

## CHAPTER 13

by Agata D'Addato

# REFLECTIONS ON HOW RECENT EU DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOCIAL FIELD CAN DELIVER FOR CHILDREN IN EUROPE

This chapter was published in the book entitled: Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe · Volume 7 (pp. 181-189)

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Published by: Alliance for Childhood European Network Foundation, Brussels, Belgium · ISBN: 978-90-8229-092-9

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Design: © 2018 Studio Marsel Stoop · Brussels, Belgium · [studio@marselstopen.com](mailto:studio@marselstopen.com) | Print: Printon AS · Tallinn, Estonia

All chapters are available for download on the website of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group:

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## ABSTRACT

As we mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European Union, we have a momentous opportunity to take stock of how far Europe has come – and how far we still have to go in order to offer a sustainable and prosperous future to everyone in Europe.

The efforts made by President Juncker to publish a series of reflection papers with the aim of building up a multifaceted vision for the future of Europe were an attempt to align Member States around a common vision affecting both EU's internal and external policies.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, announced in 2015 and proclaimed in November 2017, is a promising step towards a social Europe. However, it must not be regarded as an isolated shop window for social issues. Until its 20 principles are seen as contributing to a fairer EU, social inclusion and equality will remain desirable but unachievable. The earlier we recognise that fragile democracies require care and attention, the stronger we will be. And this attention must manifest in the form of policy guidance and funding.

The role of the European Commission does not end with the proclamation of the Pillar of Social Rights. It has to make economic and financial resources available for instruments such as the Social Pillar to be translated into practice. With the post-2020 EU budget, there is an opportunity to link EU financing to the principles identified in the Social Pillar, with an investment priority dedicated to investing in children. Delivering a future for Europe must mean investing first in children.

It is very encouraging that the European Parliament has stepped up its work with children and young people through its designated intergroup over the last few years; yet we see the potential to achieve much more across all EU institutions if children's rights are given the prominence they deserve.

This paper aims to provide some informed, critical reflections on recent EU developments that have the potential to foster better policies at EU and national levels, and that offer an opportunity for advocating for children's rights to be at the heart of policy and decision-making. The paper also offers some suggestions as to how the actions of the EU might be consolidated, developed and sustained into the future to ensure far-reaching social impact and to bring about real change.

**Keywords:** European Union; European Commission; Pillar of Social Rights; children's policies.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The European Union (EU) is undergoing a period of transition and is facing many challenges which will need to be addressed in the coming months and years. First of all the economic crisis, which, while slowly improving, still encourages Member States to rely on austerity measures, hindering social investment: children and young people are still disproportionately affected by

poverty and social exclusion, and the EU has so far struggled to implement a coherent and comprehensive approach to tackling child poverty. Despite good policy guidance, such as the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (which will henceforth be referred to in this chapter as ‘the Recommendation on Investing in Children’), implementation at the national level is lagging behind, as is the message of the economic return that investing in children generates (European Commission, 2013).

Moreover, in 2016 the migration crisis saw over a million people, 25% of whom were children, many of whom were unaccompanied, facing unfathomable hardship to flee conflict and to reach Europe, where more often than not, their rights are not upheld despite there being well established international human rights standards and obligations (European Commission, 2016).

Lastly, in 2016, the overall lack of confidence in the European project, which led to the rising of populist movements in many EU Member States, culminated with the Brexit referendum, which triggered the negotiations for the United Kingdom to leave the EU in 2019, prompting a debate around the “future of Europe”.

## THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

In March 2017, the European Commission published the first of a series of papers, the White Paper on the Future of Europe, in which five possible scenarios for Europe as EU27 are outlined (European Commission, 2017a). Depending on the choices Member States make these scenarios offer a view of the state of the EU by 2025 which include either to carry on, to do nothing other than preserve the Single Market, to do less more efficiently, to do much more together, or to allow those who want more to do more in specific areas. The Paper, while recognising the many challenges that Europe is currently facing, presents the scenarios as opportunities to be seized and better deliver for EU citizens. While the decision about which of the scenarios to choose will be a political one, it is undeniable that, on the one hand, the Commission seems to have failed so far to give due consideration to the potential impact of these scenarios on social policy, and on children in particular. On the other hand there is a lack of clarity about whether children and young people, often referred to as the ‘future generation’, will be given the opportunity to have their voices heard in the debate on the future of the Europe they will have to live in.

Moreover, the way in which Member States will choose to shape the EU as EU27 will influence several key financial and economic instruments, which will play an essential role in advancing social policies at EU and Member State level. For instance, while the upcoming work around the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (the post-2020 EU budget) offers opportunities to foster social investment and investing in children in particular, the extent to which the EU budget will be able to achieve this will depend on the outcome of the debate around the future of the Union as we know it. Along these lines, the next programming period of the EU funds, if adequately improved and updated, has the potential to support social spending at Member State level: however, this will be dependent on whether Member States will opt to save or increase the social dimension of Europe.

This transitional phase should prompt the EU to harness its potential and do more to foster social cohesion. Through promising new initiatives, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017b), the EU should become a catalyst for change, strengthening social inclusion efforts and putting a greater emphasis on participatory democracy, including by engaging children of all ages and backgrounds.

Most people debating the future of Europe think in economic terms. But today we must think about how children in Europe are experiencing their childhood, as that will be the biggest determining factor in shaping our future. Children's rights ought to be retained as a requisite factor in the choices that shape Europe's future.

## THE EU SOCIAL POLICY AGENDA

Looking back, 2017 presented social Europe with a huge opportunity in the shape of the European Pillar of Social Rights and its 20 principles and rights which support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in Member States. The Pillar's success now hinges on how it will be implemented. Particularly important is the emphasis which puts social concerns on a par with economic priorities. Too often business interests take precedence over people, but through supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU leaders recognised that social inclusion is critical to bridging the democratic deficit and have committed to the EU as a social, as well as an economic community.

Coupled with the European Commission Reflection Paper on the social dimension of Europe outlining possibilities for the future of social Europe (European Commission, 2017c), the Social Pillar has launched a high level debate on social and employment policies in the Union. It has offered an important opportunity to also reflect on how investing in children can contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous Europe.

The value of the Pillar of Social Rights lies in its ability to trigger political action from the Member States to deliver on their commitments. One of these commitments, from 2013, is the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Poverty and social exclusion affects some 25 million children in the EU. In relative terms, children (26.4%) are more at risk than the people of average age in the population (23.5%) (Eurostat, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Yet, few Member States have delivered on policy reform and increased public investment aimed at reducing child poverty, and the EU has repeatedly failed to call governments to account with regards to how they are implementing the Recommendation (Eurochild, 2016). As such, the inclusion of children's right to protection from poverty as one of the 20 Social Pillar's principles is a welcome step (European Commission, 2017d). The Social Pillar specifically commits governments to protecting children from poverty by providing children and their families with the quality of services they need, in an accessible and affordable manner.

In April 2017, the European Commission published, along with the Pillar of Social Rights, a Staff Working Document taking stock of the implementation of the Recommendation on Investing in Children (European Commission,

2017e). The document provides an overview from the Commission of the current implementation status of the Recommendation in the Member States, highlighting what has worked, as well as the gaps that need to be addressed. To this end, the document includes a number of practical examples, taken from the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) online platform<sup>2</sup>, of how the provisions enshrined in the Recommendation have been translated from theory into practice. Throughout the assessment, the Commission makes the case that investing in children is a primary example of good social investment. Not only does it pay off for children individually but it makes sense for society as a whole. Despite this, implementation among Member States remains a challenge, especially when it comes to enhancing children's participation.

Eurochild believes (Eurochild, 2017) that the Commission's assessment of the Recommendation would have benefitted from being more forward looking, in particular by offering proposals to address the gaps in implementation and developing a roadmap in order to help hold governments to account and better monitor progress. Linked to this, the assessment fails to show any intention to develop child specific indicators to assess whether and how policies are impacting on children's lives and to inform evidence-based policy development. Furthermore, the assessment, while included in the Social Pillar Package, does not explain how the Social Pillar is expected to help implement the Recommendation on Investing in Children.

In 2017 the European Social Policy Network, a group of experts on social policies providing analyses to the Commission, published a report on Progress across Europe in the implementation of the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation, examining national policies (European Social Policy Network, 2017). This report highlights that overall, "the modest progress made in the direction outlined in the Recommendation is insufficient to the scale of the problem in many countries. ... Very limited progress has been made in most areas in too many of the countries with high or very high levels of child poverty or social exclusion ... and indeed some of these have actually weakened their approach in several areas". Initiatives such as the Recommendation on Investing in Children and the Social Pillar can only succeed if there is strong buy-in at the national level.

In terms of implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights, the Commission proposes to monitor Member States' progress towards achieving the full realisation of the principles outlined in the Social Pillar through the European Semester. The European Semester cycle is the monitoring and coordinating mechanism that supports Member States' efforts towards achieving the targets of the European 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Europe 2020 strategy sets out social, economic and environmental targets, to be achieved by 2020, including important targets for reducing early school leaving rates to less than 10% and lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion.

Despite the declared intention by the European Commission to give more prominence to social issues in the 2017 European Semester cycle<sup>3</sup>, the latter failed to give children and social issues sufficient importance. Whilst

the 2017 European Semester Country Reports include a number of direct references to children in relation to a variety of recurring themes, including the acknowledgement of the situation of children and the increasing levels of child poverty, the 2017 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) not only do they not show any significant improvement compared to the 2016 CSRs in terms of addressing the needs of children, but represent a step backwards. Indeed, despite being mentioned in the Country Reports, child poverty is not explicitly covered by the 2017 CSRs<sup>4</sup>. The European Semester should focus its attention on those EU Member States where child poverty rates remain high and have not decreased in recent years. As underlined in the 2017 Fundamental Rights Report, “the European Semester should always and consistently address the situation of children” (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2017) – the lack of focus on issues such as child poverty increases the risk that progress towards the Europe 2020 target on poverty reduction will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, as this prevents recommendations being made to design integrated strategies on preventing and tackling child poverty. However, following the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in November 2017, the European Commission recommended using the Pillar as a compass in the European Semester cycle 2018, which could represent an opportunity to address child poverty.

In November 2017 the European Commission launched the 2018 European Semester cycle by publishing priorities for national policies to promote growth, job creation, social inclusion and protection<sup>5</sup> in the Annual Growth Survey (AGS). In addition to advice about boosting investment and getting public budgets in order, this year the AGS has set out some social priorities. The social dimension of the document is guided by the three main categories of the European Pillar of Social Rights, namely: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; and social protection and inclusion. The measures pursued by all Member States on social inclusion and social protection have to be in line with the Pillar of Social Rights, which means we can expect that the 2018 Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations will have a stronger social component.

The new ‘social scoreboard’ should facilitate benchmarking across countries and monitoring progress over time (European Commission, 2017f). The social scoreboard measures, among other indicators, the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion, early childhood education and care, early school leaving, and the impact of social transfers<sup>6</sup> on poverty reduction. It is thus also a useful tool for monitoring Member States’ progress in implementing several dimensions of the Recommendation on Investing in Children and for making effective links between the Recommendation, the European Semester Process and the Pillar of Social Rights. The scoreboard, however, must be given the same weight as the EU’s macroeconomic scoreboard if it is to effect policy change in Member States.

The European Pillar of Social Rights also includes a Work-Life Balance package. The package includes legislative and non-legislative measures aimed at fostering a better balance between men and women with caring responsibilities and more equal use of leave and flexible working arrangements (European Commission, 2017g; European Commission, 2017h). The initiative

aims to strengthen the social dimension of Europe and to implement Goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality that the EU helped to shape and committed to implement. The proposal for a Directive to support work-life balance for working parents and carers is the first ever proposal for a comprehensive EU Directive to improve the work-life balance of parents and carers and builds on existing rights, in particular those in the Parental Leave Directive. However, it is important to underline that the provisions enshrined in the proposal developed by the Commission are intended to set 'minimum standards' to reconcile work and family life, and are not setting specific goals for each Member States.

The Work-Life Balance package, however, remains an employment initiative; the focus is on achieving equal rights for both parents. It misses the children's rights approach which would address policies from the perspective of the best interest of the child. Work-life balance should be seen within a broader policy framework including not only labour market and leave policies and early childhood education and care services, but also family support and the formal education system. Such an approach would be in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children which recognises that education from an early age is about the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

The Directive first needs to pass through a legislative process, and the package needs to be followed up with real monitoring and backing from Member States. For now, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) have both adopted opinions in support of the Directive. At the European Council level, the Estonian Presidency published a progress report which included the current position of the Council. This will be followed-up by the Bulgarian Presidency starting in January 2018, with the aim to have a final Council position in place by the spring. The adoption of the Directive is key in keeping up the momentum around the proclamation of the European Pillar, and will be decisive for the future of the implementation of the Pillar by testing the commitment of Member States to realise the rights and principles contained therein.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As we mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome which established the EU, now is the time to rethink the direction in which we are travelling, build on our achievements and lay the foundations for the next 60 years of European integration.

We have windows of opportunity. The Sustainable Development Goals offer a universal framework that can guide the EU's post-2020 agenda.

The Juncker Commission has called itself "the last chance Commission". It is not business as usual. In March 2017 the Commission published the White Paper, followed by a series of reflection papers to stimulate and galvanise debate, and which asked Member States to take ownership and responsibility for what they wanted the EU project to be.

The EU's economic and monetary coordination mechanisms have watched over, and sometimes blatantly encouraged, massive cuts in social spending and the dismantling of social safety nets in many Member States. The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights clearly shows that the EU is really concerned about the social and economic rights of all people in the EU, inside and outside the labour market, of working age or not. We now might be more convinced that our leaders are truly committed to a Union based on equality and human rights, but we need strong mechanisms to support implementation and ensure that the Pillar has a far-reaching social impact.

What is clear is that, moving forward, our success will be determined by our ability to bring Europe closer to people<sup>7</sup>. Investing in Europe starts by investing in children, families and communities. This is crucial to achieve social cohesion and inclusion, alongside economic growth and prosperity – now and in the longer term.

We are pleased the European Parliament has stepped up its work with children and young people through its designated intergroup (the Intergroup on Children's Rights) over the last few years; yet we see the potential to achieve much more across all EU institutions if children's rights are given the prominence they deserve.

The next Multiannual Financial Framework is an opportunity to further strengthen how EU spending can help deliver on the EU's stated objective of 'promoting social inclusion and combating poverty'. Now more than ever, the EU has to catalyse spending in Member States for better outcomes for children. The post-2020 EU budget must support implementation of the Social Pillar and value spending on children as an investment.

At a time when social rights are beginning to take centre stage in the European project, dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders will be the foundation for success. The children's rights community, with children and young people themselves, is eager to support the development of such mechanisms and hold the EU leaders to their commitments. Children and young people have enormous creative energy to address the challenges of our time. Listening to them will reinvigorate our democracies.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Dr Agata D'Addato is the Senior Policy Coordinator responsible for research, policy and practice at Eurochild, a network which brings together over 100 member organisations from across Europe, which promotes the rights and well-being of children and young people in Europe. Eurochild aims to monitor and influence EU policy to ensure that the rights of children and, in particular, the rights of the most vulnerable children are taken into account. She is responsible for coordinating Eurochild's work on child poverty and well-being, family and parenting support. She also coordinates the research project 'Childonomics – Measuring the long-term social and economic value of investing in children' alongside Eurochild's work on mutual learning and practice exchange.

Prior to this position, Agata D'Addato, who holds a PhD in Demography from the University of Bari, worked as a researcher in various universities and well-renowned research institutes across Europe in the fields of demographic change, family policies, immigration and integration.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators/europe-2020-strategy/main-tables>
- 2 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&langId=en>
- 3 In the press release accompanying the 2017 Country Specific Recommendations, Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, underlined the Commission's intention to give more prominence to social issues: *"This year addressing inequality is firmly at the heart of our assessment. We have turned the page of the crisis: the next chapter is social"*.
- 4 On 22 May, the European Commission published its proposals for the 2017 CSRs. These recommendations constitute, along with the Country Reports, drafted by the Commission, and the National Reform Programmes, submitted on a yearly basis by each EU Member State, a key step within the European Semester cycle. The CSRs articulate the European Commission's position with regards to Member States' progress towards

the implementation of the Europe 2020 targets. The CSRs are published alongside an overview of the specific situation in each Member State, as well as an assessment of the efforts to comply with the 2016 CSRs. Once adopted by the European Council, the onus is on the Member States to adopt, over the course of the following year, national policies and budgets in order to integrate the CSRs. These recommendations, therefore, have the potential to play a key role in encouraging national governments to deliver on the Europe 2020 targets, which include lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020, and in advocating for children's rights to be at the heart of policy and decision making.

- 5 Social protection systems are defined by the European Commission as follows: Social protection systems are designed to provide protection against the risks and needs associated with unemployment, sickness and healthcare, old age, the loss of a parent or spouse, and so on.
- 6 All social security benefits can be understood as social transfers – a transfer of cash or services from one group in society to another. For example, from those in good health to those who are ill.
- 7 As described by Martin Schulz bringing Europe “closer to the people” is a question of how the EU can make a difference to the lives of ordinary people on a day to day basis <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20140709STO52052/martin-schulz-bringing-europe-closer-to-the-people>