

Towards a Child Union. A European agenda to break the cycle of disadvantage

Albert F. Arcarons

In Europe, 22.2 million children – almost one in four – are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. And this situation is worsening due to the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Child poverty rates are not only higher than we would expect from the level of economic development of the European Union, but also stand systematically higher than total poverty rates. In the last decades, child poverty has evolved from being a hidden reality within the household to being an issue of fundamental rights with legally binding obligations for both European institutions and member states. The coronavirus pandemic has been a magnifier of health and wealth inequalities, and has brought to light the weaknesses of European social protection systems. Whether the coronavirus crisis can represent a turning point in the protection of the most vulnerable children in Europe will depend on whether we are able to lay the foundations of a Child Union. For this to happen it is crucial to put children at the centre of the reconstruction, and to translate into concrete national policies the advances that the Child Guarantee and the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights will bring at European level. We are now closer than ever to a Child Union, and we need to seize the momentum.

Child poverty is the main path for the intergenerational reproduction of poverty: children born and raised in poverty have a high risk of becoming impoverished adults whose own children will also most likely live in poverty. The intergenerational transmission of disadvantage causes a reduction in the equality of opportunity in a society. The presence or absence of social mobility is an indicator of how the opportunities for socio-economic achievement are distributed, and whether this distribution is fair or not. Fighting child poverty and inequality is a prerequisite for breaking the cycle of disadvantage and achieving a full democratic society built on the principles of merit and social justice rather than privilege.

In Europe, 22.2 million children, almost one in four, are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, abbreviated as AROPE. The AROPE indicator is the main indicator to monitor the poverty

target of the EU 2020 Strategy, and one of the most used instruments to monitor the annual evolution of child poverty in the EU. This composite indicator, which includes monetary poverty, severe material deprivation and low work intensity, has progressively decreased since its peak (28 per cent) in 2012 that was caused by the last economic crisis. Nevertheless, levels remain high (23.4 per cent) and vary greatly across member states: from 30 per cent in Romania to 10 per cent in Denmark. Monetary child poverty,¹ the main component of the AROPE indicator, has remained stable, however, at around 20 per cent since 2008, affecting 18.4 million children according to the most recent data. This shows that there has been little progress in the last decade to enhance the economic situation of children in the EU. Moreover, among those children living in monetary poverty in the EU, more than one third (ie, 7 per cent) experience a more severe type of poverty,² which entails a higher risk of social exclusion and chronification, as it is likely to be more persistent.

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Child poverty rates in Europe are not only higher than we would expect from the level of development of the European Union but also stand systematically higher than total poverty rates. In the last decade, the difference between child and total poverty rates ranged between three and five percentage points. If we disaggregate total poverty rates further by age group, we observe that children (aged 0 to 18) are, together with young adults (aged 18 to 24), the age group with the highest monetary poverty rates in Europe. These age-related differences in poverty rates over time point to the particularity of child poverty, and the need for addressing it with appropriate policy responses both at the EU and national level. Several member states struggle to reduce child poverty after social transfers, a clear sign of the lack of efficiency of their benefit systems to address this reality. While some member states

achieve post-transfer child poverty reductions of even more than 50 per cent, others struggle significantly to counter the effect of market inequalities on the well-being and development of children.

The increasing amounts of data and evidence showing persistent age-related differences in poverty, and the rising awareness of the economic costs of child poverty and inequality, as well as their detrimental effects on social justice and cohesion, have crucially contributed to placing the fight against child poverty among the top priorities of a social Europe. We need to seize the momentum, as these are decisive times for the consolidation of the pillars of a Child Union.

1 Calculated at the 60% of median equivalised income after social transfers.

2 Calculated at the 40% of median equivalised income after social transfers.

Child poverty: from a family matter to a subjective right

Child poverty has evolved from being a hidden reality within the household to being an issue of fundamental rights with legally binding obligations for both European institutions and member states.³ In the last decades, we have witnessed the consolidation of a perspective that is focused on the rights of the child in the EU and international legal frameworks, and that embraces the multidimensionality of child poverty. There has been a shift from charity to rights, with a recognition of children as the subjects of rights, or as independent rights-holders, whose best interests need to be taken into primary consideration. This new focus on rights has now become the guiding principle at supranational level. Yet despite these advances, there is still much to be done to achieve a substantive national implementation. The materialisation of these rights-based international principles and standards into concrete policies and actions at the national level, with a real impact on child poverty reduction and child well-being, is one of the main challenges ahead.

The relationship between child poverty and child rights is reciprocal. On the one hand, child poverty has been increasingly understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that affects rights in different ways. Living in a situation of poverty or social exclusion leads to a violation of fundamental rights such as equal access to education, health and adequate nutrition. Tackling child poverty is therefore a precondition for the fulfilment of other rights. On the other hand, violations of fundamental rights can lead to poverty and social exclusion, and most likely to a chronification of these disadvantages, with negative consequences in adult life. In short, the experience of child poverty is an infringement of child rights, and neglecting these rights is likely to result in poverty in those children's adult life.

Tackling child poverty is a precondition for the fulfilment of other rights

The main legally binding instruments on which an effective rights-based approach to fight child poverty can build are, at the international level, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted in 1989 and ratified by all UN member states, and at the European level, both the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Social Charter (ESC, 1961 and 1996 revised version). The CRC enshrines child-specific economic and social rights that are closely related to child poverty. Article 27 is paradigmatic in this respect, as it enshrines "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development". This article also mentions the obligation of states parties to provide material assistance and support programmes in case of need, in order to guarantee the right of children to adequate nutrition, clothing, and housing in particular. Moreover, the CRC also enshrines the right to education based on equal opportunity (Article 19), the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable health standard (Article 24), and the rights to be heard and not to be discriminated against.

³ The report *Combating child poverty: an issue of fundamental rights* (2018) of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) provides a comprehensive account of the main steps at the European and international levels towards combating child poverty from a rights of the child perspective (<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/combating-child-poverty-issue-fundamental-rights>).

At the European level, both member states and EU institutions are bound by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Article 24 is exclusively dedicated to the rights of the child, with a provision that can be interpreted as closely linked to the fight against child poverty and the protection of children from poverty. This provision states that “children shall have the right to 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”. Moreover, Article 34 on social security and assistance explicitly relates fighting poverty and social exclusion to specific fundamental rights such as the right to social and housing assistance in order to “ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources”.

The ESC, revised in 1996, furthermore includes a unique article (Article 30) in the international human rights framework as it introduces, for the first time in a legally binding instrument, the right to protection against poverty. More concretely, Article 30 calls on states parties to take measures to guarantee effective access to employment, housing, training, education, culture, and medical assistance, for persons in a situation of risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as for their families. Despite its importance for embracing a rights-based approach to poverty and child poverty, some key member states of the Council of Europe such as Germany, Spain and Denmark have not yet ratified the revised version of the ESC.

More recently, two initiatives at the European level that seek to advance the fight against child poverty, thus building on the EU and international human rights framework, are firstly the adoption of the European Commission’s 2013 Recommendation ‘Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’; and secondly, the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017. Although a soft law instrument (ie, not legally binding), the 2013 Recommendation represents a crucial step towards a more comprehensive understanding of child poverty from a perspective of the rights of the child, and it leaves behind the consideration of child poverty solely from the perspective of the parents’ relationship to the labour market. As a response to the growing levels of poverty and social exclusion in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, the Recommendation provides guidance to member states for the implementation of policies to fight child poverty and exclusion. These policies should focus on three pillars: (1) access to adequate resources, (2) access to affordable quality services and (3) the right of children to participate. In line with the CRC, the Recommendation highlights in its guidelines the importance of understanding the interdependency of the rights of the child, providing an integrated framework to combat child poverty effectively.

Despite the importance of the 2013 Recommendation for advancing in a rights-based approach to child poverty, subsequent evaluations have questioned the impact of the Recommendation on the improvement of policies at national level. The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) concluded in 2017 that very limited progress had been made on most areas included in the Recommendation in the majority of countries with already high levels of child poverty or social exclusion. In some cases, there have even been setbacks. The ESPN also concluded that member states with high and very high levels of child poverty did not show progress towards a more integrated multidimensional approach. In a more recent Special

Report,⁴ published in 2020, the European Court of Auditors concludes that “the Recommendation was a positive attempt to holistically address child poverty, but its quantitative impact is difficult, if not impossible, to assess”. Moreover, the European Court of Auditors highlights that the Commission has limited information for an effective monitoring of the Recommendation, as there is a lack of appropriate measurable indicators, realistic targets, and reporting mechanisms.

As well as the 2013 Recommendation, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is also an important milestone in the reinforcement of a holistic rights approach to child poverty. Even if it is not legally binding, the EPSR makes clear references to the rights enshrined in the European Social Charter, and reflects a political commitment of the EU institutions to a fairer Europe with a strong social dimension. Among its 20 principles, which aim at triggering legislative and non-legislative activity at member state level, the text of the EPSR introduces for the first time the right to protection from poverty for children. More concretely, it includes a specific provision in Principle 11 (Childcare and support to children) which states 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”. Principle 11 also acknowledges the importance of enhancing equal opportunities from early childhood by specifying that “children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality”. In addition, the EPSR refers to the rights of children at risk of poverty in its Principles 1 (“right to quality and inclusive education”), 14 (“right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life”) and 19 (“access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality” and the “right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction”). The EPSR is provided with a “social scoreboard” to monitor progress in the implementation of the principles and rights enshrined. The scoreboard has been integrated into the European Semester but it only includes one child-focused indicator, which measures participation in formal early child education and care (ECEC) programmes.⁵ The rest of the indicators are not disaggregated by age, overlooking the perspective of children, even if children have systematically higher poverty rates than the total population.

In sum, an approach focusing on the rights of the child allows for an understanding of child poverty beyond family poverty. There is wide consensus on the idea that employment policies, a classic approximation to fight child poverty, have not proven to be enough, as they leave out many aspects related to children’s well-being. The cost of living has escalated at a much

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4 See European Court of Auditors (2020), ‘Combating Child Poverty - Better targeting Commission support required’, Special Report 20 (www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=54614).

5 As part of the ‘Public support/ Social protection and inclusion’ indicators of the Social Scoreboard, this indicator shows the percentage of children (under 3 years old) cared for by formal arrangements other than the family (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-pillar-of-social-rights/indicators/social-scoreboard-indicators>).

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higher pace than earnings from work, which has particularly affected vulnerable families with children in urban contexts. In the EU27, around one in ten employees are ‘working poor’: their jobs do not protect many of them and their families and children from poverty. Together with the increasing precariousness of employment, family protection systems have not evolved at the same pace as the demographic and social transformations that have altered the characteristics and dynamics of families with children in Europe. For instance, single parents (mostly women) and large families are clearly over-represented in poverty in most member states. This indicates that there is a need for a broader vision of family policies that embraces the diversity and that attends to the specific needs of different family configurations.

Placing children at the centre of policymaking combined with a focus on the rights of the child is therefore crucial to protect the most vulnerable from the growing precariousness of employment, the effects of changing demographics, and eventual economic shocks. The main aim must be to develop a protection system with durable and adaptive policies that does not leave the rights and well-being of the most vulnerable children at the mercy of changing economic, labour market or household conditions. This must ensure both an appropriate standard of living and access to quality services. The current Covid-19 crisis represents a unique opportunity to advance in this direction.

The pillars of a Child Union

If brought about, a ‘Child Union’⁶ would form the cornerstone of a strong Social Union and the pillar of a new welfare paradigm. As defined by different experts, activists, and MEPs, the objective of a Child Union is to overcome inequalities among children from early childhood by providing equal opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and abilities for children’s full participation in society. A Child Union seeks to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion, and would thus lay the foundations for social justice and cohesion. Investing early in life is the most effective way to ensure the viability of European welfare systems. The idea is straightforward: we know from a vast amount of research that disadvantages are cumulative over a life course, and therefore the earlier we revert them, the lower the costs and the higher the benefits.

Following this logic, the fundamental building block of a Child Union is affordable and high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). As we have seen, ECEC is a provision of Principle 11 of the EPSR: “children have the right to affordable early childhood education and

6 For a more detailed description of the ‘Child Union’, see Morabito, C. and Vandenbroeck, M. (2020) *Towards a Child Union. Reducing inequalities in the EU through investment in children’s early years*, Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) (www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/towards%20a%20child%20union%20-%207.pdf).

care of good quality". Indeed, there is consensus on the fact that participation in quality ECEC programmes has beneficial effects on the cognitive and socio-emotional development of children aged 0 to 3, especially among the most disadvantaged, with a positive impact in later educational and life achievements.⁷ However, half of the member states are still below the 33 per cent target of the ECEC coverage set by the Barcelona objectives, with significant variation at the subnational level. In Spain for instance, the difference between the regions with the highest and the lowest enrolment rate at 2 years old is above 60 percentage points.

Moreover, children from low-income households participate less in high-quality ECEC, which leads to an increase rather than a decrease in inequality. Most disadvantaged households, for instance in Spain about two thirds, report 'not having the capacity to meet the costs' as the main reason for not enrolling their children in ECEC programmes. But even if the most vulnerable children overcome the access barrier, they are still more likely to participate in lower-quality programmes and for fewer hours per week. Often national minimum quality standards are poorly defined, mostly because a significant part of the places offered is private. Overall, children who seem to benefit the most from quality ECEC programmes in many member states are those who already have higher parental resources, even when participation rates are above the target set by the Barcelona objectives. The member states that seem to overcome access and quality barriers to ECEC more successfully, such as Slovenia, follow a child rights-based approach to ECEC provision.

Despite being the building block of a Child Union, the expansion of affordable high-quality ECEC programmes cannot reduce inequalities by itself, as it needs to be integrated into a broader welfare provision. This broader policy system should be based on the notion of proportionate universalism (ie, universal benefits and services, with means-tested fees, complemented by additional resources for the most disadvantaged children), and should consist of three main sets of policies to address the needs of the most vulnerable children in particular:

- social protection through efficient tax and cash benefits, and minimum income schemes with a child component and integrated fade-in and fade-out mechanisms to provide positive incentives to account for the disrupted trajectories at the lower end of the labour market;
- equal access to basic services, apart from ECEC, such as housing, education, health, nutrition, and leisure;

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⁷ The recently published report Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2019) by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) provides new evidence on the positive effect of participation in ECEC programmes when looking at achievement in maths and science (<https://timss2019.org/reports/>).

labour market policies to stimulate employment and reskill/upskill the labour force, reduce the growing precariousness of work, set statutory minimum wages and offer adequate remunerated paternity and maternity leave of equal length and responsibility for both parents.⁸

Putting children at the centre of the reconstruction

The Covid-19 crisis has brought to light the weaknesses of European social protection systems, and it represents a turning point in the protection of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU. Although there are no official data yet, a further increase in child poverty can be expected in the wake of the pandemic. For the moment there is scattered evidence at the national level on the impact of Covid-19 on child poverty, and there is a structural deficit of data about children at the European level. Furthermore, the main indicators that are available are not responsive enough to sudden shocks. For instance, child poverty rates refer

to the economic situation of households with children the year prior to the time of the interview. This often results in a two-year gap between the time to which the information refers and the time when the result is published, thus making it impossible to capture changes in the period in between.

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The adverse situation brought by Covid-19 demands an effective response with a long-term perspective from European and national authorities. And there is no better synonym of 'long term' than children. In the 2008 economic crisis, the situation of disadvantaged children was overlooked by most member states, and the protection systems for children and families were undermined by the logic of austerity. This resulted in a significant increase in child poverty and inequality rates, the consequences of which member states are still countering more than a decade later. In the current crisis, the

coronavirus containment measures have disrupted the educational, social and emotional development of children, with expected long-term consequences if recovery plans do not include countermeasures that take children's needs into account.

To do things differently now, the first question we need to ask is how the Covid-19 crisis has specifically affected the most vulnerable children. The crisis has undoubtedly been a magnifier of existing health and wealth inequalities. Moreover, the different measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus have had important consequences on the lives of children and the fulfilment of their rights. First, income losses call into question the availability and responsiveness of social protection systems in several member states. In some cases, there are clearly underdeveloped or fragmented minimum income schemes.

Second, one of the coronavirus containment measures with the greatest impact on children has been school closures. There has been great variation across member states in the

8 See the EU Work-life Balance Directive adopted by the European Council in June 2019 (www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/13/better-work-life-balance-for-parents-and-carers-in-the-eu-council-adopts-new-rules/).

length of the closure, but this lasted up to six months (including the summer holidays) in the worst case. School closures have resulted in great learning losses, especially among the most disadvantaged schoolchildren, and have widened the already existing educational divide. Recent research⁹ has concluded, for instance, that in the Netherlands, which had a short school closure of eight weeks in 2020 and high broadband coverage even among the poor, the lost progress has amounted to about a fifth of a school year. Researchers have also found that learning losses are not equally distributed: schoolchildren from low-educated households have suffered a 50 per cent larger drop in performance than their more advantaged peers. Moreover, we can also expect an increase in early school-leaving and school-dropout rates.

Third, home schooling has highlighted an existing digital divide in most member states. This is observed at three levels: internet access, access to devices, and use of the internet and devices. In Spain for instance, a report from the Office of the High Commissioner against Child Poverty¹⁰ shows that one in ten low-income households with children, do not have internet access. Moreover, disaggregated by type of connection, one in five do not have broadband access. The report also shows that one in five children aged 15 in households in the first socio-economic quartile (the most disadvantaged) does not have access to a computer at home to do schoolwork. Although children in the most disadvantaged households make more intensive use of the internet than children in more advantaged households, half of them never or almost never use it to do homework. Moreover, there are added constraints such as the capacity of parents and teachers to assist their children (lower for the most disadvantaged children) and the readiness of schools to teach online (mostly lower for schools with a higher concentration of more disadvantaged children).

Fourth, lockdown measures have also evidenced inequalities in access to affordable and quality housing. Evidence shows that housing conditions are crucial for the physical, psychological and social development of children. Overcrowding, lack of daylight and inability to keep the home at a suitable temperature, among other factors, have significantly impacted the way the most vulnerable children have experienced the lockdown. Moreover, school closures, and consequently the closure of school canteens, have also increased inequalities in access to adequate nutrition. In addition, children's right to leisure has also been affected, and an increase of violence against children due to higher levels of stress at home has severely undermined their well-being.

The second question we need to ask, which is imperative, is how the 'Recovery and Resilience Facility' of the 'NextGenerationEU' (and the other initiatives at European level, as

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9 See Engzell, P., Frey, A. and Verhagen, M. (2020), 'Learning Inequality During the Covid-19 Pandemic', Working paper, SocArXiv (<https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/ve4z7/>).

10 See Spanish High Commissioner against Child Poverty (2020) 'Brecha Digital y Pobreza Infantil,' Policy brief (www.comisionadopobrezainfantil.gob.es/es/db014-brecha-digital-y-pobreza-infantil).

detailed in the next subsection) can address these adverse effects. Even if children are not explicitly prioritised in recovery funds, member states can include child poverty as a transverse axis in the definition and implementation of their national programmes. A child poverty and social exclusion perspective could be added to programmes related to the digital and green transitions – one of the central aims of the ‘Recovery and Resilience Facility’. With regard to the digital transition, action can be taken to provide fast broadband access to remote areas and disadvantaged households with children. Moreover, resources can be allocated to the digitisation of the education system, focusing particularly on the most disadvantaged schoolchildren and schools. Resources can also be allocated to level up the digital skills of teachers, and the digital competences of children, by designing for instance inclusive programmes that target schoolchildren in low-income households. With regard to the green transition, national governments can prioritise the rehabilitation and energy improvement of buildings in areas with a higher share of children in a situation of risk of poverty or social exclusion.

A critical juncture for the fight against child poverty in the EU

The additional resources of the Recovery and Resilience Facility are integrated in the long-term EU budget for the 2021-2027 period, which also includes the more traditional structural funds. Both instruments should therefore be understood as complementary in the fight against child poverty. In this regard, the European Commission’s amendment to the regulation

of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which adds that “Member States shall allocate at least 5 per cent of their ESF+ resources under shared management to support targeted actions and structural reforms to tackling child poverty”, remains the most important proposal to prioritise children in the next long-term budget.

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The appropriate use of both the recovery and structural funds by member states is crucial for the materialisation of the different initiatives in progress at the European level to promote child rights and the fight against child poverty. Among these initiatives, three have the potential to stand as the main pillars of a Child Union, as they have key implications for changing the situation of the most vulnerable children in the EU.

The European Child Guarantee (CG). This will take the form of a Council Recommendation and is expected for the first quarter of 2021. The Council Recommendation on a CG will most likely take into account the impact of the Covid-19

pandemic on children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and will most likely serve as a policy framework for member states. The CG is based on the principles and the integrated approach of the 2013 Recommendation, and the objective for the CG is to serve the implementation of Principle 11 (“Childcare and support to children”) of the EPSR, as well as to serve as an instrument for the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which is also expected for

the first quarter of 2021. The European Commission is currently carrying out preparatory action for a Child Guarantee. The double objective of this work is for it to serve as the basis for the Recommendation, and also as the basis for the development of National Action Plans for the future implementation of the CG. The 2021 Recommendation on a CG will request member states to adopt policies and make additional investments in order to guarantee the access of the most vulnerable children to affordable quality services that are essential for their well-being, health, and development. In the feasibility study conducted in the first phase of the preparatory action, “most vulnerable children” were defined as (1) children living in precarious family situations, (2) children residing in institutions, (3) children of recent migrants and refugees, and (4) children with disabilities and other children with special needs. The feasibility study identified five priority areas: (1) free early education and care, (2) free education, (3) free healthcare (4) decent housing, and (5) adequate nutrition. More recently, the access to extracurricular activities and leisure has been added to these five priority areas.

The finalisation of the preparatory action is expected for 2022, when the new programme period will most likely have already started, and when the ESF-relevant operational programmes should already have been adopted. In this regard, the European Court of Auditors makes the following recommendation: “the Commission should ensure that sufficient and reliable information on the measures and funding required to have a positive impact on the level of child poverty in the EU has been collated and analysed for developing a European Child Guarantee” by the beginning of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework period.

The Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is a priority for the European Commission, as implementation of the EPSR is reflected in the EU strategic agenda for 2019-2024. The action plan is expected to be presented in early 2021, and to seek political endorsement during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council. The plan should serve as the main vehicle for outlining new policy initiatives that can support the implementation of the EPSR’s 20 principles, including Principle 11 on child poverty. The European Commission is currently in a consultation process to prepare this.

The European strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-24. Also expected for the first quarter of 2021, this has recently concluded its open public consultation, including targeted consultations with children through leading child rights organisations. The main aim of the strategy is to provide a comprehensive policy framework to strengthen the promotion and protection of the rights of the child in the EU, by embedding a child rights perspective in all new EU legislative and policy actions. The strategy will put existing legislation, policies, tools and programmes at EU level under a single umbrella, and will assess how EU action can complement national measures to strengthen the protection of children’s rights. The strategy is crucial for a rights-based approach to child poverty, as it is expected to pay special attention to the rights of the most vulnerable children. Among other areas, it is expected to focus particularly on children’s right to fully participate in the digital and information society, and their right to equal access to quality education and health services.

Conclusion

Tackling child poverty in the EU is more important than ever. Both the 2008 economic crisis and the current Covid-19 crisis have found many member states unprepared for the protection of the most vulnerable children and their rights. This is mainly because progress towards a rights-based approach to child poverty at the international and European levels is still not fully reflected in concrete policies at the national level. This chapter advocates the need to advance towards a Child Union for a strong social Europe.

A Child Union involves a welfare paradigm change to overcome inequalities among children from early childhood by providing equal opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and abilities for children's full participation in society

In short, a Child Union involves a welfare paradigm change to overcome inequalities among children from early childhood by providing equal opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and abilities for children's full participation in society. To advance towards a Child Union, member states need to seize the momentum. National recovery plans, funded by the Next-GenerationEU package, should take into account the needs of the most vulnerable children, particularly those related to the educational and digital divides. Moreover, member states should be actively involved in the upcoming European initiatives related to child poverty. In particular, they should play an active role in the definition of the Child Guarantee and the

Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. They should also work together with the EU institutions to make sure that enough resources are channelled at national level to co-finance the implementation of these initiatives on child poverty and social exclusion.