



Save the Children

CHILD POVERTY: **THE COST EUROPE CANNOT AFFORD**

Why investing in children is Europe's urgent necessity and smartest economic choice

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A. Foreword

Child poverty is not just a statistic. It is a lived reality – a daily struggle for children who are denied their most basic rights and opportunities.

I grew up in an environment where many children did not have the same opportunities as others. I saw, with my own eyes, how financial hardship could shape a child's entire life: limiting their education, weighing on their mental health, and eroding their sense of belonging. In my own neighbourhood in Sweden, I witnessed children who could not afford school supplies or trips, and who sometimes relied on the free school lunch as their only meal of the day. Poverty creates exclusion – and that exclusion runs deep.

For too many children, it is not just about being hungry for a day. It is about losing hope for tomorrow.

All children have the same rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet child poverty violates those rights - article by article.

It divides our societies into “us and them”: on one side, children who grow up surrounded by opportunity; on the other, children whose only disadvantage is their parents' income or their postal code, and who from the very beginning are forced to walk a harder road. We must ask ourselves: is this fair?

Now imagine a different society. A society where every child grows up in safety, with the chance to dream and to pursue those dreams. A society where no child is left behind because of circumstances beyond their control. That vision is possible – but it will not happen by itself. We all have a responsibility to make it a reality.

Our future – and Europe's future – depends on how we treat our children today.

Ruaa Harb, member of Save the Children European Child Advisory Board and Save the Children Youth Sweden



B. Executive summary

This report challenges the myth that child poverty is an unavoidable issue that Europe lacks the resources to eradicate, presenting a data-driven, rights-based analysis of its scale, its staggering economic and social costs, and the proven solutions that can end it. To achieve its goal of eradicating poverty by 2050, the EU must prioritise the strengthening of its social agenda and ensure adequate investments in children.

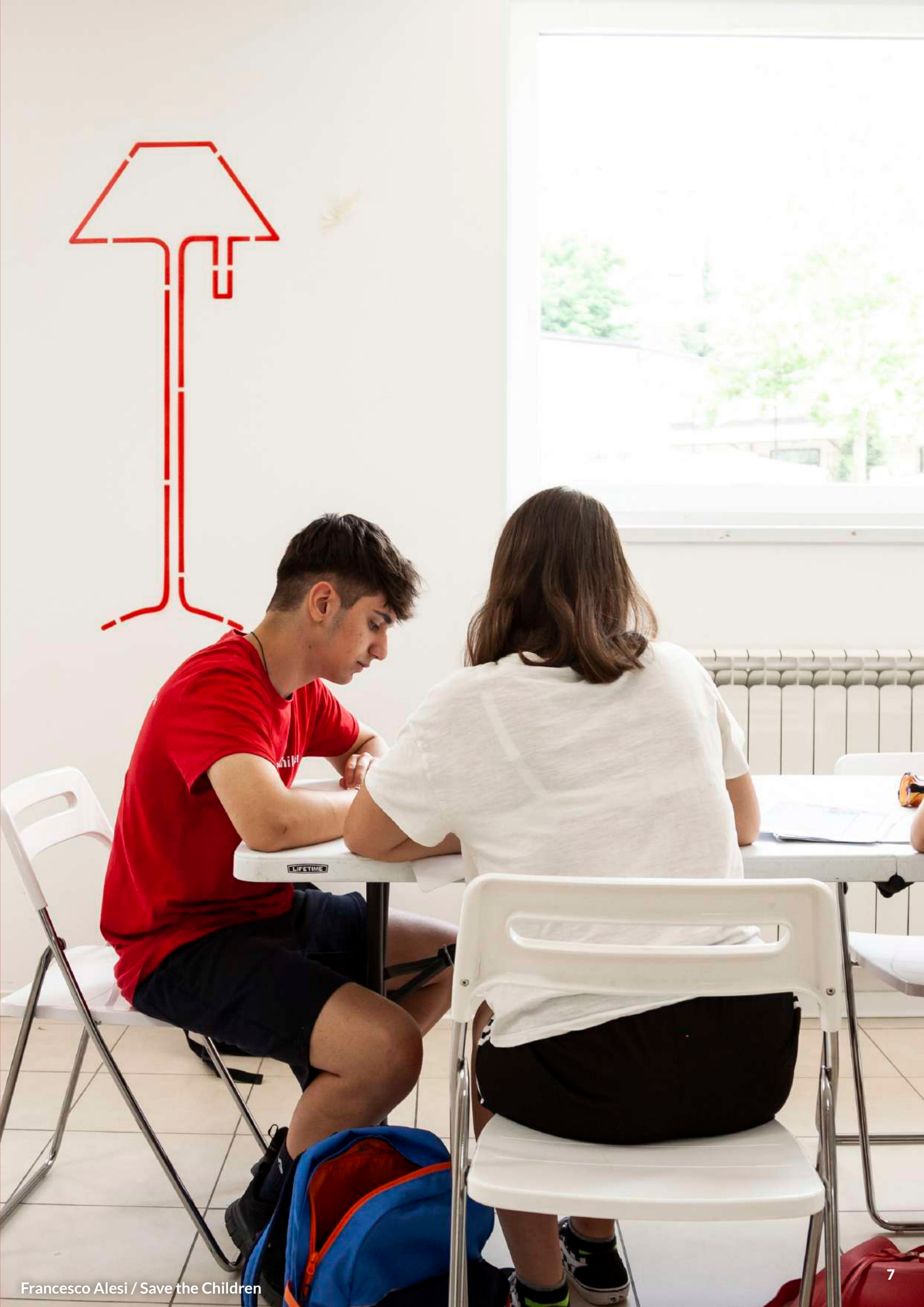
Child poverty in Europe remains a widespread, persistent, and profoundly unjust reality. Across the continent, the persistently high number of children growing up in poverty reflects not a lack of solutions, but a lack of prioritisation. Even though recent years have seen important progress in the EU's commitment to children's rights and the fight against child poverty, nearly **one in four children across its territory - 19.5 million in total - still lives at risk of poverty or social exclusion**. While the situation varies from country to country, the result is always the same: children's rights are neither respected, protected, nor fulfilled. In this context, failure to act is itself a form of neglect.

This pervasive issue imposes a **substantial economic drain on national budgets and productivity**, akin to a persistent **"invisible tax" on society**. The annual economic burden of child poverty is estimated to be **3.4% of the Gross**

Domestic Product (GDP) across OECD countries, stemming from lost employment, reduced earnings, and poorer health outcomes. The compounded effects of economic deprivation, inadequate housing, limited access to education, and poor nutrition create a **"syndemic"** harming children during their formative years and have lasting consequences on their physical and mental health.

The consequences of child poverty cast a long shadow, extending far beyond immediate hardship to create a **self-perpetuating economic trap across generations**. Adults who experienced child poverty are demonstrably less likely to be employed, earn 20% less on average, and suffer poorer health, equivalent to losing two weeks of life expectancy each year. This cycle of disadvantage impacts **academic achievement, employment opportunities, and contributes to early and preventable deaths from various causes**.

This underscores that interventions must not only alleviate immediate poverty but also be designed to break this intergenerational cycle. **The question thus shifts from "can Europe afford to invest?" to "can Europe afford not to invest?"** as the substantial cost of inaction is already being borne. With the right vision and commitment, Europe can turn the tide by **placing children at the heart of social and economic policy, strengthening rights-based frameworks like the European Child Guarantee (ECG), and ensuring no child is left behind**. The tools exist, the knowledge is there—what's needed now is the political courage to treat child poverty not just as a statistic, but as a solvable injustice.



1. The state of child poverty: a pervasive issue with a staggering cost

Child poverty is a pan-European crisis, but its burden is not shared equally. The data reveals a story of **persistent inequality, deepening hardship for the most vulnerable, and a collective failure to meet established goals.**

Despite the adoption of unprecedented and crucial instruments to tackle child poverty, the EU is currently off-track from its goal of lifting 5 million children out of poverty by 2030. In fact, the number of children at risk is still higher than in pre-pandemic times. Compared to 2019, the EU is registering **446,000 more children at risk of poverty or social exclusion**, leaving the EU at least **5.45 million children away from its target**. This means that, since 2019, an average of almost **240 children a day** have fallen into the risk of poverty or social exclusion, and that EU countries will need to lift around **2,500 children a day** out of this situation between 2025 and the end of 2030 to meet the target. Moreover, while headline rates show marginal improvements, **6.28 million children (7.9%)** suffer from severe material and social deprivation, lacking access to basic necessities. A cross-country analysis reveals deeply uneven progress:

- **Persistently high rates:** Countries like **Spain (34.6%)**, **Romania (33.8%)** and **Bulgaria (35.1%)** continue to report extremely high levels of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, far exceeding the EU average.
- **Worrying reversals:** Even wealthier nations have seen reversals of earlier gains. **Finland's** rate rose from 13.2% in 2019 to **17.3%** in 2024, while **Belgium's** has climbed to 20.2%.
- **Signs of progress:** Conversely, targeted policies have yielded results in some Member States. **Ireland** has seen a drop from **25.1%** to 20.6%, and **Poland** has maintained a stable rate well below the EU average.
- **Regional disparities beyond the EU:** Child poverty remains widespread in the Western Balkans, with rates often surpassing EU averages—Bosnia and Herzegovina (31%), Montenegro (28%), and Serbia (13.8%) all show significant disparities, especially among Roma and children living in rural areas. In war-affected Ukraine, child deprivation

is severe and persistent, with poverty rates reaching 65.6%, and extreme hardship being concentrated in large or unemployed households.

The high cost of not investing enough

Allowing child poverty to persist is an economic drain on national budgets and productivity. Across OECD countries, the annual economic burden of childhood disadvantage is estimated at **3.4% of the GDP**. This cost is even higher in some Member States, reaching **5.1% of the GDP in Spain** and **6.1% in Lithuania**. In **Ireland**, poverty costs the state **€4.5 billion** each year in increased pressure on public services, while in **Norway**, the annual cost of youth marginalisation is estimated at **€6.4 billion**. Inaction is far more expensive than strategic investment.

An early school leaver can cost the state between **€1 million and €2 million** over their lifetime. In **Romania**, with the EU's highest dropout rate, the cumulative cost is estimated at **35.67% of its annual GDP**.

The high return of investing in children

Strategic spending on children is one of the most effective long-term economic policies. The returns are exceptionally high, creating a more skilled workforce and reducing future dependency on the state. For example, every **€1** invested in school meal programmes can generate between **€7 and €34** in benefits, with a universal programme in Sweden leading to a **3% higher lifetime income** for students.

A vicious intergenerational cycle

Poverty is often inherited, creating a cycle of disadvantage that weighs on public finances for generations. An adult's risk of poverty is significantly higher (**20.0%**) if they grew up in a financially unstable household. In **Germany**, it can take an estimated **six generations** for a child from a low-income family to reach the national median income, demonstrating a deep-rooted lack of social mobility. This cycle is fuelled by interconnected deprivations in health, education, and social inclusion.

Who is most at risk

Child poverty disproportionately affects specific groups, who face intersecting and compounding disadvantages. National policies must target these children to be effective. Key vulnerable groups include:

Table 1. Children in vulnerable groups

GROUP	HIGHLIGHTED IN CHILD GUARANTEE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS BY NATIONAL AUTHORITIES
Roma and ethnic minority children	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden
Children with a migrant background	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden
Children from single parent families	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Italy
Children in large families (multiple children's households)	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden
Children with disabilities	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden
Children in low-income families or families in precarious situations (including housing)	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden
Children in rural areas	Lithuania, Romania, Spain
Children in the protection system (institutional care or homeless)	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden
Victims of trafficking or violence (including on the Internet)	Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden
Children with mental health issues	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden
Children with substance abuse and behavioural disorders	Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Sweden
LGBTI+ children	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden

Save the Children's national members further highlight that a recurring and critical barrier to addressing child poverty effectively is the **invisibility of many vulnerable groups of children** in both **data systems** and **policy frameworks**. These widespread data deficits not only obscure the realities faced by the most marginalised children but also **perpetuate cycles of exclusion**, as **their needs remain unacknowledged and unaddressed in national poverty strategies and resource allocation**. Closing these gaps is therefore essential to ensuring that policies are grounded in an accurate understanding of who is most affected and why.



Save the Children Romania

Drivers of child poverty

Child poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon driven by a complex interplay of economic, social, and structural factors. Rising living costs, inadequate social protection systems, fragmented service delivery, and persistent territorial and ethnic disparities continue to deepen the disadvantage faced by many children across Europe and neighbouring regions. In many contexts, poverty is not merely a temporary condition but a **deeply rooted outcome of systemic exclusion**. Understanding these drivers is essential to crafting effective, targeted, and sustainable policy responses.

Table 2. Common drivers of child poverty in focus countries, as highlighted by this report

DRIVER	COUNTRIES HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS REPORT
Economic instability, inflation, low wages/income	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine
Fragmented/inadequate social protection	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine
Underinvestment in children/social sectors	Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine
Limited access to quality education and health	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Lithuania, Montenegro, Romania, Spain, Ukraine
Discrimination and exclusion	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Kosovo, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Spain, and Ukraine
Restrictive eligibility criteria/bureaucratic complexity	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, Lithuania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden
Housing insecurity/overcrowding	Albania, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Ukraine
Mental health and psychosocial support gaps	Kosovo, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine
Unemployment/underemployment	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Kosovo, Spain and Serbia
Low child benefits or non-indexed	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Germany, Montenegro, Poland, Spain, Sweden

2. The policy response: frameworks, gaps, and promising practices

All European countries are legally bound by the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** to combat child poverty, and the EU has developed a powerful toolbox of strategies and instruments, including the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and the **ECG**. However, implementation at the national level remains fragmented and often falls short of the ambition set at the EU level, revealing gaps between commitment and action.

Fragmented national action

While some countries like **Ireland** have established dedicated, cross-government Child Poverty Units, most EU Member States and European governments lack binding child poverty targets and rely on broad or outdated strategies. Many interventions are siloed, failing to address the multidimensional nature of poverty. UNCRC monitoring bodies consistently urge stronger action, yet many recommendations for dedicated strategies and increased benefits go unheeded.

Promising but under-resourced interventions

Across Europe and neighbouring countries, governments have implemented a diverse mix of policy tools to address child poverty, reflecting both the multidimensional nature of the challenge and the varied socio-economic contexts.

- At the core of national responses are **income support schemes**—most notably child benefits and minimum income guarantees. Countries such as **Ireland**, **Poland**, **Italy**, and **Norway** have demonstrated the positive effects of well-calibrated cash transfers, with evidence showing reductions in poverty rates and improvements in child outcomes. However, the effectiveness of these schemes is often undermined by inadequate indexation to inflation, complex eligibility criteria, and low uptake, as illustrated by the experience of **Spain** and **Germany**.

Save the Children complements these public efforts by providing direct income support in crisis and poverty contexts. In Lithuania, Save the Children runs a **Cash and Voucher Assistance programme**, combining monthly transfers and crisis payments with psychosocial support. In Ukraine, over **1,100 family businesses** and **4,000 agricultural households** have received grants and training to stabilise livelihoods amid displacement and economic collapse.

Yet **income support alone is insufficient**. Ensuring equitable access to **essential services**, from early childhood education and health care to school meals and mental health support, emerges as a critical pillar in reducing child poverty and promoting inclusion. Countries like **Finland** and **Ireland** are leading with universal service models and targeted school-based initiatives. Others, such as **Romania**, **Germany**, and **Albania**, are scaling up or piloting mobile and community-based approaches to reach disadvantaged groups, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Save the Children complements these public efforts through direct service provision and infrastructure investment, especially in remote or crisis-affected zones. For example, in Kosovo, it helped scale up **community-based early childhood centres** in 27 rural zones, boosting access by 78% between 2021 and 2023. In Finland, the **Fuel for Life** programme supported **over 17,000 children** with aid for food, school materials, and hobbies. In Italy, the **Punti Luce centres** offer educational, recreational, and psychosocial support while engaging local communities in child-friendly urban development. In Lithuania, Save the Children maintains a network of **33 partner daycare centres** for vulnerable children.

- Efforts to **promote parental employment** are also gaining traction. Initiatives in **Kosovo, Poland, and Albania** aim to boost labour market participation among parents, especially women and those from low-income households, by improving access to childcare and offering financial incentives. Nonetheless, structural barriers such as unstable employment, limited services, and gender inequality continue to constrain progress.
- A growing recognition of the **interconnection between poverty and institutionalisation** has led countries like **Ukraine and Kosovo** to reform social care laws and expand family-based services. However, the placement of children in institutions due to poverty remains widespread, particularly in contexts of displacement and systemic underfunding.
- **Housing insecurity** is increasingly acknowledged as both a symptom and a driver of child poverty. While some countries, such as **Spain (Catalonia)** and **Italy**, have begun to incorporate housing into anti-poverty strategies, challenges around affordability, overcrowding, and substandard living conditions remain persistent.

***Save the Children Spain** is putting forward child-focused **public policy recommendations** for the upcoming **Spanish National Housing Plan (2026–2030)**. The aim is to protect children and guarantee access to adequate housing for households with children, especially those at risk of social exclusion. Efforts are being made to ensure that a child rights perspective is fully integrated into the plan, with proposals presented both to the central government and to regional governments across the autonomous communities.*

- Finally, several governments—including those of **Germany, Ireland, Finland, and Albania**—have taken steps to **anchor children's rights in legal and policy frameworks**, aligning their approaches with the UNCRC and the ECG. However, legislative and strategic commitments often face gaps in implementation, coordination, and accountability—underscoring the need for stronger governance and sustained political will.

The collective experience highlights a crucial insight: **no single intervention can reduce child poverty in isolation**. A holistic, child-centred approach—combining income support, quality services, employment measures, housing security, and legal protections—is essential to deliver lasting and equitable change. Moreover, strong coordination mechanisms, adequate funding, and meaningful child participation must underpin these efforts.

The funding gap

EU funds, particularly the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, are vital. EU Member States with at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rates higher than the EU average are required to earmark at least **5% of their ESF+ resources** to tackle it. Civil society organisations (CSOs) report **barriers** to accessing these funds, and there is a growing risk of **funding being reallocated** away from social investment toward other priorities in the next EU budget. Hence, while an earmarking on child poverty is a fundamental element that must be maintained in the new MFF, it is important to note that real needs far exceed these allocations.

The **European Commission proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF** comes at a decisive moment for the EU's social agenda, yet its current structure raises several concerns. While requiring Member States to concentrate resources in their National and Regional Partnership Plans to implement the Child Guarantee through targeted actions and structural reforms to tackle child poverty, it also risks providing **insufficient guarantees for social investment and weakening existing safeguards**. The shift to a decentralised model for the ESF - integrated into broader funds and delivered through national and regional plans - risks diluting visibility, prioritisation, and accountability for social objectives. Critically, earmarking for social investments and the fight against poverty is reduced from **25% to a 14% target**, and there is **no dedicated allocation to tackle child poverty**. Without ring-fenced funding, enabling conditions, and robust tracking mechanisms, the EU is highly likely to break its pledge to lift 5 million children out of poverty by 2030 and undermine the implementation of the ECG.

Table 3. Comparative snapshot of ESF+ positioning in the current and the future MFF

FEATURE	2021-2027 ESF+ REGULATION	PROPOSED 2028-2034 REGULATION
ESF+ sole regulation status	Yes	No - incorporated in a wider fund with different priorities
25% social inclusion ceiling	Binding	14% target
5% child-poverty minimum (high-risk)	Binding	Not included
3% aid to most deprived	Binding (FEAD)	Not included

But Member States are specifically requested to concentrate resources in their National and Regional Partnership Plans to implement the ECG.



3. Realising the promise of the European Child Guarantee

The ECG represents a landmark in EU social policy; a transformative and unprecedented initiative aimed at breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and exclusion by ensuring that all children in vulnerable situations have access to essential services. As the first EU-level instrument explicitly designed to guarantee social rights for children, the ECG has shifted the conversation from aspirational commitments to actionable policy, backed by national implementation frameworks and periodic monitoring requirements.

A catalyst for action

Since its adoption in 2021, the ECG has become a **catalyst for policy innovation and political commitment**. Countries like **Italy** have allocated €40 million under the ESF+ to support Roma children and youth empowerment, while **Ireland** has integrated the ECG into local area-based poverty action plans with coordinated governance through a national programme office. In **Lithuania**, national mental health services were significantly expanded through the scaling of

Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy, and in **Sweden** a pilot leisure card scheme was proposed to boost children's access to cultural and recreational activities.

Beyond generating new initiatives, the ECG has also **strengthened and scaled existing services**. For instance, **Finland** reinforced early childhood education and care by reducing staff-to-child ratios and enhancing child health services, while **Romania** improved support for vulnerable communities through multifunctional centres and Roma-focused projects. In **Poland**, existing social programmes were formalised and better aligned with ECG principles to support vulnerable children across domains like education, nutrition, and housing.

Importantly, the ECG's influence extends beyond the EU. In **enlargement countries**, it is proving to be a vital reform blueprint - as repeatedly requested by Save the Children. **Kosovo** has reformed its social assistance scheme and expanded community-based early education centres, while **Albania** has embedded ECG principles into its national social protection strategy. In **Ukraine**, the ECG provides a blueprint for child-sensitive recovery and



reconstruction, ensuring that long-term development is aligned with EU standards. Supporting these countries to adopt ECG-like action plans through technical assistance and dedicated pre-accession funding must become a central component of the enlargement process.

Persistent implementation gaps

Despite these advances, **critical challenges persist**. Funding remains fragmented or temporary in many countries, and key service areas like housing and healthcare receive insufficient attention. Access barriers—such as geographic disparities, transport limitations, and workforce shortages—continue to limit the reach of services. Data fragmentation is widespread, hampering efforts to monitor progress and target the most marginalised children. Moreover, while the ECG mandates child participation, many countries still treat such engagement as symbolic or one-off, with only a few (e.g., **Germany, Ireland, and Italy**) demonstrating more structured efforts.

- **Fragmented governance:** In decentralised states like **Spain and Germany**, complex and siloed government structures (“pillarisation”) make coordinated, cross-sectoral action extremely difficult. The success of the ECG is intrinsically linked to effective multi-level governance. While national governments are responsible for developing National Action Plans (NAPs), the actual delivery of the guaranteed services overwhelmingly occurs at the local level. **Cities and municipalities are therefore instrumental partners** in making the Guarantee a reality, and their involvement in the design and implementation of policies is essential.
- **Unsustainable funding:** A major weakness is the lack of dedicated, long-term national funding. Many NAPs have **no specific budget**, relying on temporary projects or existing budgets that prevent structural change and long-term planning. Save the Children has already raised concerns about insufficient funding, noting that the European Parliament’s repeated call for a **dedicated €20 billion budget** for the ECG was not included in the latest report of the chamber on the MFF. While an appropriate **ESF+ earmarking** is vital, its impact is contingent on EU Member States using the funds effectively and supplementing them with **adequate national resources**, which may be vulnerable to competing priorities or austerity measures. The success of the ECG therefore hinges on strong political pressure and accountability

from the Commission, the Parliament, and CSOs to ensure NAPs lead to tangible action.

- **Barriers to access:** Services often fail to reach those who need them most due to geographical disparities (urban vs. rural), practical barriers like transport and other hidden costs, and critical shortages of skilled staff in sectors like childcare and mental health.
- **Data and monitoring deficits:** Effective policy is hindered by poor data. Across the EU, data remains fragmented and fails to capture the realities of the most vulnerable children—including Roma, those with disabilities, or undocumented children—making them statistically invisible. The current ECG monitoring framework has its limitations. The current indicators used to monitor the ECG vary in comparability, reliability, and timeliness across Member States, with notable gaps in capturing the experiences of vulnerable groups. For example, in 2022, only 20% of AROPE children under 3 accessed formal childcare, compared to nearly 40% of their better-off peers. This gap indicates that even when services are nominally “free” or “available,” significant barriers—be they hidden costs, lack of information, geographical distance, or social stigma—prevent their take-up. To address this, monitoring must move beyond participation rates to include disaggregated and qualitative data on service quality, affordability, and the real obstacles families face. This requires improved data systems and direct engagement with affected communities.
- **Symbolic child participation:** While mechanisms for child participation exist (e.g., youth councils in Ireland, consultations in Germany), they are often ad hoc, symbolic, and fail to meaningfully influence policy design, budgeting, or evaluation.

The ECG serves as a **diagnostic tool** that makes these long-standing weaknesses visible, while offering a powerful framework to address them through integrated planning, funding, and accountability mechanisms. As the EU prepares for the ECG’s 2026 mid-term review, the policy stands at a pivotal juncture. To fully realise its transformative potential, the ECG must evolve from a promising framework to a **systemic driver of change**—with stronger governance, sustainable financing, robust data systems, and meaningful child and civil society engagement.

C. Conclusions and recommendations

This section summarises the conclusions and linked recommendations included in this report and highlights the most critical policy implications for EU and national policymakers, each grounded in a rationale that explains why action is both urgent and feasible.

Conclusion 1: Child poverty is the result of policy choices - not inevitability.

Child poverty is both preventable and politically relevant. The data collected by this report showcase an urgent need for a fundamental commitment to action, but real impact depends on rigorous implementation, adequate funds, and meaningful engagement with children and CSOs. Across countries, child poverty levels vary significantly not due to chance, but due to different political commitments, policy designs, and fiscal choices. Framing child poverty as a matter of political will—rather than economic fate—is a prerequisite for progress and success.

WHY IT MATTERS

Acknowledging child poverty as a political and preventable issue is the first step in mobilising action. Genuine political commitment is required to make long-term investments and policy reforms, especially when children have no electoral voice. Recent years have seen meaningful progress in the EU's commitment to children's rights and the fight against child poverty. It is now essential for the EU to build on these achievements and turn them into lasting change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ending child poverty is not a matter of finding new solutions, but of **implementing the ones we have, adequate investments, and sustained political will**.
- The EU must **prioritise the fight against child poverty and investments in children** in its political agenda, proposing a concrete plan to strengthen the ECG, setting up an ambitious EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, and allocating adequate resources to eradicate poverty by 2050.
- The fight against child poverty must be framed not as a social expenditure we cannot afford, but as a **core strategic investment** in Europe's economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and resilience.
- The EU should include an **ambitious and measurable child poverty reduction target** into the new EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the renewed Action Plan, accompanied by a clear **roadmap** for achieving the target on time.
- European governments must enshrine **national child poverty reduction targets** in national strategies, budgets, and funding plans. This includes developing comprehensive action plans for implementing recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.



Salvați Copiii România este o organizație de utilitate publică, a cărei misiune este aceea de a garanta egitatea de șanse pentru toți copiii, indiferent de mediul din care provin, prin utilizarea propriilor expertize, precum și prin activități de lobby și advocacy, asigurând factorilor de decizie și mobilizarea liderilor din societatea civilă.

Salvați Copiii promovează de 27 ani drepturile copilului, în amănunțite detalii, prin intermediul Programului Național de Apărare a Copilului. Peste 1.500.000 de copii au fost incluși în programe educaționale, de protecție și asistență medicală-socială, de stimulare a participării lor în activități de promovare și reabilitare a drepturilor lor.

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Conclusion 2: Integrated service delivery is critical for effective support.

Children's needs are multidimensional and so must be the services designed to support them. The success of integrated service models, which bring together health, education, and parenting support, illustrates the power of joined-up, community-based services. The ECG provides a framework to foster such integrated approaches. In contrast, fragmented or siloed service delivery often results in

duplication, missed opportunities for prevention, and inaccessible pathways for families most in need.

WHY IT MATTERS

Vulnerable children frequently face multiple and compounding disadvantages, from food insecurity and housing instability to mental health issues and learning gaps. Coordinated and holistic services ensure that no child falls through the cracks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- EU and national policymakers should prioritise the development of **integrated support systems** for children and families, particularly in disadvantaged urban and rural communities.
- EU funding should incentivise **cross-sectoral cooperation** at the national, municipal and regional level, moving beyond siloed interventions. Child poverty cannot be solved by social policy ministries alone. It is a whole-of-society problem that is deeply intertwined with structural issues in other domains, most notably housing and child protection.
- **Monitoring frameworks** should measure not only coverage but also the effectiveness of **coordination across sectors**.
- The persistence of child poverty is often the unintended consequence of decisions made in other domains without due consideration for their impact on the youngest members of society, such as a decision to raise value-added taxes, alter housing benefit calculations, or rezone public land. The **Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)** is a powerful preventative tool to counteract this systemic blindness. CRIsAs should be applied to the vast range of policies in different key sectors - such as finance, transport, housing, or environment - so that they can have a far greater, albeit indirect, impact.



Conclusion 3: Targeted universalism balances fairness and effectiveness.

Universal policies ensure that no child is excluded from basic entitlements, as enshrined in the UNCRC. However, within these universal systems, additional support must be targeted toward those most at risk. This dual approach - universal access with targeted intensity - maximises both social return on investment and public legitimacy.

WHY IT MATTERS

This report shows that universal childcare benefits particularly lift outcomes for children from low-income families, especially when accompanied by targeted subsidies. Conversely, targeted schemes alone can stigmatise beneficiaries or suffer from low uptake.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- National governments should maintain **universal entitlements to key services** but embed **progressive financing mechanisms** and **targeted access support for social services** to support children in vulnerable situations.
- The ECG should be prioritised and strengthened in ways that **uphold universal principles while identifying and addressing specific barriers** faced by groups in vulnerable situations such as Roma children, children with disabilities, and those with a migration background. To deliver, the ECG must be reinforced and fully implemented, with **binding, ring-fenced EU funding** that matches the scale of the challenge.
- **Cash transfers and in-kind services** are effective tools for reducing child poverty, but their impact is maximised when they are **deployed synergistically** rather than as competing alternatives. A one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient to address the diverse needs of families and the varying contexts across countries. European governments should design and implement **integrated child-sensitive social protection packages** that strategically combine cash transfers, universal in-kind services, and targeted support components.
- **Enlargement countries should be supported** to build progressive, inclusive service systems that combine rights-based access with targeted delivery.

Conclusion 4: Sustainable, child-focused funding is necessary to close the investment gap.

Tackling child poverty requires stable and sufficient public investment. While the EU is equipped with several key instruments to eradicate child poverty, their impact ultimately depends on effective implementation and sustainable, long-term funding.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without adequate and predictable funding, even the most progressive policy commitments (e.g. the ECG or national social benefits) risk becoming paper promises.

Fiscal pressures and emerging political priorities must not be used as justification for underfunding services that are foundational to children's development and wellbeing. The next MFF draft proposal still does not guarantee that children and families in vulnerable situations will benefit from sustained and targeted EU investment. The upcoming MFF negotiations offer a critical opportunity to address these gaps and establish a truly child-centred financial framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU and national governments should **align budgetary allocations with the proven ROI of early interventions and child-focused programmes**. The EU has the tools to end child poverty, but it requires only if they are adequately resourced. Social investment must remain a central pillar of the EU's political agenda. As discussions around competitiveness, productivity, and security intensify, the EU must protect the social dimension that underpins Europe's cohesion, its unique strategic advantage, and a key source of its legitimacy.
- The EU must **secure sustainable, child-focused funding in the next MFF**. As requested, several times by the European Parliament, the EU should establish a dedicated ESF+ budget of at least €20 billion for the ECG to maximise its impact on reducing child poverty. Additionally, ensure that at least **5%** of the ESF's resources should be allocated to tackling child poverty in all EU Member States. For countries with an AROPE rate above the EU average, this allocation should be increased to at least **10%**.
- The next MFF should fully **align with the UNCRC** and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. A "Child Lens Investing" approach must be introduced across all funding instruments, supported by a transparent "**Child Marker**" to track spending and link it to measurable child outcomes. Clear financial allocations should be embedded in all ECG Action Plans to demonstrate commitment and enable monitoring.
- The **European Semester** and related budgetary oversight tools should assess not only fiscal compliance but also social investment sufficiency.
- National governments should be encouraged to adopt **child rights budgeting tools**, and these should be mandatory for EU Member States, these should be mandatory, with ensuring transparency in tracking expenditure and outcomes.
- Child-centred reforms should be promoted in **pre-accession countries** by making social inclusion and national ECG implementation plans binding conditions for EU funding. The EU should ensure that ECG-linked investments are eligible under pre-accession instruments (e.g. IPA), with clear visibility and tracking of child-focused spending in enlargement countries.



Conclusion 5: The quality of services should matter just as much as coverage.

Expanding access to services is necessary, but not sufficient. Evidence shows that simply increasing availability without investing in quality limits the impact on child development. Key elements of quality include well-trained staff, low child-to-adult ratios, inclusive pedagogical practices, and emotionally supportive environments.

WHY IT MATTERS

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, quality matters most. Inadequate or low-quality services risk widening inequality rather than reducing it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- EU and national policymakers should establish **minimum quality standards** for services under the ECG, backed by investment in workforce training and infrastructure.
- National education and care systems should prioritise **inclusive and culturally responsive approaches**, particularly during a child's early years and in transition stages.
- **CSOs, child and youth organisations** and structures such as youth councils, should be recognised as **quality innovators** and be involved in service design and monitoring.



Conclusion 6: Stronger monitoring and disaggregated data are essential for accountability.

Gaps in data conceal inequality. Without disaggregated data, particularly by income, ethnicity, geography, migration status and disability, policies intended to reduce child poverty cannot be properly targeted, monitored, or improved as without knowing who is affected, where, and how are necessary parameters. The absence of such data leads to blind spots in policymaking and allows structural exclusion to persist unchallenged.

WHY IT MATTERS

Reliable, child-specific data is not a technical luxury; it is a fundamental tool for justice and impact. It enables policymakers to direct resources where they are needed most, allows civil society to hold institutions accountable, and empowers communities to advocate for change. Data transparency also fosters public trust and underpins democratic decision-making. Without it, the promise of the ECG and national anti-poverty strategies will remain unfulfilled for the very children who need them most.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should establish a **harmonised monitoring framework** with child-focused indicators and annual progress reviews.
- National statistical offices must **improve data collection** on children disaggregated by income, age group, family structure, geography, disability, ethnicity, and migration status.



Save the Children Romania

Conclusion 7: Meaningful participation of children and civil society must be institutionalised.

In line with the UNCRC Article 12, children possess unique lived experiences and perspectives that make them essential contributors to the design of effective and inclusive policies. However, in many countries, formal mechanisms to ensure their meaningful participation are either weak or absent. At the same time, CSOs, crucial intermediaries in amplifying children's voices and reaching marginalised groups,

often operate under significant resource constraints and face limited influence in policy processes.

WHY IT MATTERS

When children are meaningfully involved, policies are more effective and inclusive. Participation also helps children build skills, confidence, and a sense of agency, which contributes to social cohesion and democratic resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should **expand and resource child and youth participation processes**, such as the Child Participation Platform, and require Member States to demonstrate engagement with children and CSOs.
- As requested by the UNCRC, governments should move beyond symbolic gestures by creating **sustainable, resourced mechanisms for children, young people, and CSOs to participate** in the design, implementation, and evaluation of all anti-poverty policies.

Conclusion 8: Ending child poverty is Europe's smartest investment.

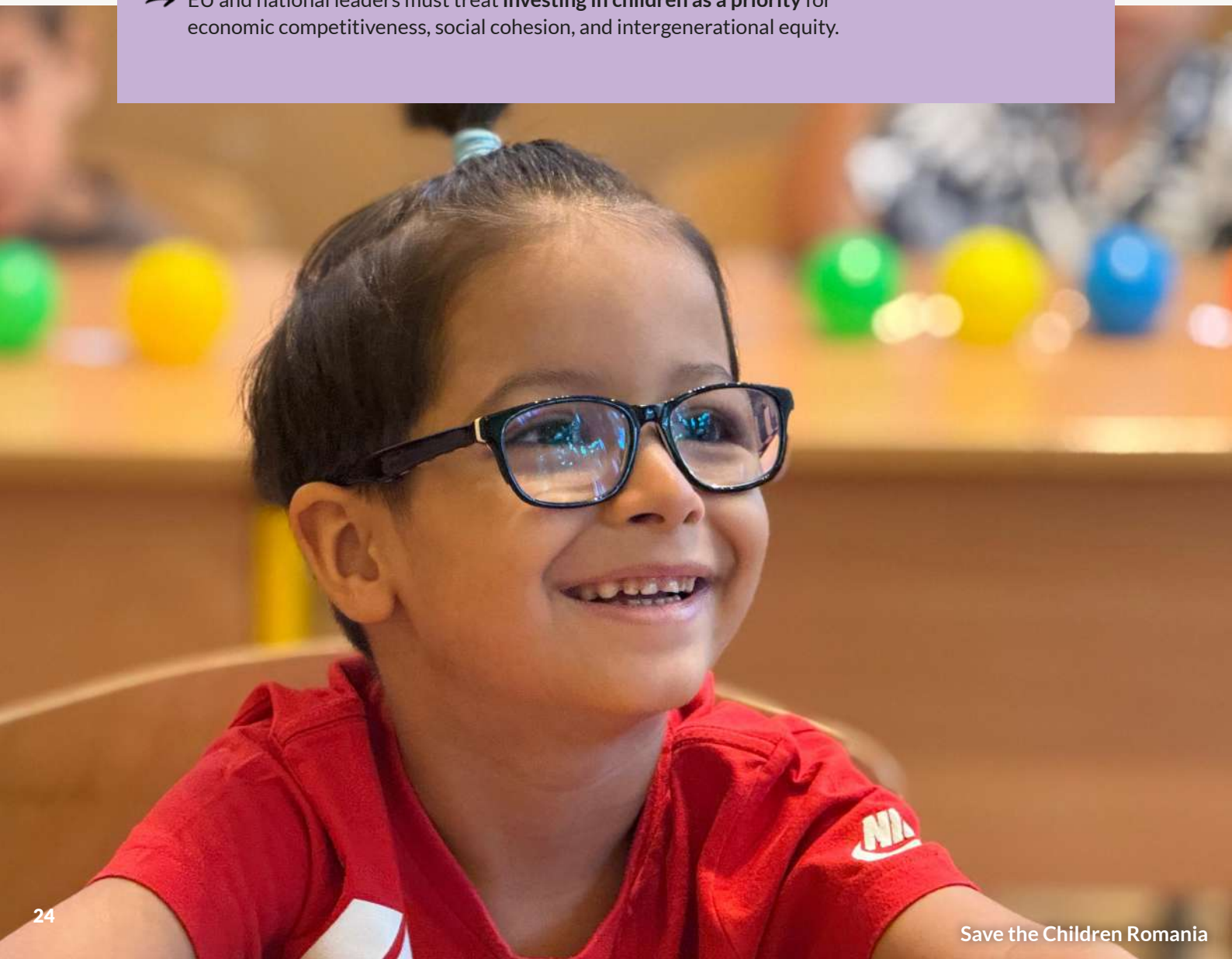
Child poverty imposes massive long-term costs, through lower educational attainment, reduced productivity, poorer health, and higher dependency on welfare. Early and sustained investment in children is a proven driver of inclusive growth and social cohesion.

WHY IT MATTERS

With Europe facing demographic challenges, skills shortages, and social fragmentation, prioritising children ensures a fairer, healthier, more skilled, and more cohesive society. It is not just the right thing to do; it is the most economically rational path forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- EU institutions and national governments must **enshrine children's rights and wellbeing at the core of all relevant legal and policy frameworks**. This includes embedding the best interests of the child and the right to participation in all cross-sectoral areas.
- EU and national leaders must treat **investing in children as a priority** for economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and intergenerational equity.





Elena del Real Moreno / Save the Children

Conclusion 9: Strengthening the ECG for maximum impact.

The ECG represents a historic step forward, providing the first-ever EU-level framework to translate children's rights into measurable action on poverty. However, initial monitoring reveals a stark reality: its success is being compromised by structural challenges at the national level.

WHY IT MATTERS

Closing this implementation gap is fundamental. If these are not addressed, the ECG risks becoming a paper promise rather than a real-life game-changer for millions of children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ➔ **The ECG must remain a political priority** and be systematically integrated into the European Semester to ensure regular monitoring. The European Commission's **2026 review** should be used to demand that all Member States submit revised, more ambitious NAPs with clear targets, common indicators for their monitoring, and funding commitments.
- ➔ **Eradicating child poverty must be a top priority in the next EU budget.** This includes supporting the call for a dedicated ECG budget of at least €20 billion and ensuring IPA are also leveraged for this fight.
- ➔ **The EU should link the ECG implementation explicitly to UNCRC obligations**—particularly Article 27 on an adequate standard of living—and connect to UNCRC reporting to strengthen accountability.
- ➔ **Meaningful engagement** with children and civil society should be a **prerequisite** for accessing funding and a mandatory component of all national planning and reporting.
- ➔ The ECG must be **fully integrated into the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** to ensure a holistic and powerful response to child poverty across all policy areas.

D. Main findings and analysis

Child poverty in Europe remains a **widespread, persistent, and profoundly unjust reality**. Despite the continent's wealth and strong legal frameworks for the protection of children's rights, **one in four children** in the EU continues to live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Similar rates prevail in the EEA and pre-accession countries.

This report **aims to expose and challenge this enduring injustice** by offering a rigorous, data-driven, and rights-based analysis of child poverty across Europe, highlighting its profound social, economic, and human costs, while also proposing tangible instruments to eradicate this crisis.

The report is produced by Save the Children (SC) in collaboration with national offices across **16 European countries**, including selected EU Member States and non-EU countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions.

EU MEMBER STATES (9)	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Sweden, Spain
NON-EU COUNTRIES (7)	Western Balkan pre-accession countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo ¹ , Montenegro, Serbia European Economic Area: Norway Eastern Partnership: Ukraine

The report draws on inputs gathered through a comprehensive **questionnaire** circulated among members and country offices between March and June 2025 (referred to as Save the Children national reports), complemented by quantitative data from Save the Children national researches, Eurostat, OECD, UNICEF, WHO, CSOs, monitoring reports on the implementation of the ECG, as well as quantitative and qualitative insights from wider literature.

The report aims to **inform and influence EU and national policymakers**, amid debates on fiscal priorities,

geopolitical instability, and a changing political cycle. While the EU has made strong commitments through its social agenda and concrete instruments such as the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** and the **ECG**, child poverty remains a **pan-European crisis affecting all countries in the region**. Much remains to be done to eradicate it, especially at a time when social policies and children's rights risk being deprioritised in the face of emerging political and economic priorities.

In doing so, this report challenges a harmful and persistent myth: that child poverty is an unavoidable consequence of economic transition or fiscal constraint. **Child poverty is neither natural nor inevitable; it is the outcome of policy decisions, underinvestment, and systemic neglect.**

The question thus shifts from 'can Europe afford to invest?' to 'can Europe afford not to invest?'. The answer is a resounding "no". The evidence presented here demonstrates that **child poverty is preventable**, and that **investing in children** is not only morally right, but it delivers high social and economic returns, and therefore, is a **strategic investment in Europe's long-term prosperity, resilience, and competitiveness**.

The report is structured into five main chapters:

- **Chapter 1** provides a panoramic overview of child poverty in Europe, offering a statistical and narrative picture of its scale, nature, and impact. It explores who is most affected, the structural drivers, and the multi-dimensional consequences of growing up experiencing poverty, as well as provides an economic rationale for early investments in children.
- **Chapter 2** examines current national and EU-level efforts to address child poverty, mapping policy frameworks, funding instruments, and promising practices.
- **Chapter 3** critically assesses the implementation and transformative potential of the ECG, highlighting both breakthroughs and persistent gaps.
- **Chapter 4** offers concluding reflections and a call to action, laying out concrete recommendations for systemic change at the EU and national levels.



EXTRA CONTENT: The information collected from Save the Children's national members and offices to build this report has also been compiled into country pages, which provide granular insights into how child poverty manifests and is addressed in each country. You can access this country-level analysis by scanning **this QR code**.

Chapter 1. State of child poverty in Europe: a pervasive issue with a staggering cost

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Child poverty isn't just a social issue; it's a critical economic problem that directly impacts national budgets, workforce competitiveness, and long-term fiscal stability. The data shows that **inaction is far more expensive than strategic investment in our children.**

Child poverty is still widespread and worsening in Europe

- **Children are disproportionately affected:** In 2024, nearly **one in four children (24.2%)** in the EU was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, a rate **3.8 percentage points higher** than for adults (20.3%).
- **The EU is off target:** The EU is still **5.45 million children away** from its 2030 goal of reducing child poverty by 5 million. Compared to 2019, the EU is registering **446,000** more children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This means the EU must lift approximately 2,500 children out of poverty and social exclusion every day until the end of 2030 to hit the target.
- **Deepening hardship:** Beyond relative measures, **6.28 million children (7.9%)** in the EU suffer from severe material and social deprivation, meaning they lack access to basic necessities.

Breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage is key

- **Poverty passed down:** An adult's risk of poverty is significantly higher (**20.0%**) if they grew up in a financially unstable household, compared to just **12.4%** for those from secure backgrounds.
- **A long climb to the middle:** In **Germany**, it can take an estimated **six generations** for

a child from a low-income family to reach the national median income, demonstrating a deep-rooted lack of social mobility.

- **The welfare trap:** Children whose parents receive long-term social assistance are at a much higher risk of needing benefits themselves as adults.

Systemic failures: support is not reaching those in need and employment does not guarantee

- **The "in-work" poverty trap:** Employment is not a guaranteed shield. In **Spain**, over **17%** of households with children experience in-work poverty. This figure rises to over **30%** for single-parent and large families.
- **Inefficient welfare systems:** Many social support programs are hampered by bureaucracy. In **Spain**, **56%** of households eligible for the flagship anti-poverty scheme do not receive it due to administrative complexity.

1.1 Child poverty as a pervasive but preventable issue

The combined impacts of the ongoing conflicts, the rising cost of living, the lingering damages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing consequences of climate change generate an immense strain on societies, especially children.

Considering future prospects, the physical and psychological wellbeing of children will be under **further pressure from slow economic growth, geopolitical tensions, protracted conflicts, accelerating climate change and humanitarian emergencies.**

Save the Children has analysed how the **escalating cost-of-living crisis has left millions of families across Europe unable to afford basic needs like heating or food**. This has severe consequences: inadequate heating is linked to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, poor mental health, and developmental delays in children, while food insecurity, especially during early childhood, can lead to stunted growth, chronic illnesses, and long-term health complications.²

Over the past years, the EU has developed a crucial toolbox of strategies and frameworks designed to shield children from poverty and exclusion, and set up a goal of eradicating poverty by 2050³. The **ECG** stands as a **flagship commitment** to ensure that every child in need has free access to essential social services. In 2021, the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan** reinforced this with a headline target: to lift **at least 5 million children out of poverty by 2030**. Meanwhile, the **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** lays out a clear, rights-based roadmap to protect and empower every child, both in Europe and beyond.

The upcoming **mid-term review of the ECG** and **revised Action Plan for the EPSR** offer timely opportunities to strengthen these instruments considering emerging challenges. In **2027**, a mid-term review of the **Barcelona Targets for Early Childhood Education and Care** is also foreseen. Furthermore, the EU's first **Anti-Poverty Strategy**, expected in **2026**, is set to include

dedicated measures to tackle child poverty more comprehensively. These tools reflect more than just policies—they are a promise to Europe's children. **But a promise is only as strong as its delivery.**

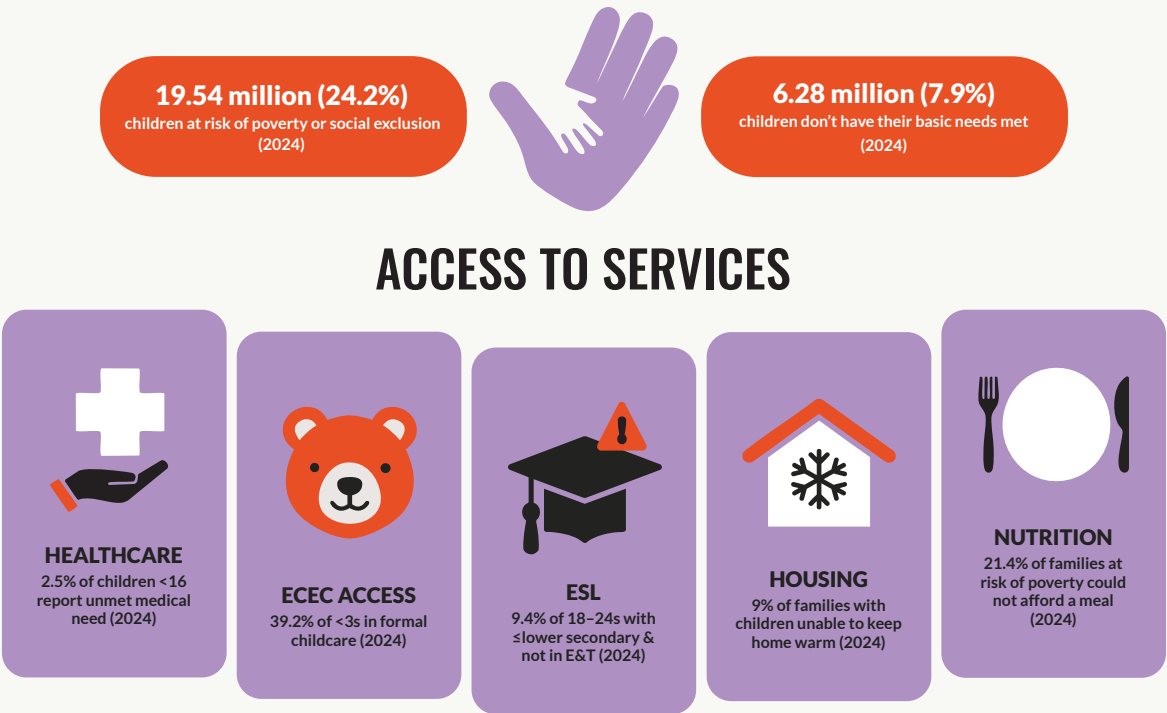
Table 4. EPSR headline targets on poverty

HEADLINE TARGET	2030 TARGET	LATEST ACHIEVED VALUE (YEAR)	GAP/ PROGRESS REMAINING
Poverty reduction	-15 million people	-2.7 million people (2024)	-12.3 million people (against 2019 baseline)
	- 5 million children	+446 thousand children (2024)	-5.45 million children (against 2019 baseline)

Source: Eurostat (ilc_pecs01).

Progress towards the 2030 poverty reduction target remains stagnant. Since 2019, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the EU has decreased by approximately 1.6 million. However, when it comes to children, the situation has worsened: the child AROPE population has increased by 0.6 million in 2023, followed by a modest decrease of 0.4 million in 2024. Compared to 2019, this still leaves the EU with **446,000 more children at risk of poverty** or social exclusion. **The EU is still 5.45 million children away from meeting its 2030 target**, and **19.54 million away from ending child poverty altogether**. This means that the EU needs to take approximately 2,500 children out of poverty every day between 2025 and the end of 2030 to hit this target.

Figure 1. Situation of children in Europe in numbers



Child poverty remains a critical and persistent issue across Europe, affecting every country regardless of its level of development or wealth. Based on recent Eurostat data, approximately **24.7%** of children in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023, and **24.2%** in 2024, representing a minor improvement, yet still leaving **19.54 million** children to face poverty and exclusion.⁴ While the situation varies from country to country, the result is always the same: children's rights are not respected, protected, or fulfilled.

Table 5. Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), % of population below 18 year

TIME	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	COMPARED TO EU AVERAGE (2024)
EU-27	23,6	24,0	24,4	24,6	24,7	24,1	●
AUSTRIA	20,1	21,9	22,8	21,6	22,7	20,9	●
BELGIUM	23,0	22,0	20,5	19,6	19,0	20,2	●
BULGARIA	35,8	35,5	33,0	33,9	33,9	35,1	●
CROATIA	19,1	18,4	18,6	18,1	17,3	19,3	●
CYPRUS	20,3	19,0	19,2	18,1	16,7	14,8	●
CZECHIA	13,0	12,9	13,7	13,4	15,0	15,4	●
DENMARK	13,8	13,4	14,0	13,8	15,3	15,9	●
ESTONIA	19,7	17,4	17,4	16,6	18,3	16,5	●
FINLAND	13,8	14,5	13,2	14,9	13,8	17,3	●
FRANCE	24,1	23,6	22,5	27,1	26,6	26,2	●
GERMANY	20,4	22,3	23,7	24,4	23,9	22,9	●
GREECE	31,2	30,8	32,0	28,1	28,1	27,9	●
HUNGARY	24,1	21,7	23,3	18,1	24,4	21,1	●
IRELAND	25,1	22,4	23,5	22,3	24,3	20,6	●
ITALY	27,1	28,9	29,7	28,5	27,1	27,1	●
LATVIA	18,7	19,7	20,1	19,8	20,3	17,9	●
LITHUANIA	25,8	23,1	21,6	22,4	21,7	22,8	●
LUXEMBOURG	25,4	24,2	29,4	24,0	26,1	25,6	●
MALTA	23,7	22,3	23,2	23,1	25,2	25,9	●
NETHERLANDS	15,4	15,8	14,9	13,9	15,9	15,8	●
POLAND	16,2	16,1	16,5	16,7	16,9	16,1	●
PORTUGAL	21,9	21,9	22,9	20,7	22,6	20,7	●
ROMANIA	39,1	40,7	41,5	41,5	39,0	33,8	●
SLOVAKIA	21,0	18,4	19,7	24,7	25,3	22,6	●
SLOVENIA	11,6	12,1	11,0	10,3	10,7	11,8	●
SPAIN	31,0	31,6	33,4	32,2	34,5	34,6	●
SWEDEN	23,0	20,2	19,7	19,9	21,6	20,9	●
EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA							
ICELAND	13,5	13,2	:	:	:	:	:
NORWAY	16,0	16,6	17,2	16,1	15,0	16,0	●
SWITZERLAND	22,2	22,8	19,4	19,3	22,4	:	:
UNITED KINGDOM	:	:	:	:	:	:	:
PRE-ACCESSION COUNTRIES							
ALBANIA	:	:	50,1	:	:	:	:
MONTENEGRO	:	:	:	40,4	:	:	:
SERBIA	33,6	31,5	27,2	28,0	25,7	23,9	●
● < EU AVERAGE ● EU AVERAGE ● > EU AVERAGE							

Source: Eurostat. Accessed on 13.08.2025

Note. Colour coding is used to illustrate the progression of AROPE changes over time, ranging from yellow for the lowest values to dark orange for the highest.

Box 1. Interpretation of children “at risk of poverty or social exclusion” (AROPE) indicator

Based on Eurostat EU-SILC data, and analyses from Save the Children (2023)⁵ and UNICEF (2023)⁶, while the AROPE indicator has remained relatively stable, evidence from national and child-focused datasets points to a **worsening of absolute poverty**—those unable to meet basic material needs— **and material deprivation**, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

National data and alternative indicators—such as food insecurity, school meal uptake, or inability to afford heating—often capture **absolute or extreme poverty** more directly. These figures may diverge from AROPE trends, especially during periods of economic stress, when **depth and severity of deprivation** increase even if relative poverty rates stay flat.

While the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) has remained relatively stable at the EU level, **the number of children living in absolute poverty**—those unable to meet basic material needs—is **on the rise**. This signals a worrying deepening of deprivation among the most vulnerable families, even when headline indicators appear unchanged.

“I think it’s so wrong that my mother has to have two jobs just because the state decides to cut everything. The benefits that have been cut are really important for us so that we could have the possibility to buy enough food.”— Children’s Voice Survey 2024, Finland

The AROPE indicator⁷ is the EU’s headline measure of poverty and social exclusion. A cross-country analysis of AROPE data between 2019 and 2024 reveals a **deeply uneven trajectory** across European countries, marked by **persistent disparities** and worrying signs of **stagnation or reversal**. While some Member States have made progress, others have experienced

sharp increases in child poverty, highlighting the fragility of social safety nets in times of crisis.

Despite a slight decline in the **EU-27 average** in 2024 (24.2%, down from 24.7% in 2023), this improvement remains **marginal and fragile**. In many countries, child poverty rates in 2024 are still **higher than pre-COVID levels**, indicating that pandemic-era vulnerabilities have not been fully addressed—and that the **winding down of emergency social measures** may already be having a negative impact.

Several countries show **clear spikes** or sustained AROPE increases since 2019:

- **Bulgaria and Romania** continue to report **extremely high rates** (35.1% and 33.8% respectively in 2024), with only minor improvements since their COVID-era peaks.
- **Spain and Greece** have seen **renewed increases** after a temporary dip, with 2024 rates at 34.6% and 27.9%, both significantly above the EU average.
- Even relatively wealthier countries like **Finland** (17.3% in 2024, up from 13.2% in 2019) and **Belgium** (rising to 20.2% in 2024 after earlier declines) reflect a **reversal** of earlier gains.

On the other hand, some Member States show **sustained or recent improvements**:

- **Ireland** has seen a dramatic **drop** from 25.1% in 2019 to 20.6% in 2024.
- **Poland** continues to hold well **below the EU average**, maintaining a stable trend around 16–17%.
- **Romania**, despite its high overall rate, has reduced its AROPE score from a peak of 41.5% (2021–2022) to 33.8% in 2024—still critical, but indicative of policy impact.

Based on current trends, a **significant drop in the EU-wide AROPE rate in 2025 is unlikely**, especially given the **expiration of COVID-era support measures** (e.g. temporary income boosts, housing support); the **increased cost of living** and reduced purchasing power and a shift in many European countries toward **fiscal consolidation and changing budget priorities**.

Unless counterbalanced by **targeted child-focused interventions**, several countries, especially those already above the EU average, may see either **stagnation or a new wave of increases**.

Box 2. Trends in child poverty in pre-accession countries

Child poverty continues to be a pressing and widespread challenge across the Western Balkans, with rates often exceeding EU averages and showing mixed trends since 2019. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, around **31% of children** live in poverty, with disparities particularly stark in rural and Roma communities. **Montenegro** reports **28% child poverty**, but the severity of deprivation is even higher—**over 80% of children**, and **96% of Roma children**, experience unmet basic needs. **Serbia** recorded **1 in 5 children at risk of poverty (19.5%)**,⁸ with Roma, rural, and large families disproportionately affected.⁹

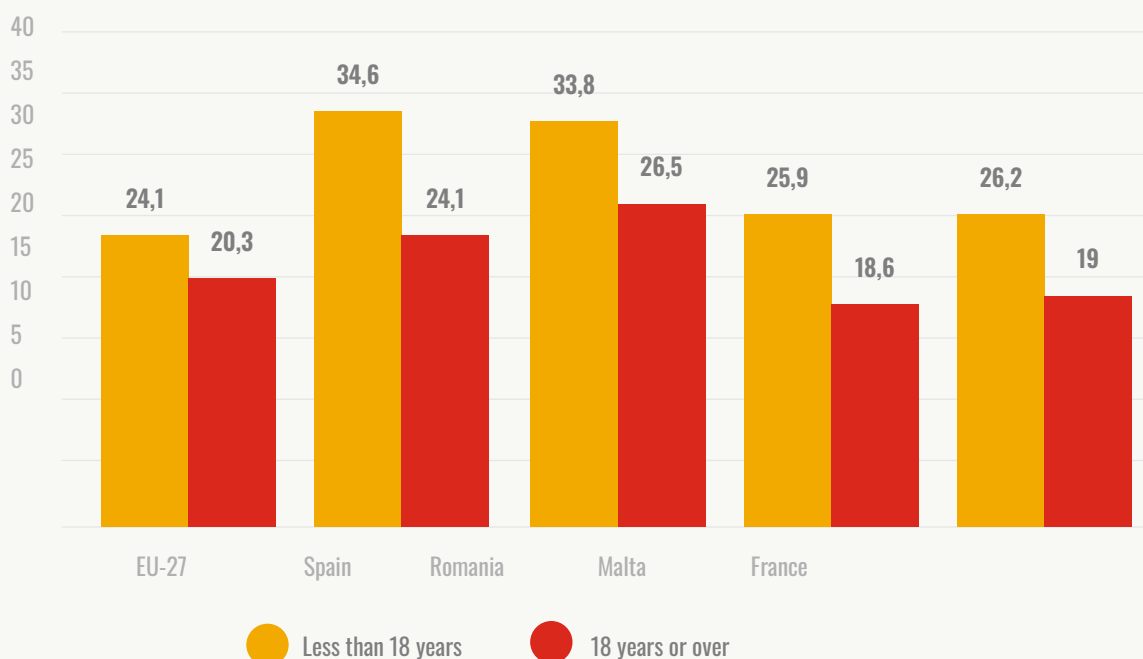
In **Albania**, child poverty has declined from a staggering **49.4% in 2020** to **26.5% in 2023**, thanks in part to expanded financial assistance for families and national social protection reforms. However, **severe material and social deprivation remains high at 34.8%**, and children in rural areas, Roma communities, and institutional care still face systemic barriers to education, healthcare, and social inclusion.¹⁰ In **Kosovo**, although official child poverty statistics are not regularly updated, evidence points to a persistent pattern of deprivation, especially in Roma communities. According to KOMF report, 22.7% of children live in poverty, with 7% in extreme poverty.¹¹

Being a war-affected country, **Ukraine** is experiencing a dramatic increase in child deprivation that is estimated to have reached as high as 65.6% in 2023 due to the war's impact on living conditions. Due to the war, in 2022, large families (with three or more children) have found themselves in the direst situation. The poverty rate among such households was 84.7%; whereas the figure for households with children with an unemployed member(s) exceeded 80%.¹²

Source: Eurostat, 2024 (ilc_peps01n)

Children bear the brunt of poverty in Europe. In 2024, the risk of poverty or social exclusion was higher among children under 18 in the EU (24.2%) than among adults aged 18 and over (20.3%), marking a **gap of 3.8 percentage points**.

Figure 2. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by group age, 2024





Gianfranco Ferraro / Save the Children

This gap highlights the **disproportionate vulnerability of children**, especially in countries like Spain, where the risk for children exceeded that of adults by 10.5 points, and in Malta, Romania, and France, where the difference also surpassed 7 percentage points.¹³ These trends are also confirmed by national statistical sources.

Taken together, these findings underscore the urgency of the situation: **tackling child poverty must become a top priority for policymakers.**

Box 3. Impacts of climate change on children in vulnerable situations

Children are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation due to their **physical, developmental, and social conditions**.

Physiologically, children are **less equipped** than adults to cope with disasters such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves. Their developing immune, respiratory, and thermoregulatory systems make them **especially sensitive** to heat stress and environmental toxins. Even low exposure to pollutants like lead, fine particulate matter (PM2.5), and waste chemicals can result in severe long-term health damage.

Developmentally, the consequences of early harm—whether from malnutrition, toxic exposure, or displacement—can be **lifelong**, affecting cognitive function, school outcomes, and future livelihoods. As Save the Children's report *Born into the Climate Crisis 2* underscores, climate change is not only a threat multiplier but a “child rights crisis” that amplifies existing inequities and robs millions of children of a safe, healthy, and hopeful future.

Socially, the risks are not equally shared. Families living in poverty, particularly in marginalised communities like many Roma groups, are **more exposed to environmental harm**. For instance, children in families engaged in **waste collection and recycling** often live and work in highly polluted environments, facing chronic exposure to toxic materials without adequate protection. Additionally, extreme weather can disrupt access to food, water, healthcare, and education—worsening intergenerational poverty.

Source: Save the Children, 2023¹⁴, 2025¹⁵.

1.2 Multidimensional character of child poverty

Traditionally, child poverty has been measured through income-based indicators, with the AROPE rate¹⁶ being the most widespread benchmark in Europe.¹⁷ While AROPE provides a useful benchmark for cross-country comparison, it does not fully capture the complexity of how poverty impacts a child's daily life and wellbeing.¹⁸ As academic studies, policy reports, and children themselves emphasise, **poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon that impairs not just material living standards but also a child's access to education, health, and social inclusion.**¹⁹ In the words of one child,

“To me, poverty means any form of disadvantage”. “Poverty is when you are treated differently.” – Child, Germany²⁰

This understanding has led to the development of more holistic frameworks. The **Capability Approach**,²¹ for instance, shifts the focus from what a person *has* (income) to what they are able to *do and be*, considering the real opportunities available to them. This principle is reflected in **Save the Children's Child Development Index**,²² which combines indicators of health, nutrition, and education, as well as in child rights approaches that advocate for expanding children's capabilities beyond the purely economic. These frameworks provide a more nuanced understanding of poverty, recognising

that **monetary poverty is a key driver of hardship, but also that its effects create a vicious cycle that can last a lifetime.** This multidimensional understanding is also embedded in key EU policy instruments, most notably the **ECG**, which rests on the principle of ensuring access to essential services. As thoroughly explained in the following chapters, this rights-based and service-focused approach offers a concrete policy pathway to operationalise the shift from income-centric to child-centric poverty reduction strategies.

Material deprivation

Material deprivation reflects whether children have access to essential goods and services necessary for a minimum acceptable standard of living. Traditionally, this is measured through the Severe Material and Social Deprivation rate used by Eurostat,²³ looking at the share of children living in households that lack at least 7 out of 13 essential goods, services or social activities necessary for an adequate life. In other words, this indicator combines material hardships experienced by the household and the individual.



Table 6. Severe material and social deprivation among children (under 18 years old), 2019-2024, %

TIME	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	
LABEL	%	%	%	%	%	%	THOUSAND PERSONS
EU-27	7.5	8.2	7.4	8.3	8.4	7.9	6,276
GERMANY	3.3	5.9	5.5	8.5	9.0	7.4	1,088
IRELAND	8.9	7.5	6.9	7.2	8.5	7.5	90
SPAIN	10.4	10.5	10.8	10.3	12.3	11.2	882
ITALY	5.8	7.1	7.1	4.7	5.6	5.7	506
LITHUANIA	7.7	8.4	6.7	5.2	6.8	5.3	27
POLAND	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.3	3.0	2.1	131
ROMANIA	25.8	29.7	28.2	30.8	22.6	21.2	788
FINLAND	1.8	1.6	0.7	1.7	1.9	3.5	36
SWEDEN	2.5	3.3	1.7	3.0	2.9	3.6	68
NORWAY	2.0	3.2	3.0	2.2	3.0	3.6	37
MONTENEGRO	24.6	25.7	27.9	22.9	:	:	:
ALBANIA	44.3	42.4	41.2	:	:	:	:
SERBIA	15.4	13.5	12.3	13.3	12.5	:	:

Source: Eurostat

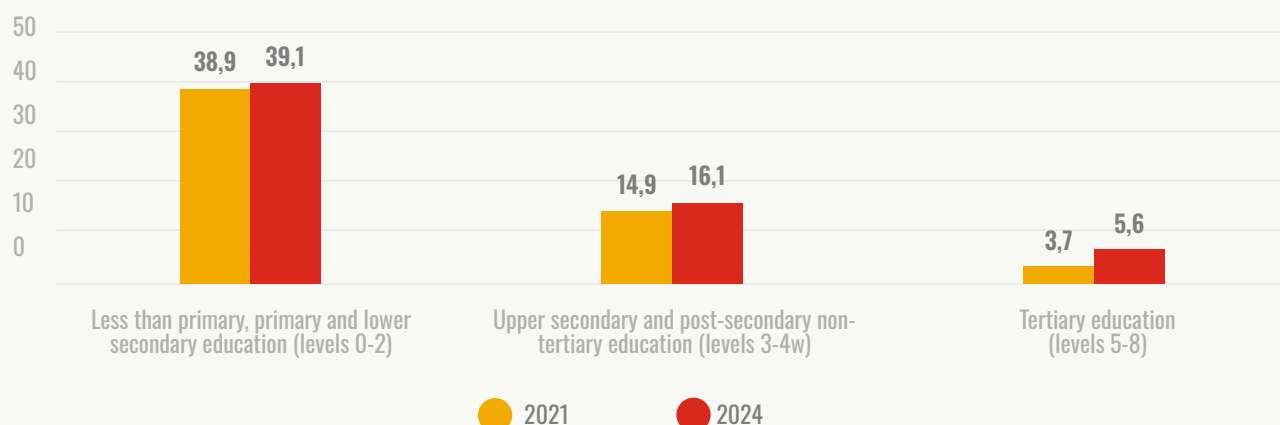
Recent data reveals wide disparities across Europe. While overall trends showed a decline in severe deprivation before 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent inflation caused reversals. In 2024, some affluent countries have seen a slight backslide, while others, like Poland, have made progress. However, **rates remain high in many Southern and Eastern European countries.** For instance, in 2024, Romania's child deprivation rate stood at 21.2%, compared to just 2.1% in Poland. The **most dramatic change is in Ukraine**, where war reversed years of poverty reduction. The World Bank estimated that 25% of the total population (9 million) are unable to afford food — up from 5% in 2021.²⁴ 81.2% of families with 3 and more children are living in absolute poverty.

“If leisure time was free then many children would go there when their parents are working instead of being at home alone or being out.” – Girl, 11-17 years old, Sweden (Missing out report, 2024)

Notably, child-specific deprivation modules in 2024 revealed that while many deprivation items became less common, the **inability to afford children's leisure activities grew** – a sign that families are cutting “extras” under financial strain.²⁵

Another 2024 insight is the enduring **impact of parental education and family type** on child deprivation. In 2024, only ~5.6% of children with highly educated parents were deprived vs **39.1%** of children whose parents had low education. Similarly, single-parent families across Europe have far higher deprivation and are much more likely to be unable to afford basics for children than two-parent homes.

Figure 3. Child-specific material deprivation rate by educational attainment level of their parents (children aged less than 16 years), 2021-2024, EU-27



Source: [Eurostat](#)

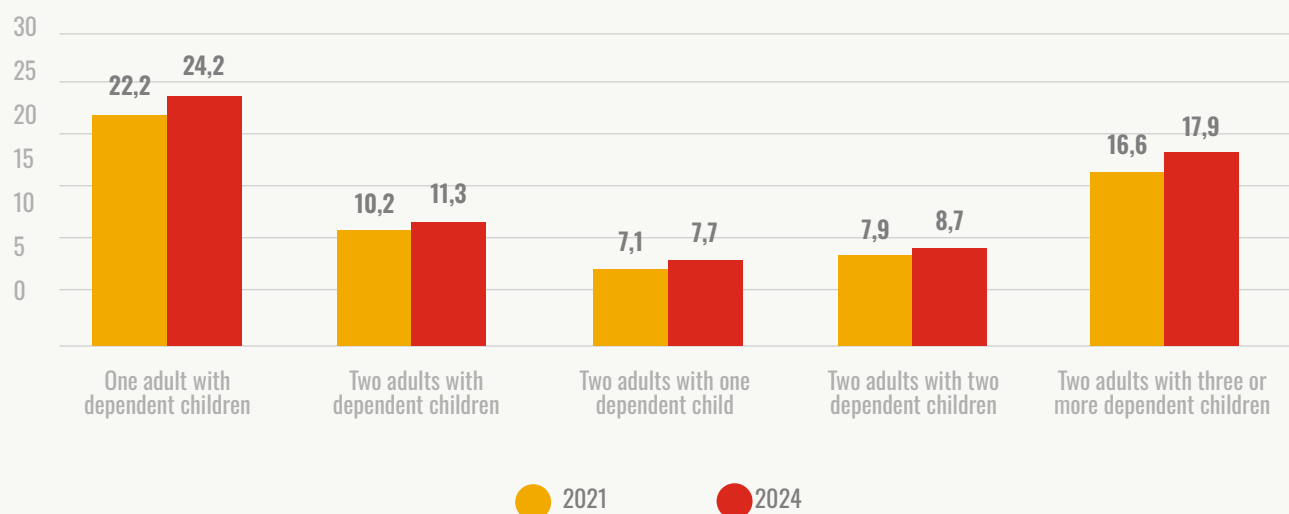
Similarly, **single-parent families** across Europe have far higher deprivation and are much more likely to be unable to afford basics for children than two-parent homes. These disparities appear consistent across years and are especially acute when gender is considered.

Box 4. Gendered impact of poverty

Women are overwhelmingly represented among single parents, and their dual role as sole earners and primary caregivers limits their ability to participate fully in the labour market. According to Save the Children Italy's *Le equilibriste* report (2025),²⁶ **20% of mothers leave their jobs after childbirth**, and this figure rises to **35% among mothers of children with disabilities**. These care responsibilities have a direct impact on poverty risk: **employment rates among single mothers aged 25–34 fall to just 50%**, while male employment rates in the same age group actually **increase with fatherhood**, highlighting a striking gender asymmetry. The Italian example demonstrates how **intersecting inequalities—gender, care work, and family structure—reinforce each other**, driving economic vulnerability for children.

The data also highlights **families with many children at greater risk of child poverty** because of the increased financial burden associated with supporting more children. A report on poverty in **Germany** gave empirical evidence suggesting that the likelihood of poverty rises with each additional child. The study found that **13% of families with one child, 16% of families with 2 children and 18% of families with three children were at risk of poverty**.²⁷ Another report by Save the Children Spain found that among households with two working adults, 5.3% are in poverty if they do not have children.²⁸ This rate rises to 6.3% for families with one child, 8.9% for those with two children, and 14.7% for households with three or more children. Save the Children has similarly identified that the likelihood of children experiencing poverty increases with the number of children in a family.²⁹ These findings stress the need to rethink the child-benefit system and improve the distribution of funds.

Figure 4. Child specific material deprivation rate by household composition (children aged less than 16 years), 2021-2024, EU-27



Source: Eurostat ([ilc_chmd02](#))

Geography further compounds these disadvantages: the highest rates were often recorded among people living in:

- **Rural areas in eastern EU countries** – this was the case in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The **same trend can be observed in pre-accession countries in the Western Balkans**. For example, in Serbia, in 2019 nearly 70% of households outside urban areas fall into the two lowest wealth and deprivation quintiles, reflecting entrenched spatial inequality.³⁰
- **Cities in western EU countries** – this was the case in Belgium, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Austria.
- **Towns and suburbs in the 3 Baltic countries** of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.³¹

Going forward, the data and literature emphasise the need for **targeted support to vulnerable child sub-groups** (such as low-education, single-parent, or marginalised households) to ensure that overall economic improvements translate into **real reductions in severe deprivation for all children**.³²

Health and nutrition

“Potatoes cost money, rice costs money, meat at home costs money. Food costs, basically. There’s less food on the table, and the parents have to be more frugal. They might walk around wearing a torn sweater just so they can buy a new one for their kids.” – Girl, 15–17 years old, Sweden (Missing out report, 2024)

Economic constraints limit access to healthy food, and substandard housing contributes to long-term health problems. The WHO warns of a **rising trend in adolescent obesity in Europe**, which disproportionately affects children from low-income families.³³ The consequences can be severe, particularly for marginalised communities. Undernutrition is another concern for many poor families. In 2024, **13.5% of single-parent families with children in the EU-27 could not afford a meal including meat, chicken, fish, or a vegetarian option every other day**.³⁴ **This figure rises to 21.4% for households at risk of poverty**. In Kosovo, children in Roma communities face chronic undernutrition, with stunting rates of 14.6%, and infant mortality rates three times the national average due to health inequities.³⁵ A recently published poll among recipients of basic welfare benefits (Bürgergeld - Social Code Book II) by the **German NGO Sanktionsfrei** adds a stark dimension to this picture: **54% of parents**



Francesca Leondardi / Save the Children

with children under 18 reported skipping meals themselves to ensure their children had enough to eat.³⁶

Limited access to healthcare is another recurrent theme: impoverished families may delay doctor's visits, skip preventive care, or face geographic and financial barriers to services. To monitor health dimensions of child wellbeing, international frameworks (like the OECD's Child Well-Being Dashboard)³⁷ include indicators such as infant mortality, child obesity rates, and rates of unmet medical needs.

Save the Children members similarly track statistics like food insecurity, prevalence of chronic conditions, mental health issues, and access to services among children in poverty. However, many countries still **lack disaggregated data** to pinpoint health outcomes for the poorest children. Improving data collection is an advocacy priority so that no vulnerable group remains "invisible" in official health statistics.

Social and educational exclusion

"Sometimes at after-school care, they go on trips. So, you end up missing out. The next day, everyone talks about it. It's tough."— Girl, 17–18 years old, Sweden (Missing out report, 2024)

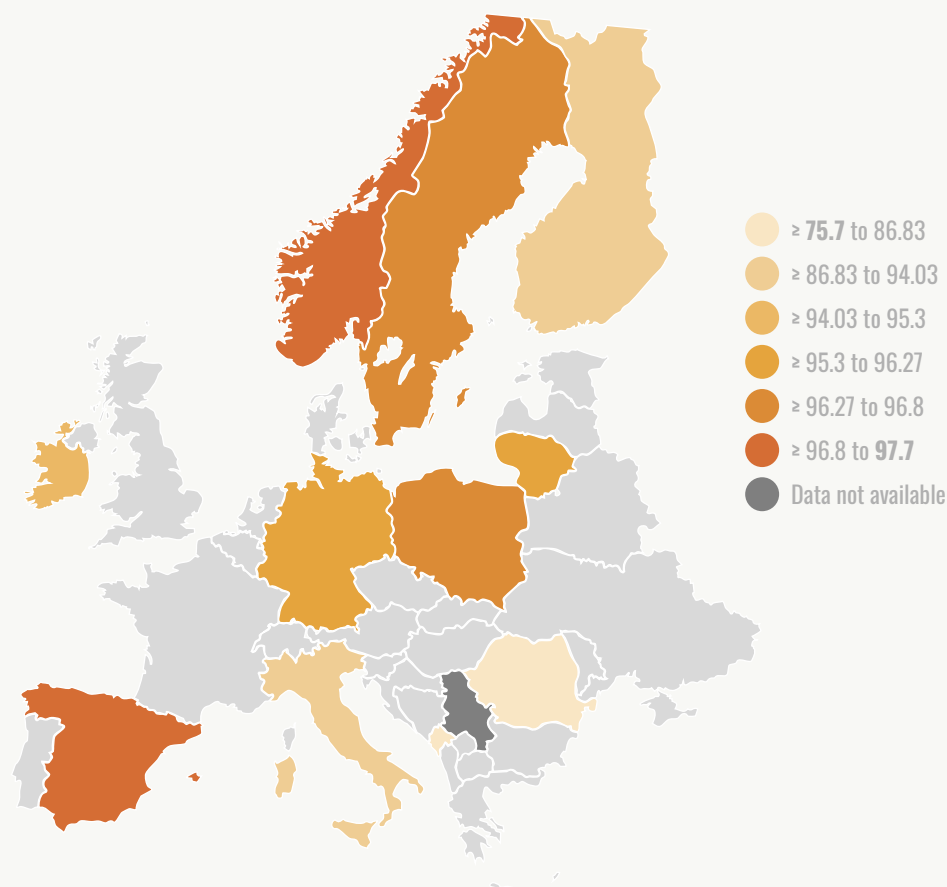
Child poverty also entails **social exclusion**: the inability to participate fully in society due to financial constraints. This can manifest as missing out on social activities, a lack of internet access required for schooling, or living in isolated and marginalised communities.

"My sister and I go to school every day, but for us it's not as easy as for other children. I suppose you are aware of what a child needs for school and that, beside the bare minimum, we also need a bit of joy, play and, most of all, carefree days." — Girl, 8 years old, Romania (testimony gathered by Save the Children Romania as part of their Christmas Tree Festival activities)

A study in **Finland** found that children experiencing poverty often have feelings of exclusion, shame and stigma, while their possibilities to take part in hobbies are limited and they lack confidence in the future³⁸. Multiple other reports by Save the Children members (e.g., **Spain, Sweden, Poland, Albania**, etc.) stress the practical and visible impacts of social exclusion on children's life, such as their inability to participate in extracurricular activities, feelings of isolation, and discrimination, especially among marginalised children.³⁹

Exclusion is deeply intertwined with **educational disadvantage**. Children from low-income families face numerous barriers to quality education, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, limited access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), or under-resourced schools.⁴⁰ These disadvantages not only **reduce their individual life chances but also have far-reaching macroeconomic implications**: lower productivity, a less skilled workforce, and higher future social spending needs. Over time, these effects reinforce the cycle of poverty and hinder economic growth.

Figure 5. Participation in ECEC for children of 3 years and older, 2023



Source: Eurostat

For instance, 2023 Eurostat data⁴¹ reveal **disparities in ECEC participation** rates for children aged 3 and above. Countries such as **Lithuania, Sweden, and Spain** achieve enrolment rates over 96%, while others lag behind—**Romania** falls below 80%, and **Serbia** even lower, with enrolment under 70%. However, such averages conceal even **deeper inequalities among children in vulnerable situations**. In **Serbia**, for example, only 5% of Roma children aged 3–5 attend preschool, highlighting stark barriers in access linked to ethnicity, poverty, and social exclusion.⁴² These disparities underscore the urgent need for **targeted efforts** to ensure that all children, particularly those from marginalised communities, can benefit from inclusive and equitable early education opportunities.

Poverty is also a **key driver of early school leaving (ESL)**, which perpetuates a cycle of unemployment and social exclusion.⁴³ Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at a higher risk of early school leaving.

The financial strain can lead to social stigma within the school environment itself. In **Lithuania**, parents report that the inability to afford uniforms or other necessities leads to bullying and decreased self-esteem for their children. This highlights how material lack directly fuels social and educational exclusion, creating barriers that statistics alone cannot capture.⁴⁴

Psychological and emotional wellbeing

Beyond the material and social impacts, poverty inflicts a **profound psychological and emotional toll**. Research consistently shows that children experiencing financial hardship suffer from feelings of **shame, stigma, and isolation**. This emotional burden is as detrimental as material deprivation, damaging children's mental health, social relationships, and aspirations.

Table 7. Trends in mental health of children living in poverty in selected countries

FINLAND	Children from lower-income families are more likely to experience mental health issues. Finland's National Mental Health Strategy emphasises the need to reduce childhood poverty and social exclusion to support mental wellbeing. ⁴⁵
GERMANY	Children experiencing poverty are especially prone to being lonely. ⁴⁶ Studies show that poverty causes stress in families that negatively affects children's mental wellbeing; children from families with a low socio-economic status have two to three times higher risk of developing mental disorders compared to children from families with high socio-economic status. ⁴⁷
KOSOVO	Studies in Kosovo show a significant correlation between lower economic status and a higher prevalence of mental health issues, specifically mentioned in the context of postpartum depression in mothers, but the general principle extends to children within those families. ⁴⁸
NORWAY	Research indicates that children of low-income families in Nordic countries have a potentially higher risk of developing mental disorders later in life. For instance, 25.2% of children born into the lowest parental income quintile developed a clinically diagnosed mental disorder by age 37, compared to 13.5% in the top quintile. ⁴⁹
ROMANIA	Studies show that Romanian children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face a heightened vulnerability to mental health issues. This aligns with the high overall rates of depression and suicidal ideation reported among Romanian adolescents. ⁵⁰
SERBIA	In Serbia, over three-quarters of Roma children live in informal settlements, facing extreme poverty, poor housing, limited education, discrimination, and lack of healthcare. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) reveals high exposure to trauma in these communities, with 68.5% of residents reporting four or more ACEs—compared to 41% in the general population—while only 3% reported no adverse experiences. ACEs are linked to poor health, educational underachievement, risky behaviours, and higher risks of self-harm and suicide later in life. ⁵¹
SWEDEN	Growing up in economic vulnerability leads to an increased risk of physical and mental illness. People who grow up and live in a home with a low economic and material standard have a significantly increased risk of accidents and death, exposure to crime, overcrowding, insecurity, bullying, neuropsychiatric diagnosis and low grades. They are also at higher risk for social service interventions such as foster care, placement in a residential care facility or special residential home under compulsory care. Limited economic resources restrict individual choice and affect life. Particularly vulnerable are those who grow up in families with long-term dependence on economic assistance. ⁵²

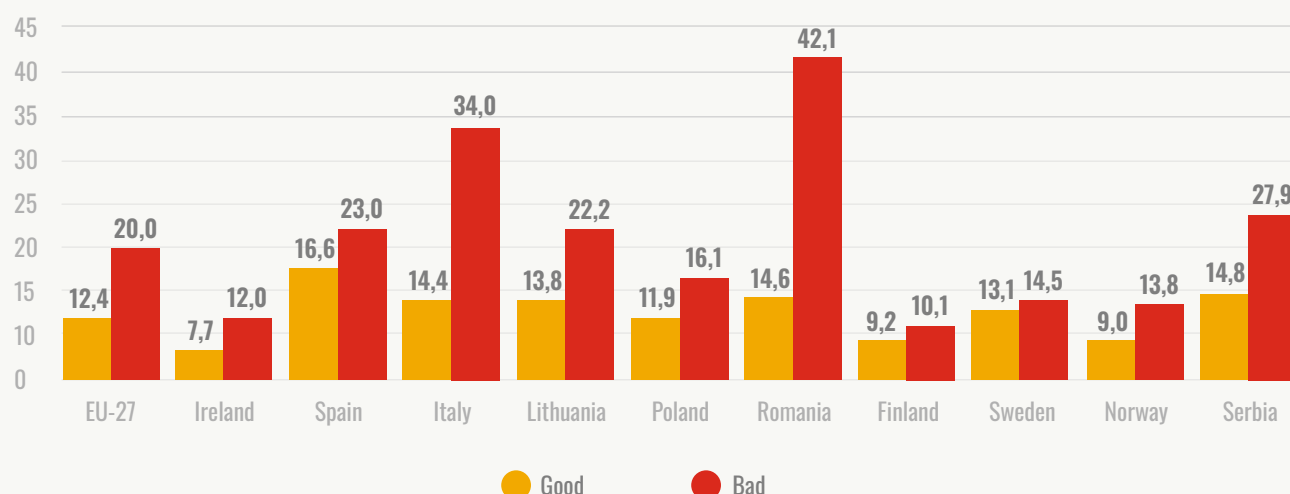
Intergenerational transmission of poverty

Material, educational, social, and psychological disadvantages do not disappear at the end of childhood. They harden into lifelong barriers, transmitting poverty from one generation to the next. Children who grow up poor are more likely to have lower educational attainment, which limits their access to stable, well-paying jobs. Eurostat data starkly illustrate this cycle: **the at-risk-of-poverty rate for adults who grew up in a financially secure household is 12.4%, but it jumps to 20.0% for those who recall their childhood household as financially unstable.** These findings are further supported by national studies on intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. In **Germany** children whose parents receive basic income support (Bürgergeld) over a longer period during their youth are significantly less likely to enter vocational training and face a higher risk of later receiving benefits themselves as adults,⁵³ while it may take up to **six generations** for a low-income child to reach the national median income.⁵⁴ Similarly, In Norway, recent data show that 20% of young adults whose parents received social assistance also end up relying on it themselves.⁵⁵



Francesco Basile / Save the Children

Figure 6. Persons aged 25 to 59 at risk of poverty, 2023



Note. By level of financial situation of their households when the respondent was around 14 years old (%). The EU-SILC 2023 module on intergenerational transmission of poverty defines “good” vs “bad” financial situation at age 14 based on adults’ retrospective self-assessment of their household’s financial circumstances during adolescence.

Source: Eurostat

Parental education is a powerful predictor of a child’s future. According to Eurostat data, around **97% of adults with highly educated parents attain medium or high education levels themselves**, while only **56% of adults whose parents had low education manage to reach medium or high educational attainment**. This educational disadvantage correlates strongly with income: **over 50% of people with low-educated parents are in the bottom 40% of the income distribution**, compared to only **12% of those whose parents had higher education**.⁵⁶

Save the Children’s inputs further confirm this trend. In **Romania**, a 2025 survey conducted by Save the Children⁵⁷ revealed that **78% of respondents with a low level of education had mothers with similarly low education levels**. Nine out of ten parents who cannot cover school-related expenses for their children were themselves in the same situation in childhood. In **Lithuania**, a 2024 report emphasised how poor adults lacking higher education often pass on attitudes that devalue education, limiting their children’s motivation and achievements.⁵⁸

These disparities underscore how **limited educational and financial resources in one generation can constrain the aspirations and achievements of the next**, creating a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break. This intergenerational cycle of disadvantage underscores the need for policies that address not just immediate financial need, but also **long-term social mobility**, investing in early childhood

education, parental support, accessible vocational training, and inclusive welfare systems. Otherwise, poverty risks becoming an **inherited condition**.

1.3 Children in vulnerable situations

Child poverty in Europe is not only widespread but also **disproportionately affects specific groups of children**. Those most at risk include **children living in single-parent households, large families, and households with low parental education**—who face significantly higher rates of material deprivation and food insecurity. Children with a **migration background** and **Roma children**, particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, face systemic exclusion, poor living conditions, and extremely limited access to early education, healthcare, or adequate nutrition. **Geographical disparities** also play a crucial role: children in rural areas of Eastern and Southern Europe, and in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, often experience compounded inequalities. **War-affected children**, such as those in **Ukraine**, face extreme poverty, displacement, and loss of essential services. These intersecting vulnerabilities underline that while child poverty is a pan-European issue, its **impacts are most severe and multidimensional for children in vulnerable situations**.

Many European countries acknowledge the disproportionate vulnerability faced by these groups and have reflected this awareness in policy planning. For example, through their commitment to implement the ECG, Member States have identified priority groups of children who require targeted support to ensure their

access to essential services. While the exact definitions and emphasis vary across countries, this common recognition underlines a shared understanding: **breaking the cycle of child poverty requires focused interventions tailored to the needs of the most marginalised.**

Table 8. Children in need as highlighted by the Child Guarantee NAPs in selected countries

GROUP	HIGHLIGHTED IN CHILD GUARANTEE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS BY NATIONAL AUTHORITIES
Roma and ethnic minority children	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Italy
Children with a migrant background	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Italy, Lithuania
Children from single parent families	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Italy
Children in large families (multiple children households)	Germany, Lithuania, Italy
Children with disabilities	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Italy, Lithuania
Children in low-income families or families in precarious situations (including housing)	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Italy, Lithuania
Children in rural areas	Romania, Spain, Lithuania
Children in the protection system (institutional care or unhoused)	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Italy, Lithuania, Sweden
Victims of trafficking or violence (including on the Internet)	Spain, Finland, Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, Poland
Children with mental health issues	Spain, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Italy
Children with substance abuse and behavioural disorders	Finland, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Lithuania, Sweden
LGBTI+ children	Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden

Source: ECG NAPs and progress reports

Countries not participating in the ECG but that are in focus of this report—namely Norway, the pre-accession countries in the Western Balkans and Ukraine—identify largely similar groups of children in vulnerable situations, according to Save the Children members.

In **Norway**, children most affected by poverty include those with a migration background (notably from Syria and Somalia), children in single-parent and large families, and children whose parents have low educational attainment or depend on social assistance.⁵⁹ **Kosovo** explicitly names Roma children, children with disabilities, and children in rural areas as especially vulnerable. These children face compounded disadvantages, including lack of access to early education, healthcare, and inclusive services, as well as systemic discrimination.⁶⁰ In **Albania**, the most at-risk children include those in rural areas, Roma communities,

children with disabilities, and children in institutional care. **Unaccompanied children and children forced into labour or street work** are also highlighted.⁶¹

Similar groups of children are also highlighted in **BiH, Montenegro and Serbia**.⁶² Save the Children **Ukraine** notes that **nearly all children are vulnerable due to the war**, but specifically underscores the risks faced by displaced children, children with disabilities, Roma children, those in rural areas, and those in institutions. These groups face disrupted services, heightened poverty, and increased risk of institutionalisation.⁶³

Save the Children members further highlight that a recurring and critical barrier to addressing child poverty effectively is the **'invisibility'** of many vulnerable groups of children in both data systems and policy frameworks. In countries like **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro**, the lack of reliable and disaggregated data significantly

undermines the ability to design targeted interventions. This data gap is especially pronounced in rural areas and among marginalised groups such as **Roma children** and **children with disabilities**, making it difficult to assess needs and deliver adequate support.⁶⁴ In **Kosovo**, authorities acknowledge the absence of child-sensitive and disaggregated data as a major limitation, preventing institutions from fully grasping the extent and complexity of children's needs.⁶⁵ In **Ireland**, key groups like **migrant children**, **children in the international protection system**,

and **Roma children** are not systematically captured in national statistics, despite facing some of the highest levels of deprivation.⁶⁶ These **widespread data deficits not only obscure the realities faced by these groups of children but also perpetuate cycles of exclusion**, as their needs remain unacknowledged and unaddressed in national poverty strategies and resource allocation. Closing these gaps is therefore essential to ensuring that no child is left behind and that policies are grounded in an accurate understanding of who is most affected and why.





1.4 Key drivers and common challenges in tackling child poverty

The discussion above has demonstrated that child poverty in Europe persists due to a complex interplay of structural factors that impede its eradication. Importantly, these factors are primarily related to **policy decisions and implementation failures**. Insights from Save the Children's 2025 reports across more than a dozen European countries, combined with macroeconomic analysis by the IMF⁶⁷, offer a nuanced picture of key drivers exacerbating child poverty today.

Legacy of the Covid-19 crisis

The pandemic was a major inflection point for child poverty in Europe. According to the IMF, the number of children facing *severe material deprivation* increased by nearly 1 million in 2020 alone—a staggering 19% jump. The increase was most pronounced in countries like **Germany** (where child material deprivation nearly tripled), while in **Spain**, child poverty indicators remain above pre-pandemic levels despite overall

improvements for adults.⁶⁸ In **Lithuania**, downward poverty trends were reversed by post-COVID inflation and insufficient indexing of social benefits, with sharp impacts on rural communities.⁶⁹

Inflation and the rising cost of raising a child

Across Europe, inflation and the rising cost of essentials are exerting sustained pressure on families with children, particularly those already struggling to make ends meet. Although inflation rates have varied across countries, their impact on household budgets has been widespread and unequal —amplified by stagnant wages, rising energy costs, and housing insecurity.

For instance, in **Germany**, **real wages** decreased in 2020 (-1.2%) and 2022 (-4.0%) and stagnated in 2021 and 2023. 2024 was the first year of significant growth in real wages (+3.1%) since the beginning of the COVID

crisis.⁷⁰ Analyses of collective-agreement wages show that the significant increase in real wages in the first half of 2024 could only compensate for half of the loss of purchasing power due to inflation in the previous years.⁷¹ People relying on basic social benefits also experienced a **loss of purchasing power** in the years 2021-2023.⁷² The rising cost of living led to a significant increase in the **cost of nutrition**. From May 2022 until July 2023, inflation rates for nutrition had been above 10% every month (and for half a year closer to or over 20%).⁷³

In **Italy**, inflation coupled with stagnant real wages has increased the cost of living significantly, with the burden disproportionately falling on low-income households. Families in southern regions and urban centres are disproportionately affected, and energy poverty is acute: in 2023, almost 1 in 10 children under age six lived in homes that could not maintain adequate warmth, with rates rising to 1 in 6 in the South.⁷⁴ In **Lithuania**, inflation continues to outpace increases in salaries and social transfers, and rural families in particular struggle to afford basic nutrition, utilities, and clothing.⁷⁵

Stagnant wages and rising prices have made it significantly more expensive to raise children. In **Spain**, Save the Children calculated that **raising a child now costs €758 per month**—a **13% increase** since 2022. Nearly 50% of families with children spend over half of their income on child-related costs, and energy poverty affects one in seven children.⁷⁶ In **Albania**, estimated monthly expenses for a family of four reached €2,321.50 in 2025, while the minimum wage is around €380/month.⁷⁷ Children's nutrition and access to school services are directly constrained by these gaps.

Insufficient and inequitable social protection

While international and EU frameworks encourage countries to strengthen social safety nets, implementation remains inconsistent. According to the IMF, **countries with robust, universal family benefits experienced smaller increases in child poverty during the pandemic**. The IMF review further highlights that while means-tested transfers can be efficient in theory, in practice, they often suffer from **exclusion, stigma, administrative complexity, low take-up, and poor responsiveness in times of crisis**. They also tend to be less politically resilient. This is why many experts advocate for **universal or semi-universal benefits**,

especially for children and families, as a **more effective and equitable foundation** for social protection.

Yet many states continue to underinvest in social protection. **Spain**, for example, allocated just 1.38% of its GDP to family-related transfers in 2023—far below the EU-27 average of 2.3%.⁷⁸ Its flagship anti-poverty scheme, the Ingreso Mínimo Vital (IMV), suffers from “non-take-up” problems, with **55% of eligible households not receiving benefits due to administrative complexity** and the figure rises to **72% for the Child Support Supplement (CAPI)**.^{79 80}

In **Finland**, evictions are rising and the share of families relying on food banks or community aid has increased due to the cuts to social security (e.g. cuts in general housing allowance, abolishment of a child-specific stipend in unemployment benefit).⁸¹ In **Italy**, although recent reforms introduced a more generous universal child allowance (Assegno Unico Universale), public spending on family/child benefits remains significantly below the EU average.⁸²

In **Norway**, while increases in child benefits have helped some families, other key welfare schemes — including social assistance, disability benefits (uføretrygd), and work assessment allowance (AAP) — remain below the national poverty line. These benefits have not kept pace with the real cost of living. In addition, the **social protection system is often experienced as unpredictable and administratively complex**. Families receiving support may receive between 7 to 10 separate payments per month, making it difficult to manage finances, increasing daily stress, and limiting the ability to plan ahead.⁸³ In **Serbia**, inadequate policies push children, particularly those coming from the most vulnerable communities, such as Roma, even deeper into poverty. The Law on Financial Support to Families requires that, for a family to receive a parental allowance for a newborn, all children must be vaccinated on time and regularly attend elementary and preschool education. Considering that all available data show a large discrepancy in vaccination and access to pre-school education between Roma and non-Roma children,⁸⁴ these provisions disproportionately affect Roma children. Similarly, provisions limiting parental allowance to four children, the implementation of the Social Card Act and a new state register - the Social Card information system often result in the exclusion of some of the most vulnerable children and adults from the social support system.⁸⁵

Table 9. At-risk-of-poverty rate for children below 18 years old before and after social transfers, 2024

	BEFORE	AFTER	DIFFERENCE
EU-27	33,2	19,3	-13,9
DE	32,2	15,2	-17,0
IE	32,8	14,8	-18,0
ES	36,6	29,2	-7,4
IT	40,1	23,2	-16,9
LT	30,7	19	-11,7
PL	33,2	13,6	-19,6
RO	32,0	26,2	-5,8
FI	29,1	11,6	-17,5
SE	31,9	18,2	-13,7
NO	28,9	12,4	-16,5

Source: Eurostat ([ilc_li02](#)) and ([ilc_li10](#))

Social transfers play a key role in reducing poverty across the EU, lowering the at-risk-of-poverty rate from **33.2% before transfers to 19.3% after**—a **13.9 percentage point drop** on average. Countries like **Poland, Ireland, and Finland**, which combine **relatively high or well-targeted social spending**, achieved the strongest poverty reduction (over 17 percentage points). In contrast, **Spain and Romania**, with **lower overall expenditure** or greater reliance on **means-tested benefits**, showed a much weaker impact. This suggests that **not only the level but also the design of social protection systems**—particularly the balance between universal and targeted support—shapes how effectively poverty is mitigated.

Housing insecurity and overcrowding

Inadequate housing is one of the most visible manifestations of child poverty. In Europe, a growing number of children live in overcrowded, unsafe, or inadequate homes. In **Spain**, over 21% of children live in homes with damp or structural damage,⁸⁶ while in **Ireland**, children experiencing homelessness reached record highs in 2025, with the country registering 4,653 children in emergency accommodation.⁸⁷ Many evictions are linked to rent arrears, and even minor cost increases can push families into homelessness or precarious accommodation.

In **Lithuania**, social housing access is one of the drivers of child poverty. Although the queue time is decreasing, it is still more than 5 years on average and can reach up to 12-13 years in some municipalities, thus leaving children in poor condition accommodation for several years. In addition, in rural areas, social accommodation is quite often in small, remote villages, with very limited public transportation.⁸⁸

In **Italy**, the state recognises housing and energy poverty, especially in urban areas, as urgent challenges. Yet, public investment remains limited: in 2023, 9.7% of children under 6 lived in homes that were not adequately heated, with the situation particularly acute in the South, where the figure rose to 16.6%.⁸⁹

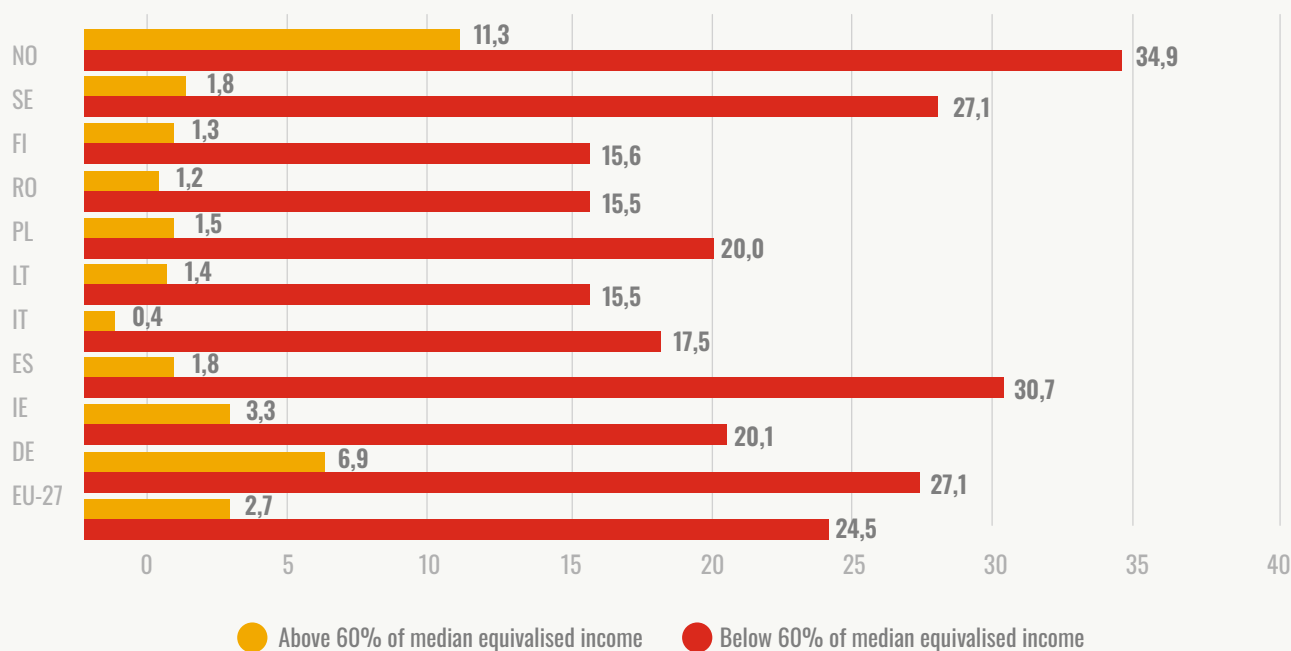
In **Ukraine**, the situation is even more severe due to the ongoing war. With **10% of housing destroyed or damaged**, displaced families are experiencing a sharp increase in rental prices alongside declining financial assistance. This has led many to live in **unsafe, overcrowded, or inadequate shelters**, or return to the dangerous frontline areas, further heightening children's vulnerability.⁹⁰

One critical indicator of housing hardship is the housing cost overburden rate, defined as the share of children living in households that spend more than 40% of their disposable income on housing. Figure 11 shows that this burden is overwhelmingly concentrated among children already living in poverty. In the EU-27, over **one in four children experiencing poverty are overburdened by housing costs**, compared to fewer than 3% of children above the poverty line. The data underscores how **housing stress disproportionately affects the most vulnerable**, deepening child poverty and compounding the risk of homelessness, displacement, and educational exclusion.



Elena del Real Moreno / Save the Children

Figure 7. Housing cost overburden for children below 18 years old by poverty status, 2024, %



Source: Eurostat

Housing deprivation also interacts with educational disadvantage: lack of space, internet access, or quiet environments hampers learning and increases dropout risk, especially for low-income and migrant children.⁹¹

Employment precarity and low work incentives

Across Europe, child poverty is closely tied to parental labour market insecurity, as many families remain

trapped in unemployment, underemployment, or precarious work. Contrary to conventional assumptions, **employment is no longer a guarantee of protection from poverty**. The IMF notes that *in-work poverty* has become endemic among low-wage households, particularly those with children.⁹² In Spain, over 17% of households with children experience in-work poverty, rising to over 30% among single-parent and large families.⁹³ Low work intensity is a key driver of in-work poverty. According to Save the Children's data, in Spain, only 4.6% of individuals who worked fewer than 100 days in

a year managed to escape poverty. This figure rises to 13.1% for those who worked fewer than 180 days, 64.6% for those who worked between 180 and 300 days, and 93.5% for individuals who worked more than 300 days.

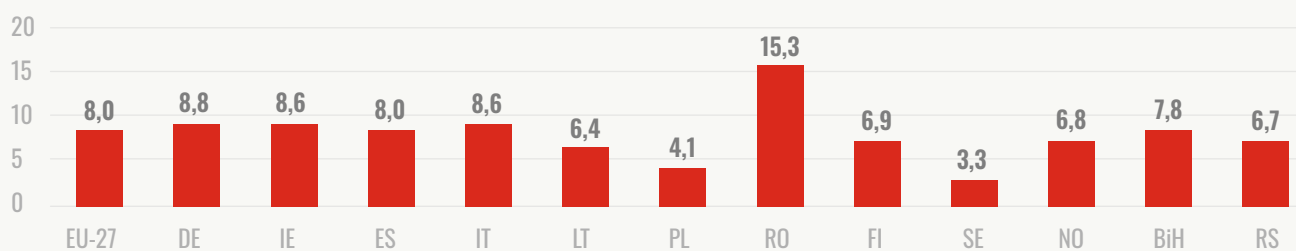
In **Germany**, the system of “mini-jobs” and low-wage service employment traps many families below the poverty line, while rigid bureaucracy discourages part-time workers from applying for top-up benefits.⁹⁴

In **Romania**, over half of the parents surveyed are either unemployed or in vulnerable employment, and this job insecurity often spans generations.⁹⁵ **Kosovo** further illustrates how high unemployment and reliance on informal work severely limit parents’ capacity to provide stable livelihoods for their children, reinforcing economic vulnerability.⁹⁶ Long-term unemployment is also a problem in **Germany**. It decreased from over 1,000,000 in 2015 to 700,000 in 2019. Then, because

of the COVID-19 pandemic, it increased to 1,000,000 again and now remains high at over 900,000.⁹⁷

In **Finland** and **Lithuania**, labour market exclusion is exacerbated by **structural and gendered barriers** such as inflexible jobs, caregiving responsibilities, and poor access to transport and childcare, particularly in rural areas.⁹⁸ These conditions leave many single mothers and low-education families unable to access decent employment, deepening the cycle of child poverty.⁹⁹ **Even in higher-income countries like Finland, benefit cuts and rising unemployment have weakened the safety net for jobless or precariously employed parents.** Collectively, these examples show that labour market failure is a major—yet often under-recognised—driver of child poverty, demanding urgent policy responses that integrate employment support with strong, accessible social protections.

Figure 8. Children aged 0-17 living in jobless households in 2024, %



Source: [Eurostat](#)

Moreover, high *marginal effective tax rates*—often exceeding 80% for low-income workers—create disincentives for additional work. These “benefit cliffs” are particularly harmful to single parents, making it financially irrational to accept extra hours or second jobs.¹⁰⁰



Pablo Martí / Save the Children

Chapter 2. Investing in children: impact of not investing and recommendations

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The high cost of not investing enough

- **A drain on national GDP:** Across OECD countries, child poverty costs an average of **3.4% of the GDP** annually. For some nations, the cost is even higher, reaching **5.1% of the GDP in Spain** and **6.1% in Lithuania**.
- **Billions in direct costs:** In Ireland, poverty costs the state **€4.5 billion** each year in increased pressure on housing, welfare, and justice systems. In Norway, the annual cost of youth marginalisation is estimated at **NOK 73 billion** (approximately €6.4 billion) due to lost productivity and higher welfare payments.

A high return on investment when investing early

- **Nutrition fuels success:** School meal programs have a remarkable return. Every **€1** invested can generate between **€7 and €34** in benefits. A universal school lunch program in Sweden led to a **3% higher lifetime income** for students.
- **The price of dropping out:** An early school leaver can cost the state between **€1 million and €2 million** over their lifetime. In Romania, with the EU's highest dropout rate, the cumulative lifetime cost of dropouts is estimated at **35.67% of its annual GDP**.
- **Early education pays dividends:** Every **\$1** invested in quality early childhood education can yield a return of up to **\$17**.

2.1 Impacts and costs of child poverty on society

Investing in children is not uniquely a social policy choice; it is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving the European Union's overarching strategic priorities of competitiveness, resilience, and preparedness.

Social investment in children directly underpins the EU's goal of becoming more competitive.¹⁰¹ A more educated and healthier social fabric fosters innovative ideas, leading to the creation of more and better jobs, which is the ultimate competitive advantage in a knowledge-based global economy.

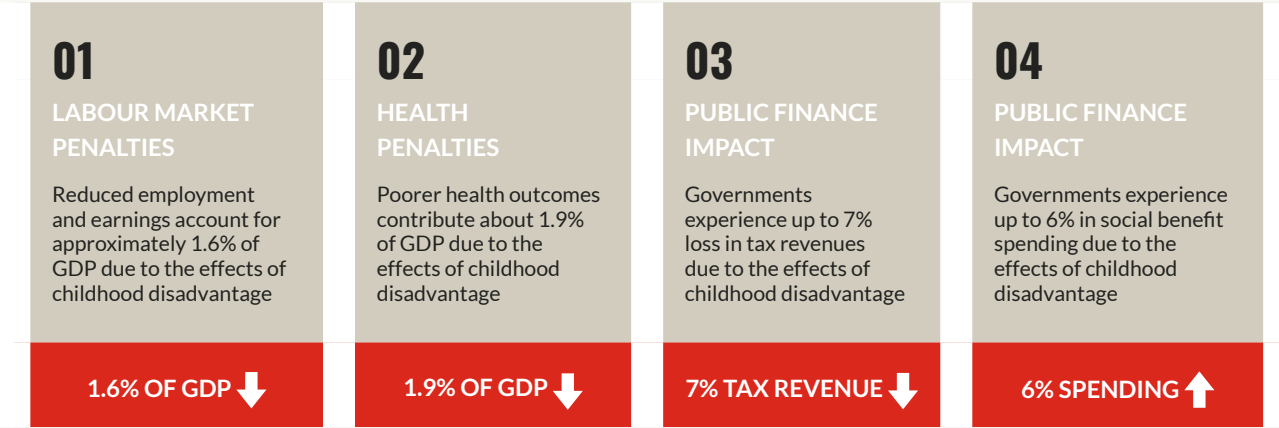
As analysed in the following chapters, the EU's next long-term budget, the MFF for 2028-2034, represents a critical juncture to prioritise children and their social protection, an imperative for the future of Europe as a whole. Policies that support children are core economic development strategies, building the foundational social security and human capital necessary for the EU to maintain its competitive edge and achieve sustainable growth. In the context of Europe's demographic trajectory, characterised by an ageing population and a shrinking future workforce, **leaving no child behind is both a principle of equity and a core strategic imperative.**

In an era marked by intense scrutiny of public spending, prioritising investments in children offers superior value for money and a high return on investment.¹⁰²

The ramifications of child poverty extend beyond individual lives, imposing significant burdens on national economies and eroding the very foundations of social cohesion and equity. An illustrative example from the United Kingdom highlights not only the human toll but also the economic costs of child poverty. According to an analysis conducted by Shelter, by 2029, the number of children living in temporary accommodation is projected to rise to 26%, with taxpayer costs increasing by 71% to nearly £3.9 billion a year.¹⁰³

Across **OECD countries**, child poverty is estimated to amount to an annual average of **3.4% of a country's GDP**. This cost varies significantly, ranging from **1.4% of GDP in Finland** to a high of **6.1% in Lithuania**.¹⁰⁴ The OECD assessed the long-term economic impact of childhood socio-economic disadvantage across OECD countries and found substantial economic costs of childhood deprivation.

Figure 9: Economic costs of childhood poverty (OECD)



Source: OECD, [The Economic Costs of Childhood Socio-Economic Disadvantage in European OECD Countries](#), 2022

National studies also stress that child poverty has lifelong consequences:

- In **Spain**, child poverty costs the country an equivalent of **5.1% of its national GDP**; ¹⁰⁵
- In **Ireland**, Save the Children reports **costs up to 4.5 billion EUR per year associated with poverty**, related to increased pressure on housing, welfare, justice and education spending; ¹⁰⁶
- In **Norway**, a 2020 report by Oslo Economics estimated the total annual cost of NOK 73 billion due to marginalisation and social exclusion of children. This includes factors such as lost productivity, increased welfare payments, and reduced tax income. ¹⁰⁷

- Several Save the Children’s reports, such as the ones covering **Kosovo** and **Lithuania**, discuss the serious economic consequences of inaction, leading to intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, losses in the workforce and productivity, and growing social welfare spending. ¹⁰⁸

This explicit quantification of child poverty’s cost to national GDP fundamentally reframes the issue from a purely social and moral concern to a **major economic impediment**. Investing in child poverty reduction is therefore not just a social expenditure but a crucial long-term **economic investment with significant returns, outweighing the initial financing costs**.



2.2 Investing in children: The demonstrated economic return of social investment

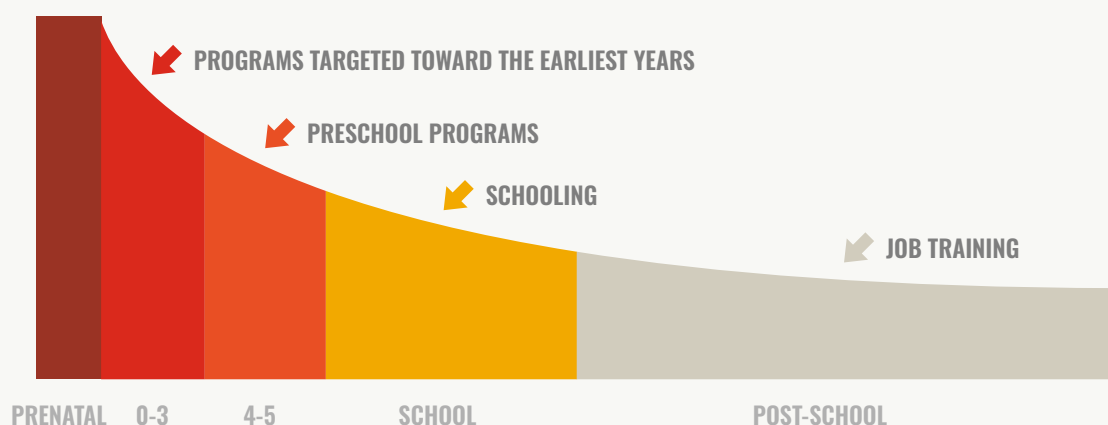
Evidence demonstrates the high return on investment (ROI) from targeted interventions in ECEC, general education, health, and robust social protection systems. These investments are not only foundational for individual wellbeing but are also crucial for **bolstering the European Union's competitiveness, enhancing its resilience to future shocks, and ensuring its preparedness for a rapidly evolving global landscape.** Ultimately, preventative spending on children generates significant economic dividends, mitigating future remedial costs and cultivating a more skilled, healthy, and stable society across the continent.

Investing in early childhood

Investing in ECEC is one of the most impactful and fiscally sound investments a society can make.

Research consistently shows that early interventions yield the **highest returns for children, families, and society.** Nobel Laureate James Heckman demonstrated that every \$1 spent on early childhood education can generate up to \$17 in long-term benefits.¹⁰⁹ The European Commission's 2024 Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) report reinforces that social investments in children, especially early in life, produce significantly higher returns.¹¹⁰

Figure 10. Returns to a unit dollar invested



Source: Heckman, James (2008), *Schools, Skills and Synapses*, *Economic Inquiry*, 46(3): 289-324

ECEC is a **cost-effective** strategy for closing achievement gaps before they widen, reducing the need for more expensive remedial services later.¹¹¹

High-quality ECEC nurtures children's cognitive, social, and educational development, preparing them for school and lifelong learning.¹¹² It reduces early inequalities, "levelling the playing field" for children in vulnerable situations.¹¹³ ECEC also acts as a powerful economic engine by enabling parental employment, addressing demographic challenges, and increasing tax revenues.¹¹⁴

The EU's "Barcelona targets" for 2030 aim for a rate of at least 45% for ECEC participation for children

under three and 96% for children from three to mandatory school age.¹¹⁵ These targets are designed to remove disincentives to female labour-market participation, as unpaid care responsibilities prevent 7.7 million women in Europe from working.

The **ESDE report estimates that achieving these targets requires an additional €11 billion per year across the EU.**¹¹⁶ As demonstrated above, **the cost of doing nothing is much higher.** An estimated 3.4% of the GDP is the annual economic cost of childhood disadvantage, which translates to hundreds of billions of euros each year for the EU.¹¹⁷

Long-term societal returns from early childhood investments:

- **Educational attainment:** High-quality ECEC correlates with improved cognitive skills and school completion. The Abecedarian Approach (U.S.) quadrupled university graduation rates (23% vs. 6% in the control group).¹¹⁸ The UK's Sure Start programme reduced special educational needs (SEN) referrals by 0.7 percentage points.¹¹⁹
- **Health and crime reduction:** The UK's Sure Start programme averted approximately £13,150 in annual hospitalisations for 11- to 15-year-olds.¹²⁰ The Perry Preschool Project (U.S.) generated \$6.0 in public and private benefits for every \$1 invested, largely through reduced crime and criminal justice system costs.¹²¹
- **Labour market and fiscal benefits:** Increased ECEC access directly impacts parental employment. The EU gender employment gap decreased from 17.7 percentage points in 2002 to 10.8 percentage points in 2021.¹²² In Norway, children exposed to subsidised childcare showed stronger labour market attachment and higher earnings as adults, contributing to increased tax contributions.¹²³

Table 10. Quantified returns on investment in Early Childhood Interventions

INTERVENTION TYPE	SOURCE/ STUDY	ESTIMATED RETURN ON INVESTMENT
Early Childhood Education	James Heckman (Nobel Laureate)	\$1: \$17 ¹²⁴
School Meal Programmes	EU Report/ Swedish Study	€1: €7 (at least) up to €1: €34 ¹²⁵
Addressing Undernutrition (Global)	World Bank	\$1: \$23 ¹²⁶
UK Sure Start Programme	IFS Report	£1: £2.05 (total benefits) ¹²⁷
France's Preschool Expansion	French Study	3% higher adult earnings ¹²⁸
Norway's Universal Childcare	Norwegian Study	5-10% lifetime earnings rise (lower/ middle income) ¹²⁹
US Perry Preschool Project	Heckman et al.	\$1: \$6.0 (public & private benefits) ¹³⁰

Reducing dropouts

Early school leaving (ESL) significantly impedes Europe's economic growth, undermining productivity and competitiveness while fuelling poverty. Young people who leave education prematurely often lack key skills, facing higher risks of unemployment and social exclusion. In 2024, over **4 million young Europeans were early school leavers, with only 47% employed**. This generates substantial public costs, including reduced income, diminished tax revenues, and increased expenditure on public services like healthcare and criminal justice.

The lifetime cost of a single early school leaver can be staggering, ranging from **€1 million to €2 million** (e.g., €1.8 million in the Netherlands, €1.1 million in Finland).¹³¹ **Romania**, a country with the EU's highest ESL rate (16.8% in 2024),¹³² faces cumulative lifetime costs from dropouts estimated at **35.67% of its annual GDP**. A dropout in **Romania** typically earns €190,000 less over their lifetime than a high school graduate.¹³³

The war in **Ukraine** is projected to cause learning losses equivalent to 117,000 children dropping out of school.¹³⁴ Across the country, 40% of Ukraine's children cannot access continuous education due to destroyed facilities or the lack of shelters. Data shows that the scale of the learning gaps seen in 2022 compared to 2018 is equivalent to two years of loss in reading and one year of loss in maths, which have been further compounded by the fatigue from studying online for over five years, and subsequent isolation and mental health decline.¹³⁵

Conversely, **improved educational outcomes correlate strongly with economic growth. Education boosts productivity and economic expansion**, with human capital driving innovation and job creation. Highly educated individuals have better labour market outcomes, including **higher employment rates, sustained employment, and greater lifetime earnings**. From a public finance perspective, educated citizens contribute more through taxes and incur lower costs for social entitlements. Education also generates societal "**spillover effects**", fostering innovation and creating a virtuous cycle of growth.¹³⁶

Investing in health and nutrition

Ensuring children's health and proper nutrition is a **foundational investment that yields substantial economic returns** by averting future healthcare costs and enhancing learning outcomes. Poor health and inadequate nutrition in childhood have profound **long-term consequences**.

School meal programmes exemplify the multifaceted benefits of investing in child health and nutrition. They improve overall child health, foster cognitive development, and enhance educational outcomes. By providing balanced meals, especially for low-income families, they bridge social inequalities. Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) positively impact diet quality and BMI, particularly among lower-income families. Seven EU Member States (**Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Luxembourg, Croatia, and Latvia**) offer universal access to **free school meals**, with **Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Ireland transitioning towards universal systems**.¹³⁷ A Swedish longitudinal study showed UFSM led to an average **3% higher lifetime income** for students, with up to **6% greater benefits for lower-income households**.¹³⁸

The economic return on investment in school meal programs is remarkably high, estimated at a minimum of sevenfold, potentially reaching up to **€34 for every €1 spent**.¹³⁹ **Sweden's** universal program boasts a **benefit-to-cost ratio of 4:1, rising to 7:1 for children in vulnerable situations**.¹⁴⁰

Spending on social protection yields higher returns

Social protection spending, often viewed as a cost, is a **critical and strategic investment** in society's future, particularly when directed towards children. Investing in children is fundamental for breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. This imperative is magnified by Europe's ongoing demographic shifts, where ensuring no child is left behind becomes essential for securing a prosperous and stable future. The EPSR and ECG frame social investment as integral to exiting crises, not an optional expenditure. The 2024 ESDE report also indicates that social investments yield higher returns when targeted at early stages of life.¹⁴¹ A universal or expanded child allowance is

considered the "smartest investment" for reducing child poverty, building human capital, and fostering equal opportunities. This positions social protection as the "first line of defence in a healthy state".¹⁴²

Preventative social protection reduces future remedial costs by improving children's life chances, reducing health burdens, lowering crime, and preventing family separation due to poverty. As stressed by the European Commission, **investing early is more cost-effective than addressing the long-term consequences of child poverty**.

¹⁴³ The European Commission also urges policymakers to consider "**how much it costs to abandon them**" rather than solely "how much it costs to support families," given that the **cost of inaction is "staggering"**.¹⁴⁴

Box 5. Snapshot: social protection spending and child benefits

Kosovo: Spends 8% of its GDP on social protection (lower than the regional average of ~17%); only 23% of this budget benefits children, despite children being 30% of the population.¹⁴⁵

Montenegro: Over 65% of children below the poverty threshold do not receive a child allowance.¹⁴⁶

Poland: Child benefit program (€187/month per child) costs ~1.7% of GDP, reaching 4.5 million children and significantly reducing child poverty.¹⁴⁷

Spain: A simulation by academic experts indicates that the proposed universal child benefit of €200/month per child could halve extreme child poverty from 14% to 8%, costing €19 billion annually, significantly less than the €63.1 billion annual cost of chronic child poverty.¹⁴⁸



Melissa Clement / Save the Children

Chapter 3. Tackling child poverty: policies, practices, and investments

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

A legal duty under the UNCRC: child poverty is not an option

- All European countries are legally bound by the **UNCRC (Art. 27)** to combat child poverty.
- The UNCRC consistently urges stronger action across Europe, calling for **dedicated strategies, better benefits, and access to services**. Yet, only a few countries have embedded **child rights in their constitutions or enforceable poverty targets**, limiting accountability.
- **Legal anchoring** gives children enforceable protections and ensures their needs are not sidelined in national priorities.

Strengthened EU policy landscape but national action remains fragmented

- The EU has introduced powerful frameworks — the ECG (2021) and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2022) — backed by funding and a target to lift 5 million children out of poverty by 2030. The EU is also working on the launch of its first comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy, which should be finalised in 2026.
- However, most EU Member States lack binding child poverty targets, and many rely on broad or outdated strategies, failing to meet the ambition set at EU and UNCRC level. Several countries still lack any dedicated child poverty strategy.

- Pre-accession countries also face **implementation gaps**, with fragmented governance and weak legal guarantees for children.
- Where **strategies** exist, they often suffer from: underfunding and poor local delivery; gaps in social protection coverage (e.g. exclusions for Roma children and children with a migration background); lack of service integration across education, housing, and health.
- ECG National Action Plans in many cases remain **detached from mainstream budgeting and governance**.

An integrated, rights-based approach to child poverty is the most effective

- **Regular, universal or well-targeted income support** is among the most effective short-term tools to reduce poverty
- **Access to quality services** is key to long-term outcomes.
- **Integrated models**, like Ireland's cross-government Child Poverty Unit, are more effective than siloed programmes.

A child-centred MFF is essential to deliver on rights and break the cycle of poverty

- The next MFF (2028-2034) will determine whether the EU can match its political ambition on child poverty with the financial means to deliver. While the ECG has shown that transformative results are possible when political will is backed by appropriate funding, the current MFF proposal lacks binding commitments and dedicated resources for children in vulnerable situations.
- Without structural safeguards, such as ring-fenced funding, enabling conditions, outcome-oriented targets, and a transparent child marker, social investment risks being sidelined. The EU must treat social investment, especially in children, as core infrastructure.

- The removal of the 25% earmarking for social investment under ESF+ and its replacement with a **14% target** risk undermining the EU's ability to deliver on its social objectives. This benchmark should be re-established, at a minimum, and strengthened to protect social priorities across Member States.
- Equally, the absence of earmarking to combat child poverty is a major setback. At least 5% of ESF+ resources should be allocated to eradicating child poverty in every Member State, rising to 10% in countries with above-average AROPE rates, in line with the European Parliament's requests.

3.1 Policy and legal frameworks for combating child poverty

International commitments: UNCRC obligations and recommendations

All EU countries have ratified the UNCRC, making it the most powerful and legally binding international framework for advancing children's rights. **UNCRC Article 27** explicitly obliges States to assist parents and guardians "to alleviate poverty where needed" so that each child can develop properly.¹⁴⁹ This international legal framework **places a duty on governments to take legislative, social, and economic measures to combat child poverty**. In practice, UNCRC monitoring bodies have consistently highlighted child poverty as a serious concern across Europe and issued recommendations for stronger action.¹⁵⁰

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reviews each State's progress periodically and has urged many European countries to intensify efforts against child and family poverty. The table below summarises recent **UNCRC recommendations** (from 2022– 2025 reviews) for the countries in focus, which often call for adopting child poverty strategies or increasing support for low-income families. These recommendations form a baseline for national action and inform EU-level monitoring and advocacy.

Table 11. Summary of the latest UNCRC recommendations for the countries in focus

COUNTRY	UNCRC RECOMMENDATION ON CHILD POVERTY
	Only countries which received recommendations in 2020 and later are included in this list.
ALBANIA (2023)	Noting that one-third of Albanian children live in poverty, the Committee urged a review of the social protection model and higher budget allocations for child services (health, education, welfare) to tackle high child poverty, especially among Roma and rural families. ¹⁵¹
FINLAND (2023)	In the context of rising poverty, the Committee recommended that Finland avoid social benefit cuts that affect children at risk and increase social benefits to ensure an adequate standard of living for all children – in particular boosting support for children with disabilities, asylum seeking children and those with irregular status. It also urged measures to prevent homelessness (e.g. more social housing for families) and data collection on homeless children. ¹⁵²
GERMANY (2022)	The Committee called on Germany to develop a strategy to tackle the root causes of child poverty and ensure all children enjoy an adequate standard of living. It specified that such a strategy should include a reform of social benefits to guarantee an adequate subsistence level (with improved benefit calculation) and a particular focus on children in vulnerable situations (e.g. from migrant or single-parent families). ¹⁵³
IRELAND (2023)	The Committee urged Ireland to raise social welfare rates to reflect the cost of living as a key means to guarantee children an adequate standard of living. It also recommended ensuring that children in asylum-seeking families have prompt access to social protection benefits , addressing gaps that left some children without support. ¹⁵⁴
LITHUANIA (2024)	The Committee noted positively that Lithuania's child poverty rate fell from 25% in 2015 to ~17% in 2022, partly due to policies like a universal child benefit . It encouraged Lithuania to continue reducing child poverty, including through its new ECG Action Plan (2023–2030), which contains measures for vulnerable groups and by maintaining adequate social benefits. ¹⁵⁵
NORWAY (2025)	In May 2025, Norway received new recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, expressing concern about rising income inequality and child poverty , particularly among children with immigrant backgrounds and those in municipal housing . The Committee called for a child rights-based approach to poverty policy, mandatory local action plans, child rights impact assessments of restrictive measures affecting asylum-seeking families, stronger financial support and access to free services, and automatic adjustment of child benefits to inflation and wages. ¹⁵⁶
POLAND (2021)	The Committee welcomed steps like Poland's " Family 500+ " child allowance (from January 2024, the state raised the family allowance to 800 PLN – Family 800+), which significantly cut child poverty. It recommended that Poland continue strengthening social protection for children, ensuring that children in marginalised communities (Roma, rural areas, etc.) are effectively reached. ¹⁵⁷
ROMANIA (2025)	The CRC welcomed Romania's efforts to improve child protection through new strategies (e.g. National Strategy "Protected Children, Safe Romania" (2023–2027), deinstitutionalisation, and support for vulnerable children, including those affected by migration. However, it raised concern over persistently high child poverty and inequality, urging increased social investment, decentralised budgeting, and better targeting of vulnerable groups. The Committee also called for stronger access to quality education, healthcare (including mental and reproductive health), inclusive services, and full implementation of the Child Guarantee and anti-poverty measures. ¹⁵⁸
SPAIN (2018) 2025 BY THE EC	Acknowledging Spain's creation of a High Commissioner for Child Poverty, the Committee recommended stepping up investment in children to combat its relatively high child poverty. This included expanding income support – for example, moving toward universal child benefits or similar financial support for families – and ensuring adequate housing and nutrition for children in need. ¹⁵⁹ While there are no more recent CRC observations for Spain, the EC issued a recommendation to Spain which explicitly addresses the issue of child poverty. It highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that combines income support with social transfers and improvements in education and training, aiming to tackle the root causes of child poverty and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. ¹⁶⁰
SWEDEN (2023)	The Committee recommended that Sweden strengthen measures to prevent child poverty and social exclusion among children in vulnerable situations – for instance, by maintaining robust universal benefits and targeted support to families at risk, ensuring no child "falls through the cracks" of the welfare system. ¹⁶¹
UKRAINE (2022)	Even before Russia's 2022 invasion, Ukraine's child poverty was a concern; the war has greatly exacerbated economic hardship for families. The Committee urged Ukraine to strengthen social safety nets for children , especially for internally displaced and conflict-affected families – ensuring that children have access to basic services, housing and humanitarian assistance. ¹⁶²

EU-level frameworks

At the EU-level, a wide framework of social rights strategies and funding instruments has evolved over the past decade to support the eradication of child poverty and support Member States to fulfil their obligations under the UNCRC. Recent years have witnessed significant progress in Europe's commitment

to child rights and the fight against child poverty, such as the adoption of the first-ever EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2022) and the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (2021), both grounded in the UNCRC's rights-based principles.

Table 12. EU-level framework to tackle child poverty

FRAMEWORKS	POLICY INSTRUMENTS AND ACTION PLANS	CURRENT FUNDING MECHANISMS	TARGETS
The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) sets out 20 key principles for a fair society. Principle 11, "<i>Childcare and support to children</i>," explicitly states that "<i>Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.</i>"¹⁶³ Its implementation is monitored via the European Semester. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) consolidates all EU actions on children's rights into one framework.¹⁶⁴ The strategy commits the EU to support Member States in fighting child poverty. The forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, slated for release in early 2026, is positioned to be the Union's first comprehensive framework aimed at eradicating poverty. This strategy is designed to connect, complement, and reinforce EU frameworks and policies to end poverty.	The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (2021) can be seen as the de facto EU-level social compass – it sets three 2030 social targets, including one on the reduction of child poverty, and introduced new initiatives such as a Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income (2022) and one on Affordable Housing (2023). The ECG Recommendation (2021) calls on Member States to ensure that children in need have free and effective access to key services.¹⁶⁵ The ECG is further analysed in the next chapter. The European Commission has established the EU Child Participation Platform, implemented with the support of Save the Children and SOS Children's Villages. This platform ensures that children's voices are included in shaping EU policies and actions affecting them. It will also contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of the ECG, helping align actions with children's experiences and opinions. In 2022, the Commission also launched an EU Platform on Combating Homelessness, which, along with the forthcoming Affordable Housing Plan (expected in 2025), will benefit children in precarious housing.	To support Member States' efforts, the EU currently provides significant funding earmarked for social inclusion and children. In particular, the ESF+ for 2021–2027 includes a requirement that at least 25% of the budget is to be spent on promoting social inclusion, including the integration of non-EU nationals. Moreover, countries with child poverty above the EU average should allocate at least 5% of ESF+ resources to tackling child poverty. All the other countries are requested to dedicate adequate funding to tackle the issue. Other relevant funds: RRF, ERDF, AMIF, IPA, Social Climate Fund, Just Transition Mechanism.	As part of the EPSR Action Plan (2021), the EU set a headline target to lift at least 15 million people, including at least 5 million children (<i>measured by AROPE indicator</i>) out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030.

While child and social policy remains a **soft competence** of the European Union – meaning that the primary responsibility lies with national governments – the **EU plays a crucial supporting role**. Through funding, political coordination, policy instruments, targets setting, and monitoring mechanisms, the **EU provides essential tools** that complement and strengthen national efforts. All 27 EU Member States now have ECG NAPs and are expected to report on progress on a biennial basis, making child poverty reduction a more visible national

priority across the Union. The 2021 political commitment to **cut child poverty by 5 million by 2030** provides a unifying foundation, against which EU institutions and national governments can be held accountable. The real progress will depend on the **effective use of EU and national funds**, integrating these EU initiatives into domestic policies, as well as effective monitoring systems. A glimpse into the current status of the implementation of the ECG at the national level is provided in Chapter 3.

Box 6. EU guidance for pre-accession countries

EU action on child poverty extends beyond current Member States. Through instruments such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)¹⁶⁶ and wider political dialogue, the EU provides guidance to pre-accession countries in aligning their social protection and child rights systems with EU and UNCRC standards.

Moreover, the EU's **Enlargement Strategy** underscores the importance of social policy and employment reforms, including child rights, as integral components of the accession process. Chapter 19 of the EU *acquis Communautaire* focuses on social policy and employment, requiring candidate countries to align their legislation and practices with EU standards in these areas. While primarily targeted at EU Member States, the principles of the ECG serve as a benchmark and political compass for candidate countries striving to meet EU child rights standards.

Furthermore, child poverty is increasingly shaped by **cross-border challenges** such as climate change, digitalisation, housing crises, migration, and public health. These dynamics call for **coordinated EU-level responses**, including frameworks that transcend national borders and address structural inequalities. **Maintaining a strong, child rights-based EU approach is essential** to ensuring that EU involvement reinforces rather than dilutes Member State efforts.



Box 7. Reflections on child poverty monitoring in the EU

The **ECG monitoring framework**, launched in January 2024, represents a significant advancement in tracking child poverty and service access across the EU. Built on Eurostat indicators and complementary data sources, it focuses on six key areas: early childhood education, schooling with meals, healthcare, nutrition, housing, and the size of the target population.¹⁶⁷ These metrics enable granular tracking of progress toward the ECG's 2030 targets while exposing systemic gaps in service delivery. In addition, as part of the EPSR, the Social Scoreboard serves as a reference framework to monitor societal progress.¹⁶⁸ Eurostat provides the data for most of the indicators of the social scoreboard.

The **European Semester** complements this framework by integrating child poverty metrics into broader economic governance. However, the Semester's focus on fiscal stability and economic priorities often overshadows social investments and children's rights, with only 5 of 27 Member States receiving explicit child-focused Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) in 2023.¹⁶⁹ The European Commission should **integrate children's issues, especially the ECG, more systematically into Country Reports and CSRs**, so that the **Semester becomes "a main guidance" for the ECG implementation**. The EC should deliver a systematic integration of child-related priorities into the European Semester.

Furthermore, child advocates raise concerns that tracking of progress on child poverty is often disconnected from broader national and EU poverty monitoring frameworks. As a result, there is inconsistency in aligning indicators with actual policy implementation, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the ECG.¹⁷⁰ Considering the upcoming **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** and the likely monitoring guidelines for its implementation, the monitoring of the ECG and other poverty-reduction efforts will need to be aligned.

The **UNCRC reporting system**, with its established procedures and civil society engagement mechanisms, offers potential to **strengthen national and EU-level monitoring** through enhanced coordination, standardised indicators, and **improved accountability mechanisms**. Integration of these systems could address current fragmentation while leveraging the UNCRC's emphasis on child participation and rights-aligned indicators (potentially pushing ECG metrics beyond service access to rights fulfilment). By integrating UNCRC's cross-cutting anti-discrimination focus (Article 2) and disaggregated data requirements, ECG monitoring could better target intersecting vulnerabilities.

The **UNCRC** can be seen as an **additional legally binding foundation that strengthens accountability** for child poverty reduction initiatives like the ECG. At the EU level, the European Commission and Council can use **UNCRC reports as additional monitoring input**. The European Parliament and child rights advocates also invoke UNCRC recommendations in assessing Member States' compliance with the ECG. In this way, the UNCRC framework (with its legally binding child rights obligations) underpins the political commitments of the ECG, helping to ensure that promises translate into concrete action. Including the UNCRC reporting cycle with the EU's monitoring (e.g. the European Semester and ECG biennial reports) could create a stronger feedback loop.

National strategies and policies

Building on the legal obligations under the **UNCRC** and the supportive role of **EU-level frameworks**, European countries exhibit a wide range of national strategies, laws, and policy measures to tackle child poverty. While some Member States and pre-accession countries have adopted **comprehensive and rights-based approaches** that align closely with both UNCRC commitments and EU guidance,

others continue to rely on **fragmented or under-resourced frameworks**. The following table provides an overview of child poverty strategies in selected countries, highlighting where **dedicated national frameworks are in place** and where **significant gaps remain** in translating child rights commitments into tangible action.

Table 13. National strategies and policies on child poverty

COUNTRY	NATIONAL STRATEGY ON CHILD POVERTY	COMMENT
ALBANIA		Child poverty is addressed within broader social protection reforms . Recent measures include increasing cash transfers for families (a “ <i>baby bonus</i> ” for newborns and tripling assistance for orphans). However, services remain underfunded and high child poverty persists . Albania relies on its National Social Protection Strategy 2024-2030 and Social Fund, but has no stand-alone child poverty plan. ¹⁷¹
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA		Social welfare is largely handled by entities/cantons, leading to unequal support . The absence of a coordinated approach was noted by the UN, which urged BiH to develop a poverty reduction strategy. Some cash benefits exist, but coverage and amounts are limited, and many families fall through the cracks in the system. ¹⁷²
FINLAND	 + CG NAP	Finland adopted its first National Child Strategy in 2021 , which, while covering all child rights, includes goals to reduce child poverty and social exclusion . In line with the ECG, Finland’s strategy and its ECG NAP (2022) focus on equal access to services and avoiding family poverty. Anti-poverty efforts are embedded in mainstream policies (universal child benefits, housing allowances, free education) rather than a single poverty-targeted programme.
GERMANY	 + CG NAP	Germany does not have a dedicated “child poverty strategy” document, but the issue was high on the agenda with the previous government. In August 2023, the government considered introducing a “ Basic Child Allowance ” (<i>Kindergrundsicherung</i>) from 2025 – a major reform bundling existing child benefits and increasing support for low-income families. However, the planned reform stalled with the government change and has not been adopted. At the moment, Germany’s primary framework for combating child poverty is the ECG NAP titled “New Opportunities for Children in Germany,” introduced in 2023.
IRELAND	 +CG NAP	Ireland established a dedicated Child Poverty Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and launched “ From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023–2025 ”. This cross-government plan focuses on areas like income support, reducing living costs, tackling family homelessness, and better coordination of services. It represents Ireland’s specific child poverty action plan, backed by high-level political leadership. ¹⁷³
ITALY	 +CG NAP	Italy recently adopted a new National Plan of Social Interventions and Services , which encompasses both the National Social Plan 2024–2026 (linked to the National Fund for Social Policies) and the National Plan for Social Interventions and Services to Combat Poverty 2024–2026 (linked to the Poverty Fund). These plans include specific goals to reduce child poverty and social exclusion, in alignment with the objectives of the ECG. ¹⁷⁴
KOSOVO		In 2023, Kosovo’s government began rolling out a child allowance for families (as part of a new social scheme), though amounts are low. There is no dedicated child poverty strategy; the issue is addressed under general social inclusion plans. Child rights organisations urge Kosovo to implement a robust child benefit and targeted programmes for poor families.
LITHUANIA	 +CG NAP	Lithuania introduced a universal child benefit in 2018 , which has been credited with sharply reducing child poverty. By 2023, the benefit amount had increased by 42% compared to 2018. Alongside that, Lithuania approved an ECG NAP (2023–2,030) with 38 measures focusing on children at risk. ¹⁷⁵
MONTENEGRO		In 2022, Montenegro expanded child allowance to all children under 18, resulting in 128,000 children receiving benefits in 2023. This led to a slight drop in the child poverty rate (from 30.5% to 28.4%). The benefit (~€30–€40/month per child) is an important step, though relatively small. Other measures include increased social assistance and some services for poor families. However, Montenegro lacks a focused child poverty or general poverty reduction strategy. ¹⁷⁶
NORWAY		Norway’s strong welfare state results in low absolute poverty. Yet, rising relative poverty among certain groups prompted action. The government implemented a National Strategy for Children Living in Low-Income Families (2020–2023), which was recently renewed. This strategy includes measures like free core hours in kindergarten, extracurricular activities for low-income children, and targeted employment support for parents. While no legal poverty <i>targets</i> exist, the strategy represents a coordinated approach. ¹⁷⁷
POLAND	 +CG NAP	Poland’s flagship policy against child poverty is the “ Family 500+ ” programme launched in 2016 (and updated to Family 800+ in 2024). Poland does not have a dedicated child poverty strategy document or target, but Family 800+ and related measures (e.g. “Good Start” school allowance) serve as its de facto strategy by boosting family incomes. The Polish government frames it as both an anti-poverty and pro-natalist policy. ¹⁷⁸ At the time of preparing this report, the Polish government was considering amendments that would limit access to the “Family 800+” benefit for children under temporary protection if their parents or legal guardians are not formally employed in Poland . Such a measure would significantly undermine the economic well-being of already vulnerable families with children and set a dangerous precedent by tying children’s rights and access to crucial child benefits to their parents’ or guardians’ legal status or employment situation. These restrictions would disproportionately affect single-parent households—particularly female-headed families—where caregiving responsibilities prevent full-time employment, thereby deepening social and economic inequalities.

COUNTRY	NATIONAL STRATEGY ON CHILD POVERTY	COMMENT
ROMANIA	 +CG NAP	The government has several strategies that touch on the issue – e.g. a National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction, and a National Strategy titled “Protected Children, Safe Romania” (2023–2027) . However, these are broad and have suffered from weak implementation. The latter is designed to reduce child poverty and social exclusion—targeting a reduction of 400,000 affected children by 2027—while strengthening access to integrated social services, especially for vulnerable groups such as Roma children, those with disabilities, and children left behind by migrating parents. It operates alongside the ECG NAP (2023–2030), and its implementation requires coordinated inter-institutional mechanisms, adequate funding, decentralisation, and regular monitoring and evaluation to avoid duplication and ensure impact. ¹⁷⁹
SERBIA		Serbia does not yet have a dedicated child poverty or child wellbeing strategy, though it has had a National Social Protection Strategy (expired) and needs to develop a new one. Social transfers in Serbia include a child allowance for low-income families, but coverage is narrow and benefit levels are low. The need for a comprehensive strategy was highlighted by both the UN and EU.
SPAIN	 +CG NAP	In the last few years, Spain has made child poverty a policy priority. In 2018 it elected a High Commissioner for the Fight Against Child Poverty in the Prime Minister’s office to coordinate actions. A National Strategy for the Prevention and Fight Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (2019–2023) was adopted, with specific focus on child poverty (90 measures aimed at income support, education, housing, etc.). However, that strategy lacked a dedicated budget and had limited impact. Spain introduced the Minimum Income Scheme (“Ingreso Mínimo Vital”, IMV) in 2020, which includes supplements for children. In 2022, a Child Support Supplement (“Complemento de Ayuda para la Infancia”, CAPI) was added to the IMV, providing monthly payments per child to improve adequacy for families with children. In 2022–2023, the government announced plans for a universal child benefit , starting with low-income households and aiming to expand to all families by 2025. ¹⁸⁰ Also, Spain’s official ECG NAP (2022–2030) provides detailed measures to improve access to essential services for vulnerable children across areas like education, healthcare, nutrition, and housing.
SWEDEN	 +CG NAP	In the Swedish context, family policy as well as social insurance and welfare systems have played an important role in preventing child poverty. Although Sweden has developed a ECG NAP, there is no clear governance attached to the ECG and its implementation cannot be tracked, including in the state budget.
UKRAINE		Prior to the war, Ukraine had a declining but significant child poverty rate and various strategies (e.g. a Poverty Reduction Strategy and a National Action Plan for Children). The Ukrainian government, with support from the EU, has focused on emergency cash transfers to families with children and maintaining basic services. Currently, the approach is centred on humanitarian assistance and integrating families into national assistance schemes, rather than a standalone strategic plan. The National Strategy to Address Poverty has expired in 2020 and has not been revisited since the escalation of the war. In July 2025, the Government of Ukraine made a commitment to join the European Child Guarantee and develop a National Action Plan on its implementation, pending details on the policy development and funding.

Despite the frameworks and strategies in place, significant **gaps and inefficiencies** remain in Europe’s legal and policy response to child poverty. Some key issues include:

Lack of binding force and accountability

Many commitments are policy-based or soft law rather than enforceable rights. For example, the ECG is a recommendation, not an EU regulation. This means that its implementation depends heavily on national political will and national follow-through. Only a few countries in Europe have adopted **legal or binding targets** for child poverty reduction. Likewise, the right to an adequate standard of living for children, while enshrined in the

UNCRC (Art 27), often isn’t directly binding in national law. Some countries (e.g. Germany)¹⁸¹ have even been repeatedly urged to entrench children’s rights (including socioeconomic rights) in their constitutions, to cover a legal gap in underpinning children’s welfare.¹⁸²

Strategy and implementation gaps

Several countries still **lack a dedicated child poverty strategy or action plan**. Even where strategies exist, they may be under-resourced or poorly executed. Implementation at the local level is another weak link: good national policies can falter if municipalities don’t have the capacity or funding to deliver services (a problem seen in decentralised systems like BiH, or in rural areas across Europe).



Save the Children Romania

Insufficient social protection coverage

Many legal frameworks fail to cover all children in vulnerable situations. Notable examples are benefit caps or exclusions that leave vulnerable children without support. In several EU countries, **social assistance schemes exclude certain groups** – e.g. undocumented migrant children or families not meeting residency requirements,¹⁸³ or Roma families - often falling outside systems due to administrative barriers or discrimination. These coverage gaps mean that even where legal entitlements exist, some of the poorest children are left out. As mentioned above., such ‘blind’ spots in legislation and exclusive protection systems are one of the key drivers of poverty.

Integration of services and legal silos

Child poverty is multidimensional, encompassing not only income deprivation but also **barriers to education, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and access to social services**. Yet legal and administrative frameworks often treat these in silos, limiting the effectiveness

of interventions. A key inefficiency is the lack of legal mechanisms to coordinate support for a child across sectors. The ECG attempts to encourage an integrated approach, but on the ground, many countries have outdated laws or protocols to link services. **Monitoring and data management** are also fragmented – some countries do not systematically collect data on child homelessness or children in temporary accommodation, making it hard to address those issues (e.g., the CRC urged Finland and others to improve data on homeless children ¹⁸⁴).

The forthcoming **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** (expected in 2026) provides a critical opportunity to address these gaps. It should **prioritise systemic coordination and integration**, encourage **legal frameworks for cross-sectoral collaboration**, and promote **standardised, disaggregated data collection** across Member States. Embedding these priorities within the strategy would not only strengthen implementation of the ECG, but also ensure that child poverty is addressed as a **comprehensive, cross-cutting issue**—not merely a set of disconnected sectoral problems.

3.2 Examples of practices and approaches in tackling child poverty

In the context of the legal and policy landscape outlined above, European countries employ a diverse array of policy responses to combat child poverty, with **cash transfers and social benefits** emerging as one of the most widespread and immediately effective interventions in the short term.

In **Spain**, the **Minimum Income Scheme (IMV)** and the **Child Support Supplement (CAPI)** are central components of income support. However, the system suffers from **low take-up, undermining its full potential**.¹⁸⁵ Complementing monetary aid, **ensuring equitable access to essential services** such as quality early childhood education and care, healthcare, and school-based activities is a cornerstone of anti-poverty strategies, often guided by initiatives like the ECG. Finland, for instance, relies on a comprehensive system of publicly provided, low-cost healthcare and daycare to support families.¹⁸⁶

While **cash transfers** have proven effective in directly alleviating income poverty, their long-term impact can be limited if not **adequately adjusted for economic changes**. For example, **Poland's** family allowance has lost significant real value due to a lack of indexation to inflation.¹⁸⁷ In Germany, a debate persists regarding whether monetary transfers alone are sufficient, or if greater emphasis should be placed on integrating parents into gainful employment.¹⁸⁸

Regarding **access to services**, while many countries aim to provide universal access, challenges often arise in implementation. **Albania's** social services, for instance, are hampered by insufficient funding and a lack of clear policy guidance,¹⁸⁹ and **Kosovo's** health and education systems struggle with limited financial and human resources.¹⁹⁰ **Italy** also faces significant territorial disparities in access to early childhood education, particularly in the South.¹⁹¹ These cases demonstrate that the **existence of policies is not enough: effective delivery often requires sustained investment, cross-sectoral coordination, and strong governance**.

Beyond direct income and service provision, some countries highlight **labour market interventions** to

support parents into stable employment. However, such efforts are frequently **constrained by limited childcare availability**, as noted in Poland and Lithuania.

Housing-related interventions also play a key role in child wellbeing. For example, **Norway** explicitly links housing costs and overcrowding to increased vulnerability among low-income families, and housing policy is acknowledged as part of wider poverty.¹⁹²

Furthermore, some countries are developing **national strategies and action plans** to combat child poverty, often adopting a rights-based approach. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks is often limited by **gaps in coordination**, weak enforcement mechanisms, or insufficient **child participation**.

The overall picture suggests that while a variety of interventions are in place, their effectiveness hinges on sustained political will, adequate funding, and a holistic, integrated approach that addresses the multidimensional nature of child poverty.

Income support/Child benefits

Child benefits and minimum income schemes remain among the most direct and measurable ways to reduce child poverty. In **Ireland**, the government's transfers introduced to offset inflation protected families to some extent from a sharper rise in poverty – in 2024, the risk of poverty would have been 17.2%, without intervention, or 1.9ppt higher, while **Norway's** increased investment reduced child poverty by nearly 2 percentage points over five years. **Italy's** Assegno Unico Universale unified fragmented schemes and widened coverage, improving transparency and uptake. In Poland, the **Family 800+** programme included a conditionality linking payments for Ukrainian displaced children under temporary protection to school enrolment, combining income support with educational inclusion. By contrast, **Spain's** IMV and CAPI are hampered by administrative complexity and low take-up, showing that the design of delivery systems is just as critical as the benefit level. **Germany's** Bürgergeld faces similar concerns around adequacy and erosion due to inflation.



Lorenzo Pallini / Save the Children

Table 14. National interventions and measures on social benefits

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/ MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION OR OUTCOME
IRELAND	One-off inflation-offsetting government transfers	Prevented a 1.9 percentage point rise in poverty (poverty would have reached 17.2% without intervention in 2024).
SPAIN	IMV and CAPI (income support schemes)	Low take-up: only 42% of eligible households accessed IMV; only 23% accessed CAPI. Regional strategies show promise.
POLAND	Family 800+ programme.	High uptake; enrolment condition promoted inclusion of (UA) refugee children in education
ITALY	Assegno Unico Universale — unified child benefit.	Expanded coverage; improved transparency and uptake.
NORWAY	Increased child benefit (universal); sustained investment	The share of children in persistent low-income households declined from 11.3% in 2020 to 9.9% in 2023; approx. 20,000 fewer children in persistent low income.
GERMANY	Bürgergeld (Social Code Book II benefit) offers baseline income, but purchasing power erosion is an issue as well as adequacy (acts as the 'last resort' among other available benefits for families).	Bürgergeld covers 1.87 million children, but purchasing power erosion is evident and benefits are insufficient.
ALBANIA	Family benefit doubled for families with 3+ children	Policy expanded income security for large families; early signs of increased school enrolment

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by the country offices for the Save the Children for the Child Poverty Report 2025

These findings reflect broader research showing that **universal and unconditional benefits** tend to yield higher and more **equitable outcomes**, especially when supporting public investment in education, childcare, health, parental employment supports and housing.¹⁹³

Box 8. Save the Children interventions on income support

In several countries, Save the Children directly supports families with children through **income assistance and livelihood support**, complementing national efforts to reduce child poverty.

Lithuania: Save the Children Lithuania operates a **Cash and Voucher Assistance** programme targeting families below the poverty threshold. Support includes monthly bank transfers, store vouchers, and crisis-response payments. Assistance is coordinated with local social workers and often complemented by material or psychosocial support.

Ukraine: Being a war-affected country, Ukraine is experiencing a dramatic increase of child deprivation that is estimated to have reached as high as 65.6% in 2023 due to the war's impact on living conditions. Due to the war, in 2022, large families (with three or more children) have found themselves in the direst situation. The poverty rate among such households was 84.7 per cent; whereas the figure for households with children with an unemployed member(s) exceeded 80 per cent.

Access to services (Health, Leisure, Childcare)

Ensuring **free or affordable access to essential services** is a critical pillar in efforts to mitigate the effects of child poverty. **Ireland** and **Finland** stand out for offering **nationwide school meal programmes**, free schoolbooks, and guaranteed access to basic services. In **Albania**, the government scaled up investments in **early childhood education and health services** following the pandemic and the 2019 earthquake. However, **structural gaps in access persist**, particularly in rural areas and among marginalised populations, highlighting the need for **universal service models** that are equitably financed and locally adapted.

Table 15. National interventions and measures ensuring free or affordable access to services

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/ MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION OR OUTCOME
IRELAND	Hot School Meals Programme and Free Schoolbooks Scheme expanded to all primary schools	Universal access planned for 550,000 children; widely recognised as reducing barriers
	The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme, DEIS Plus	Additional support to schools in areas of disadvantage, which has led to sustained improvements in a number of areas, including children's educational outcomes
GERMANY	Start Chancenprogramm to support up to 4,000 schools with a high proportion of students in disadvantaged situations	The programme is yet to be evaluated, but similar experiences in other countries with targeted place-based initiatives (e.g., Scotland, Ireland) suggest the potential effectiveness of such approaches
FINLAND	Therapy Guarantee (mental health service access law) for children and youth	Legally mandated therapy access starts in May 2025; aims to close service gaps
ROMANIA	Mobile health services and outreach via government-NGO partnerships	Mobile services that are part of national-level collaborations; impact includes reaching underserved rural families
ALBANIA	Expanded access to health and early education post-COVID and the earthquake	Recovery investments improved ECEC access and school continuity

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by country offices for the Save the Children Child Poverty Report 2025

While cash transfers have proven effective in **reducing income poverty**, particularly in the short term, they **do not alter the structural causes of child poverty** such as lack of access to quality education, healthcare, or housing. Research widely showcases that its **impact tends to plateau or fade over time unless paired with investments in broader social infrastructure**.¹⁹⁴ Across Europe, countries with **integrated strategies** that combine cash benefits with service-based support (such as home visits, early education, and family counseling) show **greater success in reducing child poverty and social exclusion**.¹⁹⁵

Box 9. Save the Children interventions on access to services

In addition to advocating for inclusive public services, Save the Children supports direct interventions to improve children's access to health care, ECEC, and recreational opportunities—especially in underserved communities. For example:

Kosovo: Save the Children supported the **scale-up of community-based ECEC centres** across 27 rural zones, increasing access by 78% between 2021 and 2023. These centres deliver early education, parenting support, and play-based learning in remote areas.

Finland: The **Fuel for Life** programme, run by Save the Children Finland, supported over **17,000 children** in 2024 by providing financial assistance for **food, hobbies, and study materials**. This intervention helps children from low-income families participate more equally in everyday life and school activities.

Italy: The national network of **Punti Luce** (27 centres) provides children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with access to free educational, cultural, and recreational activities, along with psychological and legal support for families. Over 55,000 children have been supported over the past decade. Save the Children Italy also recently launched the programme **Qui, un quartiere per crescere** (Here, a neighbourhood for growth) to significantly improve the living environment of children and adolescents in neighbourhoods that face difficulties related to social exclusion, where possibilities exist for transformation. Through a place-based approach, the programme responds to the specific needs of each area, actively involving children and adolescents as agents of change in collaboration with different stakeholders of local communities. The programme adopts several innovative solutions, such as multi-stakeholder co-designing with local institutions, universities and organisations, and territorial advocacy processes.

Lithuania: Save the Children Lithuania manages and supports a network of partner daycare centres (in 33 locations) to support children in vulnerable situations.

Many countries are piloting or institutionalising integrated service models, recognising that poverty is multidimensional. Established in 2023 within the **Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister's Office)**, Ireland's **Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office** represents a **novel whole-of-government approach** to tackling child poverty. Its primary mandate is to **accelerate implementation across government departments** in six priority areas: (1) income support and joblessness, (2) early learning and childcare, (3) reducing the cost of education, (4) family homelessness, (5) health, family, parental and wellbeing services, (6) participation in culture and sport.

The Office functions as a **central coordinating body**, ensuring that child poverty is not treated in isolation but as a **cross-cutting concern embedded across departmental budgets and strategies**. Crucially, the Programme Office operates within the highest level of government, which gives it **political weight, visibility, and policy influence**. Its role includes aligning national efforts with international commitments such as the

UNCRC, SDGs, and the ECG, while also promoting **collaboration with the community and voluntary sectors**. While still in its early stages, it is viewed as having **significant potential to drive systemic change** — provided that it continues to receive adequate **resourcing, leadership, and cross-departmental buy-in**.

Employment support for parents

As mentioned above, joblessness and in-work poverty are among the most persistent and powerful drivers of child poverty across Europe. **Parental employment can reduce poverty risk, but only if work is stable, decently paid, and compatible with caregiving responsibilities**. The 2023 IMF research underscores that boosting parental labour income, especially among low-income and jobless households, requires a mix of policy levers: reducing work disincentives through tax-benefit reform, enhancing access to affordable childcare, promoting flexible employment options, and investing in upskilling and requalification programs.¹⁹⁶ These policy directions are reflected in various national measures.



Francesco Alesi / Save the Children

Table 16. National interventions and measures on employment

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION OR OUTCOME
IRELAND	Joblessness named as priority in Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office	:
KOSOVO	Several initiatives to promote employment, such as ensuring at least one family member from jobless households is employed, including persons with disabilities in the workforce, and implementing youth employment programs	Data on the number of beneficiaries from the Social Assistance Scheme engaged through these employment measures remains unavailable.
POLAND	Active Parent Programme (introduced in October 2024)	Offers financial incentives to parents of children aged 12–35 months, encouraging labour market participation and utilisation of childcare services.
ALBANIA	The UN Joint Programme “Lifelong Empowerment and Protection in Albania” (LEAP)	Focuses on enhancing social protection systems and employment opportunities for marginalised populations, including children and youth.

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by country offices for the Save the Children Child Poverty Report 2025

Protection from institutionalisation

Research consistently shows that **poverty, not neglect, is a primary driver of family separation and institutional placement**. Institutionalisation fails to tackle the root causes of vulnerability and is associated with **long-term harm to children’s cognitive, emotional, and physical development**. In some countries (e.g.

Ukraine, Romania, Kosovo), child poverty and family separation are deeply intertwined. While state and non-state efforts aim to reduce institutionalisation and improve family-based support, severe economic hardship, systemic underfunding, and fragmented service delivery continue to pose major challenges.

Table 17. National interventions and measures to tackle institutionalisation

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/ MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION
UKRAINE	Poverty reduction as key priority to prevent family separation and institutionalisation	Ukraine has the highest number of children in institutions in Europe. Most are not orphans but placed there due to poverty, compounding vulnerabilities, and lack of access to services. The war places further strain on vulnerable families, creating risks for the implementation of the Better Care Reform.
KOSOVO	Reform of Social Assistance and a new Law on Social and Family Services to improve access and reduce the need for institutional care	The 2023 law introduces new service models, expands access, and improves institutional coordination. However, social protection remains underfunded and alternatives to institutionalisation are limited.

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by country offices for the Save the Children Child Poverty Report 2025.

While all three countries acknowledge the link between poverty and child separation, **only Ukraine** explicitly frames institutionalisation as a poverty-driven phenomenon. **Romania** reports on family separation due to economic migration (13.8% of children had at least one parent working abroad in 2023; low income is the main driver), while **Kosovo** is pursuing legislative reform to strengthen family- and community-based care, though the **shift from institutional care is still emerging** and not yet evidenced by outcome data.

The **Lancet Commission on the Institutionalisation and Deinstitutionalisation of Children**¹⁹⁷ found that children raised in institutional settings face significantly poorer outcomes in education, mental health, and life opportunities compared to those raised in family-based care. Leading global bodies advocate that **deinstitutionalisation must be seen as a key pillar of child poverty reduction**, alongside income support, quality services, and early family intervention.

Affordable housing support

Housing insecurity remains both a driver and a consequence of child poverty across Europe. Despite being a cornerstone of material wellbeing, access to affordable, adequate, and stable housing is still underdeveloped in many contexts. Children growing up in poverty are disproportionately affected by **overcrowded conditions, substandard infrastructure, and housing instability**, which have direct implications on their health, education, safety, and psychosocial development. Studies show that poor housing is associated with increased risks of respiratory illness, lower academic performance, and higher levels of stress and anxiety among children.¹⁹⁸

Table 18. National interventions and measures on housing

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/ MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION OR OUTCOME
SPAIN (CATALONIA)	Inclusion of housing in the regional anti-poverty strategy; support for families at risk of eviction and energy poverty	Over 21% of children live in poor housing conditions; housing insecurity is a major barrier to wellbeing ¹⁹⁹
LITHUANIA	Social housing for large families and persons with disabilities	Single parents—despite high poverty risks—are excluded from priority groups. There are reports of children in overcrowded, unsafe housing due to poor assessments by municipal authorities
ITALY	National strategies highlight the need to address housing and energy poverty, especially in urban areas	Acknowledgement of the housing burden in cities; support is fragmented and implementation is lagging

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by country offices for the Save the Children Child Poverty Report 2025.

While some countries have introduced **targeted housing allowances or temporary rent relief measures**, these are often fragmented and insufficient to address long-term structural deficits in the housing system. For instance, short-term rental subsidies may reduce immediate pressure but do not resolve the lack of affordable housing available or insecure tenancy regimes. According to the OECD, **integrated housing strategies**—combining social housing provisions,

tenancy protection, and income-related support—are **more effective** in reducing poverty and improving children’s living conditions.²⁰⁰ The **ECG** identifies access to adequate housing as one of its key service guarantees, emphasising its role in preventing social exclusion and institutionalisation. Despite these policy frameworks, many national systems continue to underinvest in child-sensitive housing policies, leaving the most vulnerable children exposed to cumulative disadvantages.

Box 10. Examples of Save the Children’s work in the area of affordable housing

In **Spain**, Save the Children’s advocacy department has recently carried out work focusing on housing. Child-focused public policy recommendations are being developed for the upcoming National Housing Plan (2026–2030). The aim is to protect children and ensure adequate housing for households with children, particularly those at risk of social exclusion. Efforts are also being made to integrate a child rights perspective throughout the plan, with proposals presented both to the central government and to regional governments across the autonomous communities.

Their research and advocacy work in Spain includes publications like **“No One Can Live Here”**, which document the effects of inadequate housing and that call for systemic reforms. These efforts form part of broader engagement in regional strategies, such as Catalonia’s plan against child poverty and the reform of the Renta Valenciana de Inclusión, which now explicitly incorporates a child perspective and to which Save the Children contributed through its advocacy.

Child rights and legislative anchoring

Several countries have taken important steps to **strengthen the legal and policy frameworks that support children’s rights and guide poverty reduction**. These include embedding child rights in

constitutional provisions, adopting comprehensive child strategies, or linking rights-based approaches to planning and monitoring tools. Legislative anchoring of children’s rights—whether through constitutional amendments, standalone laws, or child-specific policy instruments—serves multiple functions: it formalises state obligations, elevates child wellbeing in the political agenda, enhances coherence across sectors, and creates stronger avenues for accountability. However, persistent **gaps in implementation, funding, and legal enforcement** continue to limit the transformative potential of these frameworks.

Table 19. National interventions and measures to strengthen the legal protection of children’s rights

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION/ MEASURE	REPORTED SITUATION OR OUTCOME
GERMANY	Constitutional guarantee of a ‘subsistence minimum’ for all	Used in litigation to challenge inadequate benefits and to ensure basic material and social needs are protected
IRELAND	Children’s rights are recognised in the constitution, Young Ireland strategy incorporates commitments under UNCRC (and ECG), and the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit	The Unit coordinates action across departments; aligns with UNCRC, SDGs, and ECG, supports poverty budgeting
FINLAND	National Child Strategy includes poverty targets (100,000 people, of which 1/3 children, by 2030)	No formal child rights budgeting system; recent decisions lack child rights assessments despite UNCRC guidance
ALBANIA	National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 includes child poverty goals	Anchors child poverty reduction in multi-annual plans; expanded financial support for families

Source: SC national reports, 2025. Prepared by country offices for the Save the Children Child Poverty Report 2025.

While there is a consensus among international bodies on the importance of legislative anchoring, empirical research directly linking such anchoring to improved child outcomes remains limited. Nonetheless, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) has emphasised that **integrating children’s rights into legal and policy frameworks is essential for ensuring that**

children's interests are considered in all decision-making processes. ENOC advocates for the use of **Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA)** and **Child Rights Impact Evaluations (CRIE)** as tools to systematically assess and communicate the impact of laws, policies, and budget decisions on children's rights. These tools aim to ensure that children's rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled in all areas of law, policy, and practice.²⁰¹

Beyond transfers: Towards holistic, rights-based child poverty solutions

In summary, while income support through **cash transfers remains one of the most immediate and measurable tools to reduce child poverty, their impact is inherently limited when deployed in isolation.** Countries like Ireland and Poland have demonstrated notable success through universal or well-targeted benefits, yet the erosion of value due to inflation, administrative hurdles, and the lack of integration with other services weakens their continued impact. This underscores the importance of **indexing benefits to inflation** and **implementing temporary top-ups or one-off payments** to maintain their effectiveness over time. **Income support systems—particularly when rights-based, inclusive, and predictable—form the bedrock of national anti-poverty strategies.**²⁰²

At the same time, **cash transfers alone do not address the multi-dimensional nature of poverty.** Children face complex and intersecting barriers to accessing quality education, healthcare, adequate housing, nutrition, and inclusive community life. High rates of in-work poverty in countries like **Germany and Spain** further illustrate that employment, in the absence of decent wages and service access, does not reliably protect families from deprivation.

To deliver meaningful and lasting change, **cash transfers must be integrated within holistic, child-centred systems** that tackle poverty's root causes and uphold every child's right to thrive. This includes **investing in coordinated service delivery**, ensuring **child participation** in policymaking, and addressing **fragmented governance and underinvestment.** At the EU level, this requires **strengthening the ECG** and equipping Member States with clear guidance and financial tools to **link income support with universal access to quality services**—a shift from siloed interventions to integrated, rights-based action. The upcoming **EU**



3.3 Mobilising funding: the role of EU and national funds

While the EU is equipped with several key instruments to tackle child poverty, their impact ultimately depends on effective implementation and **sustainable, long-term funding**. European funding mechanisms provide significant opportunities to scale up proven interventions and support integrated child-centred approaches. As mentioned above, the EU has pledged to lift at least 15 million people, including 5 million children, out of poverty by 2030. Yet, it remains **5.45 million children short of this goal**, and the number of children at risk of poverty has increased.

This reality highlights the urgent need for both the current and upcoming MFF to go beyond rhetoric and **deliver the scale of investment required to close the gap**.

EU funding mechanisms: contributions, effectiveness, and limitations (2021-2027 MFF)

The ESF+ stands as the EU's primary instrument for investing in people, boasting a substantial budget of €142.7 billion for the 2021-2027 period.²⁰³ Its core mandate explicitly covers support for employment, social inclusion, education, and skills policies across the Union. A critical provision within its framework requires EU Member States with child poverty rates exceeding the EU average to allocate a minimum of **5% of their ESF+ resources specifically to tackling child poverty**, while the remaining Member States are mandated to commit an "appropriate share". Furthermore, under the theme 'Social inequalities and poverty', Member States should **allocate at least 25% of their ESF+ resources** to promote social inclusion. In addition, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) has been integrated in the ESF+ to provide **food and basic material assistance**. All Member States are obligated to devote at least **3% of their ESF+ resources** to this aim.²⁰⁵

Table 20. Examples of ESF+ allocation to tackle child poverty in selected countries

COUNTRY	TOTAL ESF+ ALLOCATION (2021-2027)	EARMARKING FOR CHILD POVERTY AND/OR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ECG	EXAMPLES OF FUNDED PROGRAMMES
FINLAND	€605 million	No amount/share specified	"Social Innovations in Child Welfare" programme, actively supporting the development of child welfare services nationwide.
GERMANY	€6.5 billion	5% of ESF+ to be allocated to tackling child poverty	The federal programme "ElternChanceN - strengthening families with parental support" provides targeted support to families who need help raising and educating their children. The focus here is on expanding network structures for families in disadvantaged living conditions. ²⁰⁶
IRELAND	€508 million	12% of ESF+ to be allocated to tackling child poverty ²⁰⁷	Food and Basic Material Support Programme. ²⁰⁸
ITALY	€14.8 billion	5% of ESF+ to be allocated to tackling child poverty	€40 million from ESF+ was allocated to support the inclusion of Roma children, alongside a €240 million investment in the "DesTEENazione" project, which established multifunctional spaces for young people, fostering social inclusion and skill development.
LITHUANIA	€1.1 billion	8.7% of ESF+ Funds (98,98 million EUR)	Funding for early education access for children from vulnerable families and a variety of informal education for children.
POLAND	€12.9 billion	No amount/share specified	Nearly €5.5 billion to support various social initiatives, including the creation of 55,000 new childcare places and the establishment of 400 new centres for mental health support for children.
ROMANIA	€7.3 billion	At least 5%	Most of the calls for proposals relevant from the ECG perspective and opened so far are funded under ESF+ with a share of co-financing from the national or local budgets.
SPAIN	€11.3 billion	696 million EUR; ²⁰⁹ Co-financed: 287 million EUR	Employment and social inclusion actions, including those targeting children.
SWEDEN	€707 million	No amount/share specified	Under program area C, Reducing the Risk of Economic Vulnerability, around half of the allocated funds are directed toward measures aimed at counteracting the risk of and mitigating the consequences of child poverty.

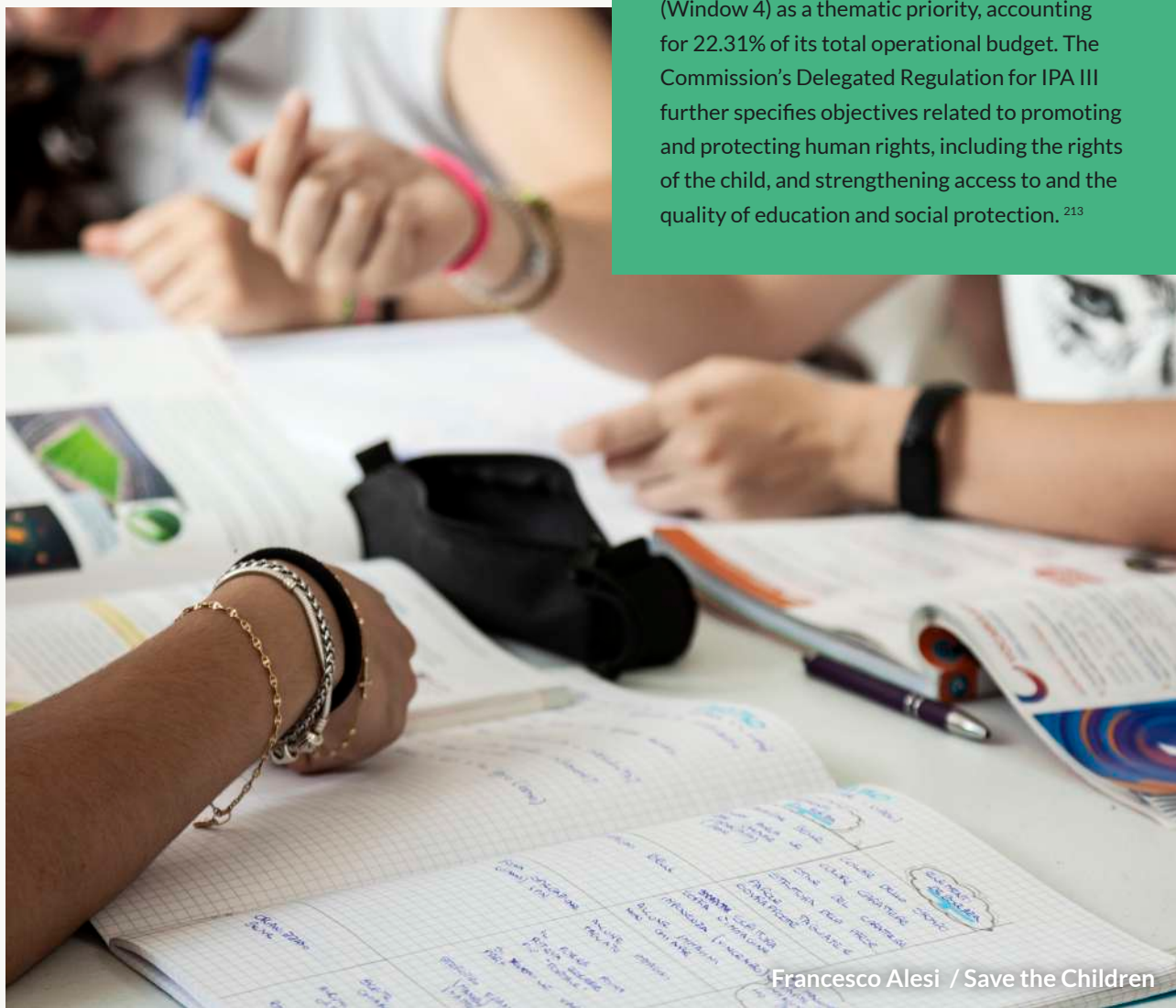
Source: *ESF in your country*, ECG NAPs, SC national reports, EU Alliance for Investing in children

Despite these contributions, the ESF+ faces several significant challenges and limitations. While the 5% allocation commitment has generally been met by the 11 Member States with the highest child poverty rates, CSOs expressed widespread **concerns regarding the sufficiency, sustainability, and transparency of this funding.**²¹⁰ Significant service gaps persist across critical areas such as universal safety nets, early childhood education, access to quality healthcare (including mental health services), social protection, affordable housing, and free school meals. This suggests that while the 5% minimum has been a positive and necessary step in formalising commitment, **increased and sustained investments are necessary to meet the actual scale of need.** The ESF+ acts as a baseline, but the persistent service gaps indicate that Member States may be meeting the letter of the requirement without necessarily achieving the spirit of comprehensive child poverty eradication. This points to a need for a higher mandatory allocation, more flexible mechanisms to exceed the threshold, and stronger national co-funding to truly address the problem. For this reason, Save the Children backs the European Parliament's call for an expansion of this 5% threshold to all EU countries, with a proposed **increase to 10% of ESF+ for those with the highest child poverty rates.**²¹¹

Furthermore, the complexity and bureaucracy inherent in the ESF+ system pose considerable hurdles. CSOs, which are vital for delivering services on the ground, report significant **barriers** in accessing ESF+ funding, including **poor communication, limited involvement in programme design and monitoring, and burdensome application and reporting requirements.** This administrative complexity can hinder effective implementation and contribute to persistent challenges around the absorption capacity and underspending of ESF+ funds for child-focused initiatives, weakening the transformative potential of the fund.²¹²

Box 11. EU funds for pre-accession countries

For candidate countries and potential candidates, IPA serves as a key financial and technical support mechanism, aiding them in implementing reforms to align with EU values and standards in preparation for Union membership. While not exclusively focused on children, the IPA III programming framework includes “Competitiveness and inclusive growth” (Window 4) as a thematic priority, accounting for 22.31% of its total operational budget. The Commission’s Delegated Regulation for IPA III further specifies objectives related to promoting and protecting human rights, including the rights of the child, and strengthening access to and the quality of education and social protection.²¹³



3.4 A truly child-centred financial framework for the MFF

The past year has been marked by a worrying trend in the EU policy discussions: the risk of **de-prioritising social inclusion and reallocating funds away from social objectives**. This shift, driven by an increasing emphasis on competitiveness and defence, threatens to sideline vulnerable groups, particularly children, and erode the Union's social foundation.

Investing in children is not secondary, but a cornerstone of Europe's long-term prosperity, security, and democratic stability. Prioritising the eradication of child poverty and the protection of children's rights is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. It strengthens social cohesion, builds trust in institutions, and ensures equal opportunities across Member States.

There can be no sustainable growth, no true security, and no resilient democracy without inclusive policies and a firm commitment to ending child poverty.

The broader reorientation risks repeating a familiar pattern: in times of crisis, social spending is the first to be compromised. Without fundamental reforms to the MFF's design, future shocks will continue to jeopardise progress on child poverty, undermining the very cohesion and resilience the EU seeks to build.

On 16 July 2025, the Commission presented its **proposal**²¹⁴ for the next MFF amounting to nearly **€2 trillion**, yet is important to highlight that the package includes the repayment of the Next Generation EU debts. The proposal is built around three key objectives:

- **Greater flexibility** across the budget, to allow the EU to act and react swiftly to unforeseen events or new priorities;
- **Simplified and harmonised financial programmes**, making funding more accessible for citizens and businesses;
- **A locally tailored model**, through the creation of **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPs)**, to ensure targeted investments for economic, social, and territorial cohesion.

Despite these positive intentions, the proposed structure raises several concerns about the future of social investment and child-focused policy in Europe. While emphasising competitiveness, resilience, and defence

readiness, it provides **no binding guarantees for social investment**. Despite previous commitments remaining in place—such as the prioritisation of the ECG and pledge to lift 5 million children out of poverty by 2030—the current draft will need to be strengthened to ensure delivery. Without **structural safeguards** such as **ring-fenced funding, enabling conditions, and child-focused tracking mechanisms**, the next MFF risks **perpetuating chronic underinvestment** in the social sphere and **undermining the implementation of key social instruments**.

One of the most significant changes is the integration of the ESF+ into the broader **Territorial, Social, Rural and Maritime, Sustainable Prosperity, and Security Fund**. The European Social Fund will be implemented via the **27 different National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPs)**, which will feature comprehensive sets of measures supporting education, employment and social objectives such as reforms and investments to reskill and upskill people, improve the quality of education and training systems, and fight poverty and homelessness. Most importantly, the proposal clearly prioritise the fight against child poverty by requesting Member States to **concentrate resources in their National and Regional Partnership Plans to implement the ECG**. Moreover, The ESF is still expected to promote equal opportunities, strong social safety nets, and intergenerational fairness. The aim of this delivery model is to enhance national ownership and responsiveness, but it will be key to ensure that it will not **dilute the visibility, prioritisation, and accountability of social objectives** across the Union.

The proposed **€453 billion cohesion envelope**, which seems like a budget increase at first, might not be a genuine expansion. This envelope must now also cover the regional component of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), support for fisheries, and other areas previously financed separately. Only **€218 billion is ring-fenced for poorer regions**, with the remainder spread across numerous competing objectives.

In this context, existing key safeguards have been weakened or removed. The previous **25% earmarked to promote social inclusion and tackle child poverty** under ESF+ has been replaced by a **14% target** in the NRPs. Even more concerning is the **complete absence of earmarking to tackle child poverty**, alongside the **removal of enabling conditions** that previously ensured

funds were aligned with EU social priorities. This opens possibilities for Member States to prioritise employment or competitiveness-focused investments, while sidelining more complex or politically sensitive issues, such as child poverty, homelessness, or discrimination.

Table 21. Comparative snapshot of ESF+ positioning in the current and the future MFF

FEATURE	2021–2027 ESF+ REGULATION	PROPOSED 2028–2034 REGULATION
ESF+ sole regulation status	Yes	No - incorporated in a wider fund with different priorities
25% social inclusion ceiling	Binding	14% target
5% child-poverty minimum (high-risk)	Binding	Not included
3% aid to most deprived	Binding (FEAD)	Not included

But Member States are specifically requested to concentrate resources in their National and Regional Partnership Plans to implement the ECG.

That said, there are **some positive developments**. A new **EU Facility** will support social innovation, policy

experimentation, and capacity-building, and will provide budgetary guarantees for essential social infrastructure—including education, healthcare, and student housing. The **European Semester** will play a stronger role, with **Country-Specific Recommendations guiding Member States' NRPs** and monitoring their protection of social rights, a longstanding request from civil society, which could enhance coherence and monitoring. The European Commission will have to ensure that the European Semester evolves into a **stronger instrument for driving social progress**, placing child poverty and broader social issues at the heart of its monitoring, recommendations, and policy guidance.

In the external action section, the Commission has proposed **€43 billion for pre-accession countries**, prioritising reforms and strategic partnerships. Among the objectives are the **empowerment of civil society, investment in inclusive education and social protection, gender equality**, and the **protection of children and youth**, including support to prevent brain drain and enable safe and well-managed migration. The MFF proposal also foresees a **€100 billion reserve for Ukraine** to guarantee the necessary funding for the existing Ukraine Facility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ➔ The draft proposal still does not guarantee that children and families in vulnerable situations will benefit from sustained and targeted EU investment. The **upcoming negotiations on the MFF** between the European Parliament, Commission and the Council of the EU over the next two years offer a critical opportunity to address these gaps and establish a truly child-centred financial framework. To seize this moment, the EU must:
- ➔ **Adopt a human rights-based, child-centred investment strategy.** The next MFF must fully align with the principles of the UNCRC and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This requires a clear political and financial commitment to prioritising children's wellbeing across all funding instruments. Regulations, priorities, and spending should be explicitly designed to uphold children's rights and prioritise social objectives.
- ➔ **Introduce a “Child Lens Investing” approach across all EU funding instruments.** EU investments should systematically apply a child lens, ensuring that children's needs are considered at every stage of programming, budgeting, and implementation. This includes mainstreaming children's rights across all relevant instruments and adopting mandatory earmarking for child-focused measures. Without ring-fenced funding, children risk being sidelined—particularly those in vulnerable situations.

- ➔ **Create a transparent “Child Marker” to track spending.** A dedicated child marker is needed to trace EU and national investment in children, improve transparency, and enable data-driven impact assessments. By linking expenditure to measurable child outcomes, such as reduced poverty rates, improved educational performance, and better mental health, this tool would enhance accountability, inform decision-making, and support more effective implementation of the ECG and other social frameworks.
- ➔ **Strengthen the ESF allocation to combat child poverty.** The ECG has already demonstrated that transformative results are possible when political will is matched with targeted investment. But its full potential will only be realised if the next MFF includes clear, binding commitments and ring-fenced resources. The EU should establish a dedicated €20 billion ESF budget for the ECG, as repeatedly requested by the European Parliament. At a minimum, 5% of ESF resources should be allocated to tackling child poverty in every Member State, and this should increase to at least 10% in countries with above-EU average AROPE rates.
- ➔ **Ensure clear financial allocations in all ECG Action Plans.** These plans must move beyond general pledges and include transparent, cost-effective implementation frameworks. Clear financial allocations are essential to demonstrate commitment, ensure delivery, and enable effective monitoring. Without dedicated funding lines and reporting mechanisms, the ECG risks falling short of its transformative ambition.
- ➔ **Recognise social investment as essential infrastructure for Europe’s future.** Social investment is not only a matter of justice, it is a fiscal and strategic necessity. As the European Commission has stated, the MFF must “deliver on shared priorities” and “strengthen the EU’s long-term capacity to act.” Investing in children’s access to social services and opportunities builds a stronger, more resilient Europe. In this light, funding for children and social inclusion should be treated as core infrastructure and safeguarded accordingly.
- ➔ **Restore and strengthen enabling conditions for social investment.** Enabling conditions under the Common Provisions Regulation must be reinstated and reinforced to ensure that Member States adopt national anti-poverty strategies and uphold commitments to social inclusion and non-discrimination. These conditions should go beyond formal compliance: they must serve as levers to strengthen Member States’ accountability and improve the impact of investments, without overburdening project-implementing organisations.
- ➔ **Ensure robust and inclusive governance and stakeholder participation.** CSOs and children themselves must be meaningfully involved in all phases of the funding cycle, from design and programming to monitoring and evaluation. Their participation enhances the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of EU investments. At the same time, the decentralised delivery model through National and Regional Partnership Plans must not come at the expense of transparency, coherence, or regional and local accountability.
- ➔ **Support child-centred reforms in pre-accession countries.** Pre-accession funding under the IPA successor should prioritise social inclusion, children’s rights, and alignment with EU cohesion objectives. Binding commitments to develop and finance national ECG implementation plans must be included as conditions for funding. These reforms will help ensure that candidate countries are equipped to uphold children’s rights and reduce child poverty as part of their EU accession pathway.



Chapter 4. The European Child Guarantee: a once-in-a-generation opportunity

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The **ECG** is the first-ever EU policy instrument designed to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by focusing on children in vulnerable situations. It moves beyond aspirational principles by creating a **pragmatic and measurable framework** for action. The upcoming 2026 European Commission review is a critical opportunity to address challenges and strengthen the instrument's impact.

The ECG has successfully spurred political commitment and new initiatives across the EU.

However, initial monitoring reveals that progress is uneven.

- **Promising interventions:** The ECG has catalysed important reforms, such as **Italy's** dedicated **€40 million ESF+ investment** for Roma inclusion and youth empowerment and **€240 million investment** in the *DesTEENazione* project, **Ireland's** creation of local-level

poverty action plans, and **Lithuania's** scaling of a national family therapy model.

- **Uneven focus:** While areas like education and early childhood care see consistent action, crucial sectors like **housing and healthcare** receive fragmented, underfunded, and pilot-based attention.
- **Data blind spots:** Effective policy is hindered by poor data. Across the EU, data remains fragmented and fails to capture the realities of the most vulnerable children, including Roma, those with disabilities, or undocumented children.
- **Symbolic participation:** While child participation mechanisms exist (e.g., youth councils in Ireland, consultations in Germany), they are often ad hoc, symbolic, and fail to meaningfully influence policy design or evaluation.

The process of ECG implementation at the national level effectively exposes pre-existing structural barriers that must be overcome.

- **Fragmented governance:** In decentralised states like **Spain** and **Germany**, complex and siloed government structures (“pillarisation”) make coordinated, cross-sectoral action extremely difficult.
- **Unsustainable funding:** A major weakness is the lack of dedicated, long-term funding. Many NAPs in focus countries have **no specific budget** earmarked for them, relying instead on temporary projects or existing budgets, which prevents structural change.
- **Barriers to access:** Services often fail to reach those who need them most due to **geographical disparities** (urban vs. rural), practical barriers like **transport and other costs**, and critical **shortages of skilled staff**.
- **Not a flaw of the ECG, but a mirror of structural gaps:** These barriers and challenges do not stem from the framework itself. The

ECG serves as a diagnostic tool that makes these long-standing weaknesses visible, while offering a powerful framework to address them through integrated planning, funding, and accountability mechanisms.

For EU candidate countries, while not binding, the ECG serves as a vital **framework for reform and an advocacy tool** to guide investments and align national policies with EU standards.

4.1 Why the Child Guarantee matters

After championing the European Parliament’s 2014 proposal and years of intense advocacy, in 2021, Save the Children welcomed the adoption of the Council Recommendation to establish the ECG as a **once-in-a-generation instrument to fight child poverty**. The ECG is an integral component of the broader EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. As such, it should also be a **pillar of the future EU Anti-poverty strategy**.

Figure 11. ECG vision





Arturo Cuenca / Save the Children

The timing of the **ECG's unanimous adoption** by EU Member States reflects a dual imperative: focus on children in the most vulnerable conditions by **ensuring their access to social rights** and simultaneously address long-standing structural issues that perpetuate child poverty by bringing children's rights and child poverty back into the national and EU political agenda.

This shows that the ECG is not merely a reactive measure to a recent emergency, but that it has the potential to be a **proactive, strategic, long-term investment in societal resilience**. The defining characteristic of the ECG is its status as the first EU-level policy instrument specifically designed to address disadvantage and exclusion in childhood, with the explicit aim of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The ECG represents a crucial evolution in EU social policy by **translating the aspirational "rights of the child" into a pragmatic and measurable framework for service delivery**. By clearly defining *what* services are to be guaranteed and *how* they should be accessed (free and effective), as well as by asking governments to identify specific groups of vulnerable children that they want to target, the ECG provides a **tangible framework for all EU Member States**. This operationalisation of rights makes the policy more actionable, enabling

concrete interventions and facilitating accountability, which is vital for achieving real-world impact.²¹⁵

The ECG adopts a **comprehensive and integrated approach** to child wellbeing, acknowledging that deprivation in one area can severely exacerbate challenges in others. By mandating access to a set of key services, the ECG implicitly recognises the complex interplay of factors contributing to child poverty and seeks to address them holistically, rather than through fragmented, siloed interventions.

A key requirement of the ECG is for Member States to nominate **national coordinators** and develop **NAPs** outlining their strategies for implementation. These NAPs are intended as "**living documents**" covering the period **until 2030**, adaptable to national, regional, and local circumstances. All 27 EU Member States have now developed and submitted their NAPs.

Member States are also required to report to the European Commission every two years on the progress achieved in implementing the ECG. The first **biennial reports** were due in March 2024.²¹⁶ As of the latest available information, 26 EU Member States have submitted their biennial reports for 2024, with Latvia being the only country yet to submit.²¹⁷

As established by the Recommendations, the European Commission is expected to publish a **mid-term review** on the implementation of the ECG in **2026**. This review will play a crucial role not only in assessing the current state of implementation but also in signalling **how the Commission intends to strengthen the ECG in the coming years**. Indeed, strengthening the ECG is one of the flagship priorities of the von der Leyen Commission's social agenda. The review should be informed by the contributions of both national and European NGOs, and it has the potential to showcase good practices, identify persistent challenges, and encourage Member States to step up their efforts. Moreover, it will serve as a key opportunity to revise and reinforce NAPs, ensuring they are more ambitious, better funded, and more impactful.

Initial monitoring reports indicate that while progress is being made, significant challenges persist, as discussed in Chapter 1. These findings underscore the urgency of sustained and intensified action to address structural inequalities affecting children. They also **highlight the critical importance of reinforcing the ECG**, both as a policy instrument and as a funding and accountability framework. As the European Commission moves to **strengthen the Guarantee**, evidence from national monitoring should serve as a foundation for setting more ambitious targets, ensuring stronger service integration, and closing the access gap for the most vulnerable children.

4.2 Implementation progress: promising interventions under the Child Guarantee

Since its adoption, the ECG has **catalysed renewed political commitment across the EU and beyond** to combat child poverty and promote equal access to essential services for children in vulnerable situations. Beyond funding, the ECG has become a **powerful incubator for innovation**, enabling the development and scaling of impactful initiatives, from skills development programmes to tailored support for children with a migration background. It has helped **foster strong national coordination and collaboration** through action plans and multi-stakeholder platforms, bringing together policymakers, civil society, and service providers to identify gaps, share good practices, and promote accountability. This instrument has also **driven significant improvements in essential services**, including school meal programmes, which boost health, school attendance, and future earnings. Moreover, by embedding **child participation** into national frameworks, the ECG can provide an important platform for children's voices.



This section provides an **integrated analysis based on national reports coordinated by Save the Children and the Member States' biannual progress reports** on the implementation of the ECG. It outlines promising practices and structural reforms initiated or reinforced due to the ECG's impetus in selected countries, focusing on new policies, service strengthening, data and monitoring progress, and participatory mechanisms.

The initial monitoring reports reveal that all dimensions of the ECG are being addressed across countries, demonstrating the breadth of policy commitments necessary to combat child poverty and social exclusion. However, the **depth and focus of these interventions vary considerably**, reflecting differences in national priorities, governance structures, and resource allocation.

Some areas—particularly **education and early childhood care**—are more consistently supported across countries through well-developed strategies, sustained funding, and structural reforms. In contrast, dimensions such as **adequate housing and healthcare** are often less comprehensively addressed, with interventions in these fields tending to be more fragmented or pilot-based. This is due to high costs, fragmented governance—especially in decentralised systems like Spain²¹⁸ and Germany²¹⁹—and a lack of child-specific framing in housing policy. Though countries such as **Finland and Spain** have introduced targeted services—like mental health support in schools or local multidisciplinary centres—most efforts across Europe remain fragmented and underfunded. Data limitations and weak integration of preventive care further limit progress in this dimension. These findings highlight the **critical importance of making the ECG more effective and ambitious**, especially in sectors where children's needs are still overlooked.

Between 2022 and 2025, the **ECG has driven policy and systemic change in diverse national contexts**. However, as the initiative enters its next phase, success will depend on institutionalising reforms, ensuring sustained financing, narrowing territorial gaps, promoting the instrument among national, regional and local authorities, and embedding participatory, accountable implementation models. The ECG must move from a 'framework of promise' to a vehicle of measurable transformation for children across Europe. The European Commission's plan to **strengthen the ECG** presents a key opportunity to build on this foundation by reinforcing implementation, ensuring adequate investment, and anchoring child-specific goals across all social policies.





Mauro Bedoni / Save the Children

Introducing new policies and services

The ECG has served as a driver for national reforms, catalysing the design and expansion of inclusive, quality services for children in vulnerable situations. In several Member States, the ECG has stimulated the development of new, rights-based policies—particularly in the areas of family income support, early childhood education and care, and school meal provision. These reforms demonstrate the ECG’s potential to act as a strategic enabler, reinforcing and complementing existing social protection systems while addressing persistent service gaps.

Table 22. National interventions in fields connected with the ECG

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION	KEY ACHIEVEMENTS	REMAINING CHALLENGES
IRELAND	Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans (2024)	Integrated ECG with pre-existing national strategies; strong governance via Programme Office	ECG influence is hard to disaggregate; marginalised children (e.g. migrants, homeless) need more targeted focus
ITALY	Priority 2 – ECG under Inclusion & Poverty Programme (2021–2027); Calls for Roma inclusion & adolescent spaces (2024)	Dedicated ESF+ investment (€40M+) for integrated services targeting Roma children and youth empowerment; alongside a €240 million investment in the “DesTEENazione” project, which established multifunctional spaces for young people, fostering social inclusion and skill development.	Complexities remain for families with irregular documentation, local fragmentation remains high
POLAND	Active Toddler, Kamilek’s Act, Winning Family	94.2% preschool enrolment; new legal protections for children exposed to violence	NAP built largely on existing programs; weak monitoring and no ECG-specific funding
SPAIN	Catalan Strategy for Combating Child Poverty (2025–2030) Recent reform of the Renta Valenciana de Inclusión, which incorporates a child perspective	Comprehensive regional plan aligned with ECG pillars	Weak coordination across regions; no dedicated national ECG budget
LITHUANIA	Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) scaled nationally	MDFT model adopted with state funding; mental health prioritised	Lack of disaggregated data and limited outreach to rural children
SWEDEN	Pilot leisure card initiative is proposed; school social teams	The leisure card is intended to give children and young people increased access to sports, culture, outdoor activities, and other community-based activities; school teams link social services with education	Lack of ECG earmarked funding; unclear targeting of most deprived groups

Source: national reports by Save the Children’s members and [MS biennial progress reports](#) on the implementation of the ECG

Strengthening and scaling of existing programmes

In many countries, the ECG has also **stimulated the expansion, improvement, or renewed political attention** towards existing services. Governments have used the framework to reinforce geographic coverage, deepen intersectoral coordination, or target underserved communities more effectively. In this way, the ECG has helped **embed ongoing measures in a more coherent, rights-based approach**, enhancing alignment with principles of inclusion, universality, and child wellbeing.

Table 23. Examples of strengthening and scaling of existing programmes.

COUNTRY	STRENGTHENED PROGRAMMES	KEY ACHIEVEMENTS	REMAINING CHALLENGES
ROMANIA	Multifunctional centres for vulnerable children; ESF+ funded programmes for Roma and school inclusion projects	Renewed political attention; targeting of vulnerable communities	Delays in launching ESF+ funded ECG initiatives, implementation capacity gaps
FINLAND	Reforms in student welfare and child health clinics; improved child-staff ratios in ECEC	Integrated early intervention; strengthened universal services	Administrative complexity in benefits coordination
LITHUANIA	Child daycare expansion; social benefits and mental health investments	State support extended to family services	Limited rural reach; lack of data on effectiveness and vulnerable groups
POLAND	Strengthened and formalised support across key areas—education, nutrition, healthcare, housing, and childcare—especially for vulnerable children	Strengthening of the state support	Limited disaggregated data, focus on capacity and coordination

Source: national reports by Save the Children's members and [MS biennial progress reports](#) on the implementation of the ECG

Improving data and monitoring frameworks

Robust, disaggregated, and timely data are critical for the success of the ECG, enabling better identification of children in need, more targeted policymaking, and stronger accountability. While most countries have made **incremental progress**, **comprehensive ECG-specific data systems remain underdeveloped**. The most promising steps involve qualitative research with children, the use of administrative data for select indicators, and efforts to align national systems with European frameworks.

However, across Member States, major obstacles persist: data remains fragmented across institutions and governance levels, real-time interoperability is rare, and **many groups of children—such as Roma, undocumented children, those in alternative care, or with disabilities—remain statistically invisible**. ECG monitoring is often integrated into broader child strategies but lacks dedicated evaluation or budget tracking tools.

Table 24. National interventions on data and monitoring frameworks.

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION	KEY ACHIEVEMENTS	REMAINING CHALLENGES
GERMANY	CG Monitoring Committee; youth-led input into evaluation reports	Multi-level collaboration; child participation integrated in monitoring discussions	No ECG-specific indicators or disaggregated data by vulnerability; limited follow-up to evaluations
LITHUANIA	Plan for the development of disaggregated indicators on institutional care, trafficking, disability	Intends to support detailed tracking of priority groups	Monitoring integration between ministries remains weak
SPAIN	Regional monitoring systems	Some regional statistics have been improved, especially for early childhood education (0–3)	National disaggregation remains limited and inconsistent
FINLAND	National Child Strategy data base; School Health Promotion Study	Integrates ECG into broader child monitoring tools; structured national knowledge base	Not all vulnerable sub-groups (e.g. Roma, undocumented children) are visible in datasets; there could be more monitoring and evaluation from CSOs

Source: national reports by Save the Children's members and [MS biennial progress reports](#) on the implementation of the ECG

Child participation and civil society engagement

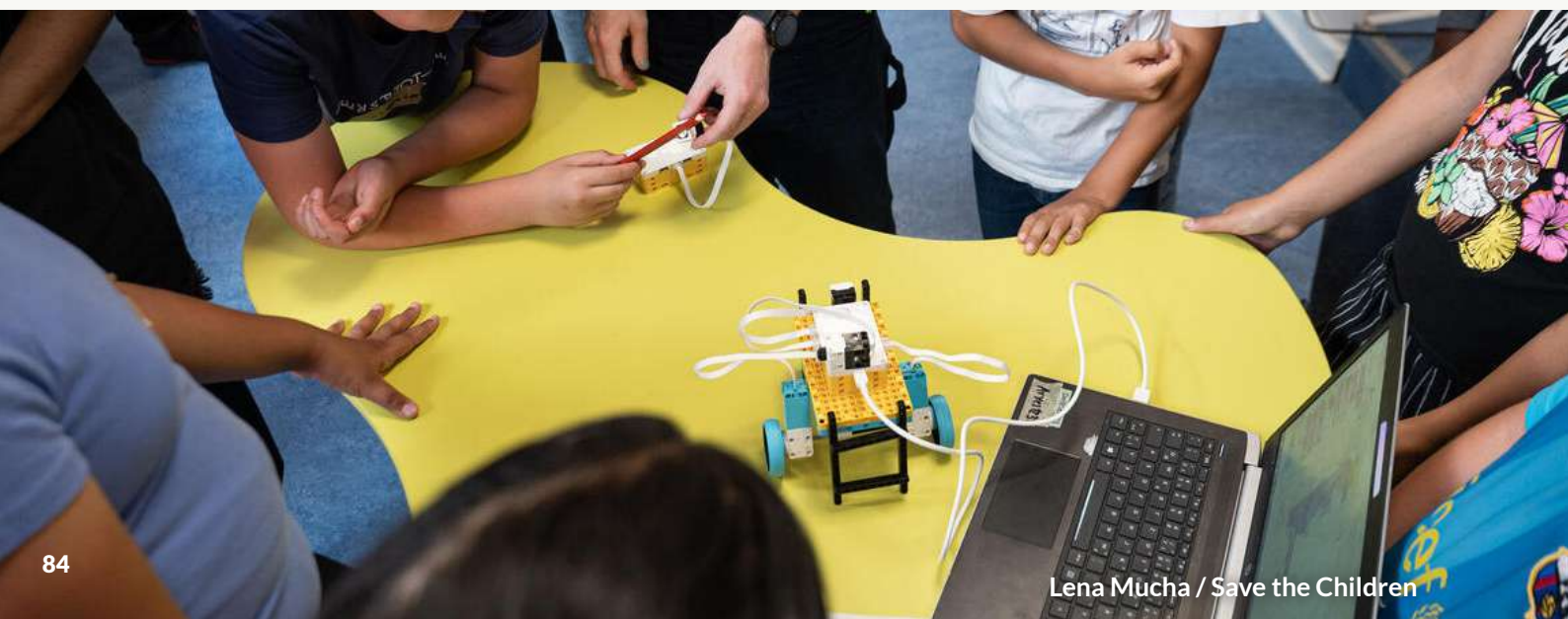
The ECG reaffirms children's rights to be heard in decisions affecting them and calls for the meaningful engagement of civil society in shaping and monitoring child-related policies. Across Member States, there are **encouraging examples of child and youth participation**, from child councils and youth boards to child-friendly consultations. Several governments have also opened spaces for CSOs to contribute to policy design and technical planning.

However, these practices are still **not systematically embedded in the governance of the ECG**. Participation remains **fragmented, ad hoc, or symbolic**, especially when it comes to reaching marginalised children or influencing the implementation and evaluation stages of the Guarantee.

Table 25. National mechanisms of child participation

COUNTRY	MECHANISMS	KEY ACHIEVEMENTS	REMAINING CHALLENGES
IRELAND	Participation of Children and Young People in the Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028 - overarching strategies and action plans, based on Lundy Model	National participation framework; National Participation; Local forums are Comhairle na nÓg (youth councils), and national are Dáil na nÓg and Seanad na nÓg (youth parliament), Hub na Nóg; National Youth Assembly (4 times a year)	Reaching the most marginalised and at-risk communities
GERMANY	National child consultations (ServiKID/ German Youth institute)	Children's voices fed into NAP ECG process and were reflected in the progress report	Institutionalisation of feedback mechanisms remains limited; the process of the NAP itself is quite complicated for children
FINLAND	Children consulted during social security reform; NGOs produced ECG shadow reports	Some engagement via broader child strategy; CSO-led pressure	CG itself does not include structured child participation or CSO involvement
SWEDEN	The children's ombudsman has helped with consultation together with a small group of young people		More children need to be heard and better representation in terms of "children in need" are some aspects that have been highlighted
ITALY	Youth Advisory Board (YAB) supported by UNICEF	Created a formal space for adolescents to engage directly with ECG governance; held meetings with national institutions	Still limited outreach to CSOs
ROMANIA	Child-friendly communication campaigns (videos and materials); UNICEF and authority-led outreach	Improved awareness among children; limited information sharing	No structured or recurring consultation mechanisms; participation remains one-off or symbolic

Source: national reports by Save the Children's members and [MS biennial progress reports](#) on the implementation of the ECG



4.3 Gaps and challenges in implementing the Child Guarantee

Initial monitoring reports give an indication of challenges encountered and lessons learned in the implementation of the ECG across various Member States. These challenges span governance, data management, financial sustainability, service accessibility, and stakeholder engagement.

Coordination and governance [All analysed countries]

Multi-level and intersectoral complexity: A recurring theme is the **inherent complexity of coordination within federal and decentralised governance structures**. **Spain** highlights the “high complexity in the distribution of powers between the national, regional, and local administrations,” making it difficult to consolidate information and implement uniform plans²²⁰. While national coordination mechanisms exist (e.g., Spain’s Inter-Ministerial Commission or the Sectoral Conference on Children and Adolescents), the “greatest difficulty” lies in coordination at the regional and local levels, which often lack similar structures. **Germany** also notes that the implementation of the ECG requires “coordinated effort on the part of multiple players,” emphasising the importance of interaction between federal, state, and local authorities.²²¹

Overcoming siloed approaches: **Germany’s** expert report explicitly addresses the “pillarisation” of support systems, stating that the idea of “benefit provision from a single source” is a “myth” due to constitutional prohibitions of mixed administration and the distinct legal logic of different social benefit systems. The challenge is to instead foster “coordinated cooperation on the ground” by closing service gaps, avoiding duplicate structures, and clarifying responsibilities.²²²

Need for broader cooperation mandates: There is a recognised lack of concrete obligations for various actors to cooperate beyond their immediate responsibilities, which hinders cross-sectoral synergy. **Romania** emphasises that “inter-sectoral coordination is an exercise that needs to occur outside formal processes as well” to ensure efficient resource use and added

value through collaboration.²²³ **Italy** aims to improve governance at all levels and promote inter-sectoral and inter-professional collaboration by reorganising administrative, social, and school health systems.²²⁴

Data, monitoring, and evaluation [All analysed countries]

Significant data gaps and lack of uniformity: Across the board, countries struggle with inadequate and inconsistent data. **Spain** notes a “significant disparity in how the different regions manage and report their sources of funding,” making comparisons and monitoring difficult.²²⁵ **Germany** reports that the number of children with particular disadvantages is “often not well documented,” with available data being “rough estimates” or “outdated”.²²⁶ It calls for improving data infrastructure, including on educational trajectories and food poverty. **Italy** also identifies “fragmentation of data” and the need for data-enhancement strategies, including leveraging administrative sources and conducting ad hoc surveys.²²⁷

Absence of quantifiable targets: **Germany’s** CSOs criticise the NAP for not being “backed by budget funds” or having “specific targets formulated,” which makes it “less binding” and hinders effective monitoring of success. They suggest that the monitoring should include an “impact analysis of political measures to combat poverty”.²²⁸ **Romania** is in the process of developing its inter-institutional coordination mechanism for monitoring and evaluating public policies, including budget allocations.²²⁹

Challenges in budgetary tracking: **Spain** finds it difficult to monitor the “budgetary effort of the programmed actions” because specific budget allocations are often not identifiable or are aggregated within broader initiatives.²³⁰ **Ireland** also notes that its spending on ECG measures is “not easily differentiated” due to multi-departmental involvement.²³¹

Financial sustainability [All analysed countries]

Ensuring **financial sustainability** for the implementation of the ECG presents a multifaceted challenge across the selected countries, often rooted in complex administrative structures and varying funding mechanisms. A common difficulty lies in the **fragmentation of funding sources**, as countries rely on a mix of national, regional, local, and EU funds. This multi-level financing can lead to **significant disparities in how funds are managed and reported** across different administrative tiers, making it challenging to consolidate information, draw comparisons, and effectively monitor the overall budgetary effort or the precise impact of measures. For instance, **Spain** notes that specific budget allocations are often not clearly identified at the regional level, leading to difficulties in tracking spending.²³² **Italy** also highlights the risk of **overlapping and unequal treatment of needs** arising from disparate funding sources.²³³

A significant impediment to long-term sustainability is the **absence of dedicated and earmarked funding** specifically for the ECG's NAPs in several countries. In **Germany**, the NAP was neither backed by specific budget funds nor did it contain quantifiable targets, which renders it “less binding in the political arena”. Similarly, **Sweden** and **Ireland** report that no specific funding has been provided for the Action Plan itself, with measures instead being integrated into ordinary budget processes or existing policy areas.²³⁵ This often translates into a reliance on **temporary or model funding**, rather than permanent structural solutions. For example, **Sweden** and **Ireland** have resorted to temporary supplementary allowances to address cost-of-living increases or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, signalling a dependence on short-term financial interventions. **Germany** further elaborates on how municipal poverty prevention often depends on time-limited “beacon-type projects” or “model funding” that do not contribute to long-term integration or systematic financial support.²³⁶

Moreover, some countries face **structural and legal barriers to effective funding coordination**. **Germany**, for instance, identifies a “dead end” in establishing “prevention funds” through mixed financing due to constitutional prohibitions against mixed administration between federal, state, and municipal levels, which complicates efforts to pool and align resources for

integrated poverty prevention.²³⁷ Beyond internal complexities, **external economic shocks and financial constraints** also pose a challenge. **Poland** and **Lithuania**, for instance, have seen global economic crises and geopolitical instability impact their ability to expand crucial services like free school meals, citing a lack of financial possibilities to do so.²³⁸ Overall, the consistent challenge across these countries lies in transforming fragmented, temporary, and often unearmarked funding into a coherent, sustainable, and effectively monitored financial framework to support the ECG's long-term objectives.

Accessibility and reach of services [ES, IE, IT, LT, RO, DE]

Countries face pervasive and complex challenges in ensuring the **accessibility and broad reach of services** for children in need under the ECG.

A fundamental challenge is the **lack of comprehensive and standardised data** to accurately identify and monitor “children in need” and assess service reach. **Germany** reports significant data gaps for many vulnerable groups, hindering quantification and impact assessment.²³⁹ **Italy** explicitly states a “main problem” in obtaining a clear picture of those reached,²⁴⁰ and **Lithuania** notes “hidden” restrictions due to data limitations.²⁴¹

Geographical and regional disparities consistently lead to unequal service provision. **Spain** identifies inadequate publicly owned early childhood education institutions in large cities and rural areas, as well as across regions,²⁴² while **Italy** faces regional disparities in access to early education, school canteens, full-time schooling and poverty, particularly in the south.²⁴³ **Lithuania's** childcare network is “critically low” in villages and towns,²⁴⁴ and **Romania** highlights significant urban-rural divides.²⁴⁵

Practical barriers, such as **cost and transport**, also limit access. In **Germany**, childcare costs can be prohibitive for low-income families, and “mobility poverty” affects access to essential services.²⁴⁶ **Lithuania** found that even with free preschool, families from disadvantaged situations struggle with transport costs, meals, and non-formal education fees.²⁴⁷ Lastly, **staffing shortages** significantly impact service availability and quality, notably for skilled labour in **German** daycare centres and child/adolescent psychiatric care, and for qualified personnel in **Ireland**.²⁴⁸ These interwoven issues represent a persistent challenge to achieving equitable service access.



Participation [SE, RO, IT, DE]

In terms of ensuring meaningful child and youth involvement, Sweden's consultations revealed that young people were largely unaware of the ECG, emphasising the need for **age-appropriate information and outreach**.²⁴⁹ Germany highlights challenges in incorporating children's views due to the complexity of the NAP and perceived distance of political processes from their lived realities.²⁵⁰ Finland continues to develop "child impact assessments" and pilot "child-oriented budgeting" to systematically integrate children's perspectives into decision-making and resource allocation.²⁵¹ Romania recognises that ensuring active and inclusive participation of children is a "premise for ensuring added value" to effective implementation.²⁵²

"Decision-makers make us feel like our involvement is useless because we keep making the same request, it's not implemented, and the same thing happens again."— Girl, 15 years old, Kosovo

In essence, the "lessons learned" emphasise that while commitment to meeting the ECG objectives is present, **transforming strategic plans into tangible, equitable, and sustainable improvements for children requires overcoming entrenched structural, financial, and administrative obstacles.**

ServiKid/Dein München Youth Team in its statement in the progress report: "We want to participate and have good ideas! Take us seriously! Listen to us!"

Moving forward, the effectiveness of the ECG will depend on countries' abilities to **strengthen cross-sectoral and intergovernmental cooperation**, develop **transparent, disaggregated data systems** linked to clear targets, and ensure **stable, flexible investment** that supports local adaptation. Crucially, progress also requires **embedding the voices and lived experiences of children and young people throughout all stages of the policy cycle**—from design to delivery to evaluation—not as a procedural add-on, but as a core driver for more inclusive and accountable governance.

4.4 Spotlight on Enlargement countries

Child poverty remains a pressing challenge in the EU enlargement countries, particularly across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. Countries such as **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine** - while making progress towards EU membership - continue to face child poverty rates that often exceed the EU average. In these contexts, limited social protection systems, fragile institutional frameworks, constrained public budgets, and systemic inequalities further exacerbate the situation, especially for the most marginalised children, including Roma, children with disabilities, and those living in rural or conflict-affected areas.^{253, 254, 255}

The role and relevance of the Child Guarantee

The ECG, while not yet institutionalised in enlargement countries, has already inspired reforms. **Albania's** Social Protection Strategy for 2024–2030 explicitly references ECG principles and aims to develop child-focused budgeting, with emphasis on Roma children and those in large families.²⁵⁶ **Kosovo** has reformed its Social Assistance Scheme to eliminate discriminatory eligibility rules and expanded early childhood development centres in underserved areas.²⁵⁷

In **Ukraine**, the ECG is becoming an important advocacy tool and guiding framework for child-sensitive recovery and social reform. It provides the blueprint for aligning humanitarian needs with long-term EU integration goals. Despite significant funding constraints, the Ukrainian government and civil society are attempting to incorporate the ECG into the reform agenda and the EU accession negotiations.²⁵⁸

Table 26. Examples of interventions

COUNTRY	INTERVENTION
ALBANIA	The 2024–2030 Social Protection Strategy, which includes targeted cash benefits for large families, and initiatives focusing on early childhood development and inclusive education. This strategy aligns with ECG principles and is supported by budget transparency and child-sensitive allocations. ²⁵⁹
BIH	Save the Children and UNICEF have supported municipal-level child protection services and piloted integrated service models that combine health, education, and social care. Though national coordination remains weak, local innovations show potential for scale-up. ²⁶⁰
KOSOVO	The 2024 reform of the Social Assistance Scheme, removed exclusionary eligibility rules and increased outreach to vulnerable families. The country also hosts over 27 community-based Early Childhood Care and Development centres, co-funded by international donors, that provide inclusive, multilingual early education, especially for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. ²⁶¹
MONTENEGRO	Introduction of Roma mediators in schools and the provision of social cards to improve access to welfare benefits have helped improve outreach and targeting of services to marginalised children. There are also EU-funded programmes focused on expanding preschool access and improving nutrition standards in schools. ²⁶²
SERBIA	The deinstitutionalisation process through the expansion of foster care, the development of inclusive education strategies, and the decentralisation of social services. The government also operates a child allowance scheme targeted at families in poverty and is implementing Roma inclusion programmes under the EU-supported IPA framework. ²⁶³
UKRAINE	Numerous civil society-led child consultations have informed municipal recovery strategies, notably in cities like Mykolaiv. The country is also progressing with the Better Care reform agenda to reduce institutionalisation and promote family- and community-based care. Though implementation is constrained by conflict and displacement, these initiatives lay the groundwork for a post-war ECG structure. ²⁶⁴

Structural challenges and systemic gaps

Despite these efforts, significant challenges persist. Many enlargement countries have underfunded or donor-dependent social protection systems. In **Kosovo** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, for instance, service provision often relies on external aid, and capacities remain weak.²⁶⁵ For the fourth consecutive year, **Ukraine's** state budget currently operates with a 50% deficit, with most social programmes financed through international assistance. These fiscal realities limit the scope of reform and sustainability.²⁶⁶

Inadequate data collection and monitoring further hamper effective policy design. **Kosovo's** child poverty data, for instance, has not been updated since 2019.²⁶⁷ Moreover, marginalised groups—including Roma children, children with disabilities, and those in rural or post-conflict areas—continue to face structural exclusion from education, healthcare, and housing.



Box 12. A structured EU approach to addressing child poverty in enlargement countries

To meaningfully address child poverty in enlargement countries, the EU can take a more strategic and structured approach, building on the principles of the ECG and aligning with the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies.

First, **mainstreaming child poverty reduction within the EU accession process** is critical. Specific indicators and benchmarks on child poverty should be integrated into Chapters 19 (Social Policy and Employment), 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) of the acquis. This can include requiring countries to adopt national child poverty reduction strategies aligned with ECG principles and to report on progress as part of regular enlargement monitoring.

Second, the EU should **prioritise child-focused investments** through its pre-accession funding instruments. IPA should include earmarked funding for child poverty reduction, mirroring the 5% allocation to addressing child poverty seen in ESF+ for EU Member States. This funding should support both service delivery (e.g. early education centres, school meal programmes, child health outreach) and capacity building (e.g. training, data systems, integrated service delivery models).

Third, the EU should **offer technical assistance and knowledge sharing**. Enlargement countries often lack the administrative capacity or experience to design integrated child poverty strategies. A dedicated technical support facility could offer assistance with ECG-inspired national action planning, budgeting, data collection, and programme design. Joint learning platforms, twinning with EU Member States, and access to ECG monitoring tools could be integrated into this facility.

Fourth, the EU should **strengthen the role of civil society and children themselves**. Support should be expanded for national and local NGOs to participate in ECG-inspired planning and monitoring, particularly those working with marginalised communities. Children's voices should also be systematically included in EU-supported dialogues and programme development, using tools like child consultations and advisory councils.

Finally, the EU should **mainstream child rights and poverty into the Ukraine Facility and other reconstruction funding**. For countries in conflict or post-conflict recovery, like Ukraine, child poverty must be a visible and funded priority within broader recovery frameworks. A child rights and wellbeing lens must guide investments in housing, education, mental health, and family support systems.

4.5 Recommendations: strengthening the Child Guarantee and EU Action

If fully and effectively implemented, the **ECG holds the profound potential to be a “game-changer” for children across Europe.**²⁶⁸ Its transformative power stems from its ability to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion. As part of the EU Social agenda objectives, the upcoming plan to **strengthen the ECG** presents a unique opportunity to make this vision a reality. Drawing on concrete lessons from national implementation, there is now a clear roadmap: strengthen multi-level governance, invest in sustainable and equitable service delivery, embed meaningful child participation, and build robust monitoring systems that hold governments accountable. The experiences across Member States already point the way.

Building on lessons learned from Member States, documented in progress reports and insights from Save the Children’s 2025 national reports, the following strategic actions at both EU and national levels could be recommended:

1. Reinforce governance, coordination, and inter-sectoral cooperation

Strengthening the ECG’s implementation requires robust governance structures that enable effective coordination across ministries, sectors, and levels of government.

NAPs should be revised to clarify responsibilities, avoid duplication, and ensure the active participation of regional and local authorities. This is also true for enlargement countries like **Kosovo** and **Ukraine** to be able to highlight critical gaps in horizontal and vertical coordination, particularly between social protection and service delivery frameworks. The EU should:

- Support the creation or strengthening of **national ECG coordination bodies** with multisectoral representation and integration among local, regional and local authorities.
- Take advantage of the **strengthening of the ECG** to set up a **formal body on the fight against poverty** to allow better cooperation, representation, monitoring and revision of the ECG implementation. This formal body should ensure meaningful, structured, and regular cooperation among all stakeholders, provide funding guidance, improve monitoring and accountability, and facilitate coordination. The



Platform on combating homelessness provides a successful example that can serve as inspiration.

- Promote **peer learning** between Member States and enlargement countries on models of integrated service governance (e.g. municipal alliances for poverty prevention in Germany or Ireland's cross-departmental cooperation).
- The **European Commission's 2026 report** on the implementation of the ECG should be used as a formal trigger to require Member States to **revise and strengthen their NAPs**. The revision process should be based on a critical assessment of what has worked, what gaps remain, and how national efforts align with EU-level objectives. Member States should be asked to update their NAPs with clearer targets, improved funding commitments, and concrete measures to address persistent barriers.
- The European Commission should meaningfully embed the implementation of the ECG within the **European Semester cycle**, ensuring it is monitored and evaluated in a regular, structured, and comprehensive manner. This means systematically integrating ECG objectives, progress, and challenges into key Semester outputs. The European Semester should provide a platform for assessing how Member States are addressing child poverty, enabling a comparative analysis of outcomes, highlighting good practices, and identifying gaps in delivery.

2. Close data gaps and strengthen monitoring and accountability

Accurate, disaggregated, and timely data are essential to track progress and improve decision-making. Yet, many countries still lack comprehensive monitoring systems capable of identifying and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable. The European Commission's **updated monitoring framework for the ECG** - published in 2024 - highlights both progress and persistent gaps. The updated framework also introduced new indicators in education, healthcare, and nutrition—addressing blind spots from the initial 2023 version for critical data. However, statistical monitoring alone is not sufficient.

The EU should:

- Establish **minimum data collection standards for ECG reporting** and support national

investments in child-focused statistical systems, including administrative data integration and child-specific indicators.

- Encourage Member States and enlargement countries to **publish regular, disaggregated progress reports** and include civil society in independent monitoring frameworks.

3. Ensure sustainable and adequate financing for child-centred policies

Long-term investment in children remains fragile. Several countries, including Italy, Germany, and Romania, stress the urgency of moving from pilot or model funding to stable, law-based funding mechanisms. In Ukraine and Kosovo, EU assistance has often focused on service delivery without sufficient attention to system-wide financing reforms.

To enhance ECG implementation, the EU should:

- Encourage Member States to adopt legislative guarantees for **minimum child-focused spending at national and subnational levels**.
- Ensure that child poverty eradication is a **priority in the next Multiannual Financial Framework and related instruments**. This includes supporting the European Parliament's request for a dedicated budget of at least **€20 billion** for the ECG, as well as establishing binding and earmarked targets of at least **5% of ESF** resources for tackling child poverty in all Member States. For countries with an AROPE rate above the EU average, this should be increased to at least **10%**, ensuring resources are proportionate to the level of need and directed toward the most marginalised children and communities.
- Make ECG-linked investments eligible for **IPA** and ensure visibility and tracking of child-focused spending in enlargement countries.

4. Embed the participation of children and civil society in all stages of ECG implementation

Ensuring that the meaningful participation of children—especially the most vulnerable—is both

a right and a necessity for effective policymaking is key. While countries like Sweden, Ireland, and Italy have developed promising participation mechanisms, in many contexts (particularly in enlargement countries), engagement remains symbolic or absent.

The EU could:

- Develop **child-friendly participation guidelines** for ECG implementation and reporting. This could be done in cooperation with the European Child Participation Platform.
- Require Member States to include documented **engagement with children** and **CSOs** in their **NAPs and progress reports**.
- Support strengthening the capacity of national child rights organisations to enable children's voices to be included in public decision-making.
- Make meaningful participation of children a **prerequisite for accessing funding linked to the ECG**, including for pre-accession countries.

5. Align ECG efforts with EU and national reforms and enlargement priorities

The ECG should be more explicitly embedded in broader policy agendas such as the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and national anti-poverty strategies, social protection reforms, and education system overhauls. In enlargement countries, it should become a reference point for pre-accession investment frameworks, especially within the Ukraine Facility and IPA III programming.

The EU should:

- Fully integrate the implementation of the ECG into the forthcoming **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** and position it as a central instrument in the EU political agenda. This requires aligning the ECG with a broader set of EU socio-economic policies and funding instruments, including those related to employment, social protection, education, health, housing, digital inclusion, and the green transition. Ensuring coherence across these frameworks will strengthen the structural impact of the ECG and support a more holistic response to child poverty.

- Position the ECG as a key tool to realise Member States' and enlargement countries' legal obligations under the **UNCRC**—particularly Article 27—would strengthen its political and legal weight. Linking ECG implementation to the **UNCRC monitoring and reporting mechanisms** can enhance accountability, support coherence between EU and international commitments, and promote stronger child rights-based governance at the national level.
- Request that **enlargement countries** integrate ECG objectives into key reforms under their accession processes, including public administration reform, education, social protection and health system reforms; as well as implement national coordinators and poverty reduction action plans.
- Use the ECG to promote deinstitutionalisation (DI) and community-based care for children, as highlighted in Ukraine's case.
- Encourage the development of ECG-like action plans in enlargement countries and provide technical and financial assistance for implementation.

6. Promote integrated and preventive services tailored to children's needs

Many countries underline the need for early intervention and universal access to quality services, including ECEC, mental health support, and inclusive education. Lithuania, Spain, and Poland emphasise the cost of inadequate services on children's wellbeing and the long-term outcomes.

The EU and national governments should:

- Promote the **"whole-child" approach** through policies that link education, health, housing, and social protection.
- Incentivise investment in **ECEC and community-based services**, particularly in rural, disadvantaged, and marginalised communities.
- Support social innovation and scale-up of effective practices (e.g., community-based ECCD in Kosovo, multidisciplinary child centres in Spain).



E. Acronyms

ACEs	- Adverse Childhood Experiences
AROPE	- At risk of poverty or social exclusion
CAPI	- Child Support Supplement
CRIA	- Child Rights Impact Assessment
CSOs	- Civil Society Organisations
CSRs	- Country Specific Recommendations
DI	- Deinstitutionalisation
ECEC	- Early Childhood Education and Care
ECG	- European Child Guarantee
ENOC	- European Network of Ombudspersons for Children
EPSR	- European Pillar of Social Rights
ESDE	- Employment and Social Developments in Europe
ESF+	- European Social Fund Plus
ESL	- Early School Leaving
EU	- European Union
FEAD	- The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
GDP	- Gross Domestic Product
IDPs	- Internally Displaced Persons
IMV	- Ingreso Mínimo Vital
IPA	- International Partnership Agreement
NAP(s)	- National Action Plan(s)
NRPs	- National and Regional Partnership Plans
ROI	- Return on investment
SC	- Save the Children
UNCRC	- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

F. Endnotes

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