

S&D COVI Working Group on the lessons learned from the pandemic**15 December 2022****Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca****President of Eurochild****About Eurochild:**

I would like to start my contribution by giving a background about Eurochild.

Eurochild is a civil society organisation working WITH and FOR children. It is the largest European network of children's rights organisations.

Eurochild is a network of national umbrella organisations, that brings together about 2,000 organisations in 37 countries across Europe.

We earnestly fight against child poverty and advocate for systemic reforms that address structural inequalities. We benefit from our members' experiences on the ground, and bring to table their realities in real time.

We at Eurochild, are therefore abreast of the situations that all Children living in Europe, are experiencing.

Introduction:

I am truly pleased to see that the S&D COVI Working Group, is keen to identify 'lessons learned' and recognise that the pandemic is not really gone.

We must be aware that the effects of the covid pandemic are still very real, as the most vulnerable children and families, have suffered and are still suffering the most due to the COVID-19.

Children's experiences of the Pandemic:

Let me share with you the words from Elisabeth (14 years old), a Eurochild Children's Council member and her experiences with mental health. (She presented her experiences at the opening session for the Child Rights Forum in September this year).

Elisabeth said and I quote: *“it can be challenging to get quality help for people who are not financially stable. These families are usually the ones who need the most help and although the health insurance mostly covers therapy when it is needed, there is limited access to this free service in Estonia and very long waiting lists, and also not every therapist or therapy is suitable for every child.*

Usually when you want to get diagnosed quicker there are private clinics where there are shorter waiting lists but you have to take a test which can be quite expensive. This leads to children being undiagnosed which can lead to their mental health worsening. This can cause more problems later in life. ... But these severe situations could be much less common if society and parents were taught how to notice signs that something is wrong and talk to children.”

Elisabeth’s words are very revealing of the situation on the ground. We have to be realistic and admit that while access to quality healthcare is essential for the well-being and realisation of children’s rights, it is in actual fact not accessible to all the children living in our member states.

It is therefore clear, that the pandemic revealed a number of gaps in our systems, such as access to healthcare and mental health for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

Eurochild members reported how the pandemic had far-reaching effects on children’s well-being.

Our members identified that the pandemic has exacerbated existing problems of social inequality, with job losses pushing many families further into poverty. School closures created a wider educational divide, impacting children’s life chances, and their physical and mental health.

The Growing Up in lockdown Report describes how children with no history of behavioural problems, had trouble sleeping and some were becoming increasingly aggressive.

Mental health is a widespread and significant concern for children themselves. The views of more than 10,000 children are collated in the **Our Europe; Our Rights; Our Future report (2021)**

Let me share of these findings for a better context to this discussion:

- Almost 1 in 10 children from the EU identifies as living with mental health problems or symptoms such as depression or anxiety, with girls far more at risk than boys, and older children reporting higher levels of problems than younger children.
- 1 in 5 children said they feel sad or unhappy most of the time.
- Yet again, children from minority groups fare far worse. For example, nearly half of LGBTQI children and a third of children with disabilities say they feel sad or unhappy most of the time.

The causes presented for these alarming rates of mental health problems are complex but include anxiety about the future, fear for the health of family members, bullying and challenges in coping with school.

Poor mental health during pregnancy can have lasting effects on a child's development. Therefore, support for the mother and the baby is critical. Perinatal mental health needs more investment, as this time creates a window of opportunity, for a proactive and preventive approach to mental health, to potential poverty and vulnerability.

Digital Divide

I will now quote a Roma girl, who is 15, and is from Spain, which can also be found in the **Our Europe, our Rights, our Future Report**.

She said: "I didn't have a computer, the internet didn't reach my village, and I didn't have any data. I lost my uncle. (...) I didn't have the strength to connect to the classes. The teachers knew this, but they suspended me because I couldn't connect for the last three months, and I had to repeat."

The **Eurochild Growing Up in Lockdown report**, includes many accounts from across Europe of how home schooling impacted children. It highlights the educational and digital divide. The pandemic has clearly shown us the inequalities, and the inequity, that children have to live with in our society.

We definitely know through the pandemic that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have faced and are facing significant obstacles in accessing online learning and their right to education.

How can we then expect that our Children will obtain the necessary the necessary life skills and skills sets, to be able to live in dignity and contribute to the socio-economic life of their respective countries and European Union?

How can we model fair and just Europe on such inequalities and inequity?

How can we envisage a sustainable European Project, with such real situations existing in every one of our member states?

Let me mention some tangible examples of the inequalities that challenge the everyday existence of the children living in Europe.

- Parents were struggling to support their children's learning: Many low income families could not afford the digital equipment needed for their children to attend school online, or only had one device that they also had to use it for working from home.
- Often parents did not have the necessary technical skills to support their children for online learning.
- Teachers also had to adapt to delivering lessons online, and their own technical skills and the support they received varied greatly.
- There were serious problems with internet connectivity especially in underdeveloped and rural areas.

Recommendations:

I would like now to put forward some recommendations.

Mental Health

The First Years First Priority is a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA (the International Step by Step Association). I want to draw your attention to a recent

report focusing on maternal and perinatal healthcare – the period from pregnancy to the first year after birth.

A mother's own physical and mental health and wellbeing can affect a child's physical and cognitive development. Adversity during pregnancy and the first years of life can predict adversity across generations.

The commitment made through the Child Guarantee, to increase access to healthcare for children in need must also include universal access to quality healthcare during pregnancy, childbirth and the post-partum period, as prerequisites for maternal and child health and wellbeing.

EU Member States must:

- Include universal access to maternal, newborn and child healthcare and parent friendly care provisions in their Child Guarantee Action Plans
- Strive to achieve and provide Universal Health Coverage to all, as defined by the WHO, guaranteeing pre- and post-natal care for all women and children
- Education and Care services for children under the age of three
- Provide accurate and clear maternal health information, with a special focus on the needs of migrant, Roma and other women in vulnerable situations
- Guarantee privacy of information about the migration status of pregnant women and ensure that immigration status is not a barrier to accessing healthcare services
- Prioritise investment in easily accessible medical facilities, maternal support programmes, and training of health professionals based on best practice
- Invest in maternal mental health services, including prevention, screening and support programmes

Childhood is a critical stage of life for mental health and well-being. The stakes could not be higher. We must adequately and appropriately address the key mental health challenges children face due to this pandemic.

Children thrive when they are safe and protected, when family and community connections are stable and nurturing, when they are not frightened and when their basic needs are met.

There are things we can do to reduce the mental health challenges faced by children. We must listen to children and include them in any discussion or implementation of activities, such as further lockdowns or plans to shape programmes and services around their needs.

Again, in many cases, children from socially disadvantaged families have less access to relevant services and suffer from mental health issues more intensively and for longer.

Children having reduced or no access to key services means that mental health issues remain undiscovered for longer and that many children may have no close support network to ask for help.

Child Guarantee:

Let me remind what the Child Guarantee states about **Mental Health**:

*“Children in need generally have hindered access to certain healthcare services... Income poverty and other social determinants significantly affect the overall development and health, **including mental health**, of children and increase the risk of ill-health in later years.”*

*“Member States are recommended to identify children in need and within this group take into account, wherever appropriate in designing their national integrated measures, specific disadvantages experienced, in particular... **children with mental health issues**” and “facilitate early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental problems, **including those related to mental health**”.*

The Child Guarantee is a key milestone for addressing **access and quality of key services**. Eurochild has identified mental health priorities, including perinatal mental health, as stated in the National Action Plans.

- In the Netherlands, the Solid Start action programme helps expecting parents in vulnerable situations so that their children have the healthiest possible start in life. This consists of care and support for parents during

and after the pregnancy, including adult mental health care, prenatal home visits and non-invasive screenings.

- The Maltese National Action Plan also includes psychosocial support to pregnant mothers in pre- and post-natal care.
- Greece for example is presenting a strategy to install more mobile medical units and creating mental health centers.
- Croatia is focusing strongly on access to healthcare and quality nutrition for children and will develop a national framework for protecting children's mental health.

Despite the lack of a specific focus on mental health in many National Action Plans, there is some room for developing actions that can address the mental wellbeing of children.

Member States and European Institutions must ensure these plans are published and implemented.

So we need services made available to children that are accessible and inclusive.

- We need to involve children - ask children what they need, where and when they need it.
- We need to make sure that all children, parents and carers are aware of these services and children's rights
- We need to talk more about mental health and reduce stigmatisation.

Digital Divide Recommendation

Malta Trust Foundation - include a reference to the focus on supporting children and young people who need laptops to access their studies and learning. The Your Device Your Right (YDYR) Project is a good example of addressing the digital divide caused by COVID and is environmentally friendly.

Conclusions

Ending poverty is not only a matter of social justice. Prosperity and economic advancement depend heavily on a society where no one is left behind. Poverty erodes social cohesion and creates a burden on all taxpayers to pay for welfare

services and costly poverty interventions. It shrinks the space for innovation and economic growth by reducing the productivity of the workforce and stagnating consumption.

After this meeting, the report “**Upscaling the 2021-27 MFF**” will be voted in plenary, including an amendment calling to increase the budget for the Child Guarantee by 20 billion euros to account for the effects of the current cost-of-living crisis.

We kindly ask you to consider the key role that the Child Guarantee can play in the reduction of child poverty. Proper funding for this framework is essential.

I therefore urge you, on behalf of the 19 million Children living in poverty in Europe to vote for this amendment.