ensuring that alternative care settings provide stability, continuity and safeguards for children’s well-being.

Additionally, effective anti-poverty policies should adopt a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to household needs, acknowledging the competing pressures of time, care, income, and employment that often challenge the stability and well-being of low-income families considering the specific needs of single-parent households, that face a higher risk of poverty. These challenges are further compounded by demographic shifts and the green and digital transitions, persisting gender gaps in income and career opportunities, as well as the sustainability of social protection and pension systems. Policies that support families in adapting to changing labour markets, new skill demands, and evolving care responsibilities, contribute 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:

18. **Promote 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 among other things. Investing in children is therefore not only a social obligation, but also a strategic investment in Europe's future competitiveness, stability, and cohesion.
19. **Accelerate progress towards the EU 2030 poverty reduction target,** and, where relevant, the child poverty objective, while having in mind the importance of access to essential, affordable, inclusive and high-quality services, gender-balanced parental participation in the labour market and income support and social assistance as key components of active inclusion policies to address the risk of poverty or social exclusion.
20. **Strengthen the implementation,** depending on national challenges, **of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee** which provides a supportive policy framework to combat child poverty and social exclusion and enhance equal opportunities for the well-being of children in need and their families. 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 should, where appropriate, enhance synergies with EU instruments including the use of EU Funds and promote more balanced territorial coverage in the provision of multidimensional services for children.

21. **Continue the implementation of the Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income** ensuring active inclusion. It constitutes a framework aimed at ensuring that robust social safety nets are in place for ensuring life in dignity by providing adequate income support and in-kind benefits while safeguarding incentives to (re)integrate and remain in the labour market for those who can work.
22. **To improve the living environments and conditions of families and children and foster inclusive communities** built on social cohesion, meaningful interactions, and equal opportunities, Member States are encouraged to support that both indoor and outdoor spaces could be designed to promote opportunities for every child, including children in vulnerable situations, to thrive and reach their full potential, contributing to an inclusive, fair, resilient, and democratic society.
23. **Equip children across the EU with the skills**, in particular basic and digital skills, they need to succeed in their educational, personal and professional lives.
24. **Strengthen the active participation of children in policymaking on matters that affect their lives**, through tools such as the EU Children's Participation Platform or any other age-appropriate structured mechanisms enabling safe, inclusive, accessible and meaningful participation of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and situations in decision-making, including those in vulnerable situations. These mechanisms will ensure that children's views shape and monitor policies promoting their well-being and equal opportunities across the Union.

25. **Ensure an integrated approach to child well-being across all relevant policy areas and at all governance levels**, with a specific focus on children in vulnerable situations and their families. This includes efforts to mainstream the well-being of all children⁴ across policymaking and promote stronger coordination between policies, programmes, services⁵ and other support measures across different sectors. Children's well-being and development should also encompass access to sports, culture, and leisure activities. The integrated approach 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, promoting integrated governance mechanisms that strengthen synergies among stakeholders without creating additional reporting or monitoring requirements, in line with the need for simplification. Attention should also be paid to strengthening integrated child protection systems to prevent and combat all forms of violence⁶.
26. **Adequately fund policies supporting the well-being of children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable, including by harnessing opportunities offered by EU funding**. Member States should allocate adequate amounts, in accordance with national circumstances, to the fight against child poverty and social exclusion. Ensuring that sufficient attention and resources remain focused on children's well-being is essential to uphold and strengthen Europe's social model.

⁴ Without any discrimination of the child or his or her parents or legal guardians, based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation.

⁵ Platforms, such as URBACT, Rural Pact Platform, European Urban Initiative and Thematic Partnerships of the Urban Agenda for the EU, and those within the EU Agenda for Cities can reinforce mutual learning about child well-being policies among local authorities.

⁶ Commission Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (April 2024).

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

27. **Strengthen support to Member States in combating child poverty and social exclusion, and implementing the European Child Guarantee**, including by supporting the funding of projects that address child poverty and by further promoting mutual learning and the exchange of good practices, in cooperation with the Child Guarantee coordinators, local and regional authorities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, taking into account the specificities of certain regions to enhance the well-being of children in need. In line with the EU Quality Framework for ECEC and the Barcelona targets, continue supporting Member States in investing in accessible, inclusive, affordable and high-quality ECEC services, with a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations.

28. **Continue supporting Member States, including through the Social Protection Committee**, in improving the quality and availability of data, including through the collection and use of data disaggregated by sex, age and other relevant factors, in order to better identify inequalities and support evidence-based policymaking, monitor child well-being and the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. Explore ways to enhance the evaluation of long-term effects of child-related reforms and investments, to ensure that every child has equal opportunities to thrive and reach their full potential.

29. **Promote initiatives and actions that strengthen a safe, inclusive, accessible, age-appropriate and empowering digital environment for all children**, in line with the principles of child well-being online and counteracting the digital divide, including by engaging schools in promoting greater awareness in the use of technology. Emphasise the importance of ensuring online safety, protecting children from online violence, exploitation, as well as illegal and harmful content, while also fostering their digital and media literacy, resilience, the appropriate use of artificial intelligence, and participation through digital education appropriate to their age and maturity. In particular, pay attention to gender-based online violence, recognizing that girls are disproportionately affected, while also acknowledging that boys may also be exposed to harmful online content. Encourage the implementation of comprehensive EU measures, promote awareness-raising, education among children, adolescents, parents and professionals, and cooperation with relevant stakeholders including civil society organizations, 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.
30. **In cooperation with the Member States and relevant stakeholders, develop a comprehensive approach on how to act in emergencies**, guaranteeing that emergency responses are child-sensitive, and ensuring that all measures are adapted to the specific needs of all children and safeguard their best interests. This should cover all types of crises including natural and human-induced disasters, health emergencies, armed conflicts, climate change, and humanitarian situations, and ensure continuity of access to essential services, including child protection, protection against violence, including gender-based violence safe evacuation and family reunification procedures, child-sensitive risk communication, and measures for early warning and coordination, thereby reinforcing the Union's commitment to uphold the rights and well-being of children in all circumstances.
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