



Child poverty: a political priority for EU Member States



Over the past years child poverty has become an increasingly important part of the EU Social Inclusion Process and is now one of its key issues. At the Lisbon Council meeting in 2000 children were mentioned as an exam. Then, in the Common Objectives agreed at the Nice European Council later the same year, “to move towards the elimination of social exclusion among children and give them every opportunity for social integration” was included in the objective on helping the most vulnerable. Child poverty has featured as a priority concern in many National Action Plans on poverty and social exclusion (NAPs/inclusion) ever since even though the actual coverage has been rather uneven and piecemeal and in many cases lacking a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach.

The issue of child poverty has also been a key theme from the outset of the Community action programme on poverty and social exclusion and was covered under many of the different activities

supported under the programme. Within this context, a first transnational thematic study was commissioned in 2002 which examined the policies to tackle child poverty in six Member States and the United States.

Compared with their better-off peers, children growing up in poverty suffer from more health and behavioural problems and lower self esteem, obtain less education, and have fewer prospects of a successful future. Those are some of the conclusions of the above mentioned study by Dr. Petra Hoelscher, now a Social Policy Officer at UNICEF in Geneva.

The study compared poverty rates and policies in six Member States (France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and the United States and made several key recommendations that are being integrated in a number of National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs).

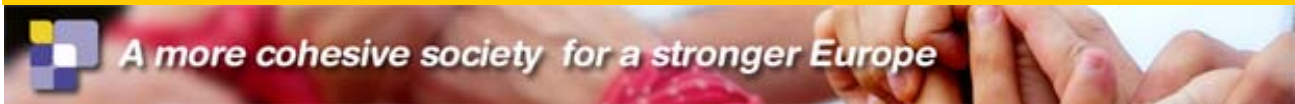
“A few years ago only some member states, notably the UK, were beginning to focus on specific children’s issues, but there was very little information available on policy experiences to reduce child poverty,” says Dr Hoelscher. “So when this study came out there was a lot of interest in it. Member States used it as a reference for developing their National Action Plans.”

■ Better resources, less poverty

The study showed that the financial situation of parents’, the different aspects of children’s living conditions such as health, education, accommodation, mobility, access to services have a strong effect on children. Growing up in poverty affects children’s cognitive development and their ability to succeed in their adult life, and this leads to the so-called “inter-generational transmission of poverty”.

However, children cope better and develop more healthily in surroundings where measures are





taken to increase their families' financial resources through bringing parents into work that pays and through cash transfers, policies aim to reduce the families' expenses by subsidising childcare, making decent housing affordable and ensuring quality healthcare and policies focus on prevention and on the well-being of children by ensuring an inclusive education, strengthening family and social relations and developing child protection services. Countries with a high level of social expenditure on families and children have considerably lower poverty rates than those countries with low expenditures on social protection. Cash transfers and social protection thus have a significant impact on the extent of child poverty.

The report emphasised that reducing child poverty requires an explicit and integrated strategy encompassing child, family and women-friendly policies that:

- Make children and families in general, and child poverty in particular, a political priority.
- Secure and increase the financial resources of families.
- Enhance child development and well-being.
- Include the most vulnerable.

■ **Making child poverty a political priority**

“There have been some quite significant developments regarding child poverty over the last three years since the report was published (in 2004),” says Dr Hoelscher. “The European Commission has been increasingly placing priority on child poverty through the Social Inclusion Process. There were also milestones made at the Luxembourg Presidency Conference on Taking Forward the EU Social Inclusion Process in 2005, calling for child mainstreaming across all policy areas and for better indicators to measure child well-being.

Key policy recommendations formulated in the study:

- High priority, backed with adequate financial resources, should be given to the elimination and prevention of child poverty and social exclusion at EU and member state levels.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be used as a framework for the development, implementation and monitoring of policies at EU and member state level.
- Children should participate in the decision-making processes affecting their lives.
- Child poverty and social exclusion should gain a more prominent role within the OMC so that processes of benchmarking and peer-review are strengthened.
- All Member States should adopt integrated approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion among children and young people.
- All Member States should adopt targets for the eradication of child poverty on the basis of clear indicators.
- Member states should adopt balanced policy combinations to tackle child poverty. These should include strategies to bring parents into work that pays, to improve the reconciliation of work and family life, adequate cash transfers, access to high quality and affordable childcare and access to child-related services and health care.
- In the process of reforming welfare systems the effect of policies on children and on low-income families should be monitored and policies should be child and poverty-proofed.
- Policies should focus on children's present quality of life and on the longer-term impacts of poverty and social exclusion on their future life as adults and on society as a whole.



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Following this, the European Union has set up a special task force to develop indicators for child well being and will publish a report on it in September."

"The European Commission has been increasingly placing priority on child poverty through the Social Inclusion Process"

Dr Hoelscher adds that the March 2006 Conclusions of the European Council of Ministers called on member states to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty. According to her, "A prerequisite for the eradication of child poverty is that it is acknowledged as a problem and made a political priority and that the rights of children are recognised. (...) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets a framework for the development, implementation and monitoring of child-related policies."

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Project information

Name of the initiative: A thematic study using transnational comparisons to analyse and identify what combination of policy responses are most successful in preventing and reducing high levels of child poverty

Activity: Study

Author: Petra Hoelscher, University of Dortmund, Germany

Scope: EU

SPSI Priority theme: child poverty

Year: 2004

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