

ETUC resolution on a Child Guarantee

Adopted at the virtual Executive Committee Meeting of 3-4 June 2021

SUMMARY

The aim of this document is to provide the ETUC inputs on the key elements of the European Commission's proposal for a Child Guarantee. Such views have been discussed and developed within the trade union delegation participating at a dedicated hearing with European Social Partners in Autumn 2020, and further discussed with the ETUC permanent Committee on Social Protection.

Background

Since January 2020, the Political Guidelines of President Ursula von der Leyen indicated the adoption of a Child Guarantee to help ensuring that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic rights, like health care and education. The Covid-19 pandemic has stressed the urgency to address the need of children in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

Built on the 2013 Commission Recommendation "Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage"¹, the Child Guarantee initiative aims to **ensure access for children in need to the services they require, in particular in the field of education and early childhood education and care (ECEC) (including participation in cultural and leisure activities), health care, nutrition and housing.**

The goal is to break the cycle of poverty faced by millions of children, and to contribute to building resilient societies across the EU, triggering policy action and investment, by the Member States, to close the gaps in terms of access to quality services **for children who are in need of extra support.**

In line with Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights on childcare and support to children, the initiative aims at promoting equality of opportunity, by ensuring that children in need have access to services and support that are **essential for their development and well-being.**

While the 2013 Recommendation would remain as a framework for **all children**, the Child Guarantee initiative would be a **targeted instrument for ensuring access to services by children who are most in need of extra support**, so that they have the same opportunities to succeed as their better-off peers. These may include **children at risk of poverty, in precarious family situations** (due to household composition, economic fragility - in particular material deprivation or very low labour intensity - or other social risk factors), **children with disabilities, children with a migrant background, and Roma children. Children in institutions** would also be included.

The Child Guarantee Recommendation would propose a policy framework at EU level, that will allow for adjusted and tailor-made solutions in each Member State. Member States will have to define multi-annual national strategies and set up "Child Guarantee National Action Plans". These will identify the children in need, their specific needs, measures for addressing their needs gaps, mode of service access and delivery to them

¹ recommending Member States to implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion and promote children's well-being. It called for the Member States to ensure a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage - such as Roma children, some migrant or ethnic minority children, children with special needs or disabilities, children in alternative care and street children, children of imprisoned parents, as well as children within households at particular risk of poverty, such as single parents or large families.

and the financing required. Member states will also have to estimate the financial investment needed, via national and – where available – complementary and targeted EU funding as well as monitoring and evaluation arrangements.

Trade union concerns and priorities

The ETUC remarks that beside the urgency to address the poverty of specific and most disadvantaged children, it is crucial that an integrated approach is undertaken. All children must have access to services that are crucial for their well-being, such as free health early childhood "edu-care". Therefore, by being targeted involuntary divisive and discriminating situations may be created.

With respect to "promoting equal access to and completion of quality and inclusive education, in particular for disadvantaged groups, from early childhood education and care (...) to tertiary level", for the ETUC, it is crucial that a Child Guarantee and the ESF+ fund allocations adopt an integrated and inclusive approach to childcare and education that, while addressing the primary needs of the most deprived children, also targets all children in an equal and inclusive way. In fact, tackling only the most deprived or disadvantaged only risk to increase inequalities among children and perpetuate the socio-economic divides in our societies which prove to have a tendency to fall-back across generations.

The importance of *preventing* deprivation, poverty, exclusion and disadvantage for children must be recalled. This implies also to take care of the socio-economic conditions of their families in order to prevent the recrudescence of the crisis and the perpetuation of disadvantaged situations and the cascade effect on generations. To help children, it is also necessary to give support to their parents. Single-parent families, especially when the woman is in charge, are for example extremely vulnerable and in need of extra support. Decreasing inequalities at family level is also key to prevent the intervention of institutions and the separation and distancing between parents and children, causing a series of long-term psychological wounds (lack of trust between parents and children; inability to communicate; ...).

The ETUC recalls that the COVID-19 crisis has magnified the inequalities, the divergences and the poverty-related issues that already existed in our societies. Many causes of child poverty and disadvantages are long-standing issues: decrease in GDP, under-employment, in-work poverty, insufficient household disposable income. These issues cannot be tackled if not in an integrated approach starting from investments in redistributive growth, quality jobs and fair employment conditions (including education, training and life-long learning), which lacked in the past years, due to the trends resulting from the European Economic Governance policies.

Covid-19 has also magnified the already grave issue of exploitation, violence and abuse on children, who can be victims of violence both within and outside the families. Once again, the problem is more serious in families with poor socio-economic and education background. The pandemic has also increased the victims of digital violence, in relation to the increased and often unmonitored access to the web. The pandemic has also reduced the impact of supportive and preventive social services, whose presence and action were already insufficient with respect to the needs, due to budget restrictions for public and social services.

In addition to formal education and care since the early childhood, Nordic countries have addressed quite well the need of high quality after-school services, showing the importance for children to learn and grow together and for their personal development. These must be considered as essential services also for the most deprived children.

Digital skills, and access to them, was a huge problem already before the pandemic. Certainly, as a result of the corona crisis, an additional problem has arisen, which

exacerbates the differences with regard to less protected children. The digital divide, due to the temporary introduction of online lessons, and to the more structural lack of public investment in digital infrastructures across the territories, will hit certain groups harder, this cannot be easily made up later on.

Since the ESF+ among the main fund-provider of the initiative, the implementation of a Child Guarantee is necessarily linked to its objectives. With respect to the objective of “improving the quality, effectiveness and labour market relevance of education and training systems, to support acquisition of key competences including digital skills”, the inspiring guideline recalling the “resilience of citizens” hides a recurrent ambiguity. The ETUC believes that investment in people should represent a priority *per se*, and not only aim at economic growth or respond to market needs.

In this respect, it is important to recall how Principle 11 of the EPSR on Childcare and support to children is strictly linked to the right to education and life-long education referred to in Principle 1, which states the universal right of each human being to learn and develop freely and grow. Childcare must not be focused on as a service that should be merely *affordable*, “to be paid for”. **The right to “edu-care” should not be considered as a commodity.**

Soft-law approach and consistency of the financial means

The ETUC questions the capacity of an initiative in the form of a Commission Recommendation as a tool to effectively deliver on the Child Guarantee in a way that actually provides upward convergence within and among member states with respect to child struggle for equal opportunities in accessing essential services. A Commission Recommendation could possibly be an incentive to strengthen certain practices that already exist in certain Member States, but in those Member States, where such policies are less developed, a non-binding tool might not be enough. Another instrument, such a Directive or a Council decision with minimum provisions, would have been more effective, supplemented by monitoring each Member State and highly targeted remedial recommendations per Member State.

The European Commission intends to design the Child Guarantee along the same lines as the Youth Guarantee. In this respect, it is important to recall the loopholes of the Youth Guarantee, and implement the lessons learnt.

The Child Guarantee could build synergies with the reinforced Youth Guarantee, as education will be a key element. In relation to early drop-out, linking the Child and the Youth Guarantee could be useful to further identify and reach young people in need of support – and to address more effectively the issue of NEET, identified as one of the major shortcomings of the Youth Guarantee. Synergies with the Child Guarantee could also improve the transition between education and work².

However, the mistakes and negative aspects of the Youth Guarantees must be avoided when used as a model to design the Child Guarantee. If it must be a Commission Recommendation, then there must also be a clear commitment from all Member states; clear coordination at European level on the implementation (monitoring system, reporting back from all MS) must be ensured; clear monitoring and evaluation of implementation should be implemented; involvement of all relevant partners (in preparation, monitoring and evaluation) must take place; adequate financial investment from both the European and national level should be secured; and quality standards and targets should be set and used to lead the monitoring and the evaluation practices.

The poor strategies to reach out to vulnerable communities, identified as a major problem with the Youth Guarantee, should be prevented in the case of the Child Guarantee.

² ETUC Resolution – “Resolution on Reinforced Youth Guarantee; The revisited fight against youth unemployment” – Executive Committee – 2-3 July 2020

Preventing and overcoming the very poor monitoring of the outcomes and impacts of the Youth Guarantee is a good start.

Without any detriment for the freedom of open personal development of children, which must not only be meant in relation to a future job, the Child Guarantee could also offer education on civic and constitutional rights, democratic rights, labour rights, so as to prepare children to become responsible adults in the labour market and society.

The revised ESF+ proposal includes a new thematic concentration requirement whereby all Member States should allocate at least 5% of the ESF+ resources under shared management to address child poverty. The proposal for a thematic concentration requirement takes full account of the current preparations for a Council Recommendation on a Child Guarantee and the ongoing pilot projects. This 5% of the ESF+ allocation is quite restricted with respect to the child poverty challenges highlighted in the most recent reports (see draft Joint Employment Report 2021). Regretfully, the EU Council was more cautious than the European Commission with respect to the Child Guarantee.

The ETUC warns to avoid enacting *merely formal* free access to education, healthcare, leisure and educational activities. It is proved that high rates of malnutrition, poor access to child education and care and even healthcare in many MS are clear consequences and in turn also causes of inequalities in low socio-economic backgrounds which is time to tackle once for all. Unaffordable, unavailable and poor-quality services are the typical outcomes of austerity measures by Member States in the use of EU funds and increase inequalities and poverty among young generations.

Inequalities in access and quality to childcare services are highest in countries where there is a strong marketisation of these services by the private sectors and its providers. Therefore, fund allocations and investments must privilege public service provisions.

ETUC recommendations for the Child Guarantee initiative

The ETUC calls for addressing the **socio-economic inequalities affecting the families** of the children experiencing poverty and social exclusion and that persist since a long time in our societies. Child poverty and exclusion – and even extra support need – should be eradicated from families and must be **prevented** – and then addressed - addressed via universal and high-quality assistance in case of disability, contrasting no or low-job intensity, poor educational attainments. Countries and regions must be equipped with public, accessible, high quality and effective services for children and their parents. All these issues must be addressed in an integrated manner with respect to an initiative targeting those in need of extra support.

The ETUC calls for an **increase in the amount and the effectiveness of social transfers to families in need** (where it is the case), to which the support to children must be added on top, without mixing or cumulating the financial contributions in a way that the respective purposes result blurred and thus reduced in effectiveness.

It is crucial to enact **integrated investments in future generations**, guaranteeing that *all* children have access to free health, early childhood, education and home care, as per the [joint views of the European Social Partners](#). The lack of coherency between the need of the young generations and the public expenditure allocations to tackle these needs must be addressed allowing a greater fiscal space for public investment in free, high-quality and accessible child education and care services for all. Furthermore, the lack of investments in childcare penalises gender employment.

The ETUC and EPSU also highlight the need to **fight the increasing commercialisation of such services** across member states. The EPSR Principle 11 must be enacted as an individual right that should **not be considered as a commodity** for anyone. The rights of children, especially of those in need of specific support against the inequalities, must not become a ground for mere economic and profit purposes. It is

thus crucial to make long-term **public** investments in services of high quality for all, with specific monitoring measures to ensure that private service providers do not speculate on the rights of children that Member States and public authorities should ensure.

The European Commission must prevent, and Member States must ensure, that **extra support to children in need is provided in a way that doesn't create further marginalisation** with respect to their peers.

The ETUC stresses the importance of **social dialogue** in the development, implementation and evaluation of the Recommendation and in the policies and lines of action in each of the Member States. For this reason, the ETUC calls for social dialogue to be given its due importance in the Recommendation for a Child Guarantee, so that the trade unions are empowered in the multi-annual national strategies and in the "Child Guarantee National Action Plans".

In addition to the right to formal education and care since the early childhood, leisure facilities for all should be enhanced and ensured to children in need of extra support, in order to complement their personal development and societal growth. These services must be provided by professional staff.

The ETUC demands investment in highly qualified staff for all the services, as well as the provision of staff specialised in caring for children most in need sufficient in number with respect to the needs – this is crucial especially for children with disabilities or psychological problems. It is also necessary to address the problems related to the working and remuneration conditions of the teaching and educational staff: the systematic undervaluation of the work performed affects its social relevance, leads to wage downward convergence and perpetuates that workers are underpaid.

The gender dimension has a great importance in childcare. The sector is a highly feminized one and among the most affected by undervaluation and gender pay gap. Gender pay and pension gaps must be tackled, also because they have a direct consequence on the well-being of children, especially in single parents households. Whereas Men are underrepresented in the sector, which contributes to gender stereotypes regarding male and female roles in the labour market as well as in society more broadly, thus efforts should be made to incentivise more men to join the childcare workforce. This is crucial also to enhance education, care and support free from gender bias and stereotypes.

For this reason it is also crucial to provide special attention to girls in need among all children in need. Gender discrimination, starting in childhood, continues to rob children of their childhoods and limit their chances – disproportionately affecting the world's girls. A girl is far more likely to be denied her rights, kept from school, forced to marry and subjected to violence – her voice remaining undervalued, if heard at all. This assault on childhood also deprives nations of the energy and talent they need to progress. This is unacceptable.

The fund allocation foreseen for the Child Guarantee targeting those in need of extra support should be reinforced and added on top to the budget foreseen for intervention against child poverty. The ETUC recalls the importance of structural fund allocations, based on the partnership principle guaranteeing the implication of social partners in their designing and monitoring, adequate to the needs of the new generations to prevent the raise of social inequalities among children with different socio-economic backgrounds.

Trade unions also demand that the new Recovery and Resilience Facility and other EU funds such as the European Regional Development Fund also provide for further funding than the 5% of the ESF+.