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## A Policy in its Infancy: The case for strengthening and re- thinking EU action on childhood

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cooperation, competition, solidarity

### A Policy in its Infancy: The case for strengthening and re-thinking EU action on childhood

This paper offers a critical analysis of current EU interventions on childhood. After mapping out the economic and political rationales for shifting welfare policies towards children and providing an overview of current EU child-related interventions, the paper fleshes out various arguments for rethinking and strengthening the EU action on childhood. This is followed by a detailed analysis of EU actions in two selected fields: childcare and child poverty. Based on this analysis, three main shortcomings of current EU action on childhood are identified; first, the dominance of the instrumental approach, second, its piecemeal character and third, its exclusive reliance on weak coordination instruments. The paper finishes by presenting a number of recommendations for the improvement of existing EU child-related interventions and the development of a more ambitious, well-designed and comprehensive EU policy on childhood.

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## A Policy in its Infancy: The case for strengthening and re-thinking EU action on childhood

By Eulalia RUBIO



## EULALIA RUBIO

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## Foreword

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**C**hildhood: a great European cause? One can already imagine the Eurosceptics' scorn for the petty obsessions of Brussels, or the scandalous violation of people's private lives. And yet, as Eulalia Rubio explains in this study, this is not simply Brussels's latest folly. Child poverty, health and welfare; their homes and schools: these issues have been dealt with by various European programmes for years already, as part of a resolutely modern transformation of social policy.

European action in the social field has historically been linked to the single market programme and to labour policy. However, there has been a gradual movement - similar to that at national level - towards action which respond to new social needs, such as exclusion, demographic change and the increasing heterogeneity of family structures. Children are unfortunately the victims of flawed traditional systems of social protection, and of new needs which lack responses. As in many areas, the progress of European

integration makes new intervention a possibility where national measures - insofar as they exist - are not sufficient. It is therefore unsurprising that people look to Europe when the issue of children comes up. Yet we are a long way from a satisfactory situation: European action is fragmented, limited in ambition, and often views support to children as simply a means to achieve other aims seen as nobler.

Avoiding the trap of partisan bias, Eulalia Rubio sketches an overview of the subject and discusses the arguments for and against European action in this domain. In conclusion, she suggests that we proceed by practical steps, not only to improve what exists already, but - above all - to clear the path to a genuine European childhood policy: a policy more efficient, more coherent and with fully legitimate foundations.

We come away with the conviction that this policy area is anything but minor, and could even give a helping hand to a European social policy too often condemned to a second class role.

*Marjorie Jouen*

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## Introduction

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**A**lthough traditionally not part of the EU social agenda, children have recently been placed at the centre of various EU social-policy initiatives. First, with the establishment of the so-called 2002 Barcelona targets, EU member states have for the first time taken a strong commitment towards the extension of early childcare services. Second, preventing and reducing child poverty has become one of the priority goals of the EU social inclusion strategy, as the 2006 Spring Council called Member States “to take necessary steps to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background”. Finally, at the summit meeting of March 2007 the heads of states and governments of the European Union agreed to launch the European Alliance for Families. Proposed by the German EU presidency, this Alliance is envisaged as a platform for the member states to exchange opinions and information in the area of family-friendly initiatives.

This paper has greatly benefited from the comments and useful suggestions made on early versions by Frédéric Lerais, Marie-Anne Paraskevas and various colleagues of Notre Europe. I would like to express my gratitude to all of them.

Important as these recent initiatives have been, EU social policy remains predominantly focused on adults. In line with treaty provisions, the bulk of EU social legislation aims at improving the welfare and working conditions of adult population. Regarding the two mechanisms so far used to enhance social action beyond the strict limits of art. 140-144, the Open Method of Co-ordination and the European Social Fund, these have been mainly used in pursuit of the economic objectives of the Lisbon strategy - that is, promotion of sustainable economic growth and creation of employment, two objectives which mostly concern the adult population.

Not only is the attention paid to children low, but the rationale behind EU interventions on children is questionable. Most EU child-related interventions have developed as by-products of broader EU policies designed to respond to adults' needs and demands (conciliation of work and family duties) and/or produce collective goods (demographic renewal). Concerns about children's well-being are therefore secondary, if not totally absent, in many EU interventions on childhood.

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the shortcomings of current EU interventions on children and to call for the development of a more coherent and comprehensive EU action in this field. The paper starts by mapping out the political and economic considerations for shifting welfare policies towards children (section 1) and by providing an overview of current EU child-related interventions (section 2). It then proceeds by providing some theoretical arguments for rethinking and strengthening the EU action on childhood (section 3). There follows a detailed analysis of the rationale and output of EU actions in two selected fields: childcare and child poverty (section 4). Based on this analysis, section 5 identifies three main shortcomings in current

EU action on childhood: the dominance of the instrumental approach, its piecemeal character and its exclusive reliance on weak coordination instruments. The paper concludes by presenting a number of recommendations for the improvement of existing EU child-related interventions and the development of a more ambitious, well-designed and comprehensive EU childhood policy (section 6).

## I - Shifting to Children: The Best Strategy to Meet the Challenges of Post-industrial Societies

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European welfare policies have traditionally paid little attention to the needs of children. This situation has historical roots. In the immediate post-war period, at the time when national welfare structures were created, children's well-being was not a primary matter of public concern. The male-breadwinner model was the rule rather than the exception, and out-of-home childcare was socially considered a 'second-best' option relative to mother care. Study of child cognitive development was at an early stage and there was little concern about the quality of education provided to children. Neither was there much concern about the level of education attained, as educational credentials were less critical for entering and thriving in the labour market. Finally, under conditions of full and stable (male) employment and marital stability, family structures were fairly effective at sheltering children from poverty. Child poverty risks were directly associated with low earnings and large families, and thus insured against by the classical post-war system of family allowances (that is, the

AT THE TIME WHEN NATIONAL WELFARE STRUCTURES WERE CREATED, CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING WAS NOT A PRIMARY MATTER OF PUBLIC CONCERN.

provision of a fix income supplement per dependent family member - a child or dependent wife - to the male worker).

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, A SET OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS HAS SIGNIFICANTLY ALTERED CITIZENS' LIFESTYLES IN EUROPE AND, IN PARTICULAR, THOSE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CHILDREN.

Over the past few decades, however, this picture has substantially changed. A set of social, economic and cultural transformations has significantly altered citizens' lifestyles in Europe and, in particular, those of young people with children. New circumstances and ways of life have brought new social risks and demands (Esping Andersen: 2002, Taylor-Gooby: 2004, Bonoli: 2006) to which national welfare structures have still not provided an adequate response.

First and foremost, there has been the **massive entrance of women into the labour market**. Since 1960, the rate of female employment in Europe has been rising steadily, to the point where today more than half of the working-aged women in Europe are engaged in employment. Women's labour market engagement is especially salient among the middle-aged cohort (women aged 20-54): At present, the employment rate of this cohort almost reaches 70 percent in Europe (EC: Employment in Europe 2006, chart 10, p 31). Not surprisingly, these changes in women's labour market participation have translated into changes in the patterns of work organisation within families. Dual-earner families have become the norm rather than the exception<sup>1</sup> and, as a result, families' capacity to care their children has been severely reduced. This **'family care deficit'** (Mahon. 2002) has been largely disregarded by public authorities, and this has had negative consequences both for parents and children. For the parents, the lack of public facilities for the provision of care has been a major cause of stress and frustration, in particular for working mothers. For the children, the

<sup>1</sup> The results of a survey conducted in 2003 among the 27 member states illustrates the magnitude of this change: The survey shows that, among couples aged 20-49 where at least one of them has a job, the most common situation is for both partners to work, either full-time (45 percent) or part-time (21 percent) (Aliaga: 2005, p. 5).

state's reluctance to take on new responsibilities on care has led to a greater role for the market in care and education, which to some extent has made the quality of the care and education conditional on the wealth of parents.

Secondly, labour markets have gone through a process of profound transformation. Rapid technological changes in production, the shift towards a service economy as well as the growth in scale and intensity of global competition have translated into **employment instability and an increase in wage differentials**. Again, these trends have particularly hit young people. Not only entering the labour market has become more difficult, but young adults are more exposed to the risk of being in temporary and low-paid jobs (Lucifora et al: 2005) or in unemployment (EC: Employment in Europe 2007, chapter two). This worsening of the economic position of young adults has had clear negative effects on the well-being of children. During the 1990s, the percentage of children living in poverty has risen in most advanced economies and studies reveal that labour market transformation accounts for part of this increase (Unicef: 2005). The link between parents' employment situations and children's well-being is also evidenced by **the increase in the number of children living in workless households** (those with no working-age adult in employment). From 1985 to 1995, the proportion of EU children living in workless households raised from 8, 0 to 10, 6 (Micklewright and Stewart: 1999, p.7).

Finally, there have also been **important changes in the patterns of family formation and parenthood**. During the last three decades, advanced societies have experienced two interrelated trends: a growing disinclination towards marriage and an increasing social recognition of new forms of partnership and parenthood outside wedlock; and a parallel increase in divorce rates and family breakdown. As a result, families have become more heterogeneous than ever. Yet, family diversity has not been fully recognised at the level of norms and social protection arrangements, and this lack of recognition has had dramatic consequences for so-called 'atypical

families'. Illustrative of this is the situation of lone-parent families. At present, **more than one third of lone parent families in the EU-27 are at risk of poverty** (Eurostat: 2007)

WHEN USING THE TERM «NEW SOCIAL RISKS», WELFARE SCHOLARS ESSENTIALLY REFER TO THE UNCOVERED NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF ADULTS.

The magnitude and importance of these trends and the need to respond to them has been largely discussed in the 'new social risks' literature (Esping Andersen: 2002, Taylor-Gooby: 2004, Jenson 2006b4). This literature calls for re-orienting welfare structures towards the coverage of the so-called 'new social risks' and, as a corollary, it argues for a greater focus on young families with children. Yet, when using the term 'new risks', this literature is essentially referring to the uncovered needs and demands of adults.

New social risks mainly have to do with entering the labour market and establishing a position within it, or by balancing working and caring responsibilities - in other terms, the circumstances faced by adult (young) individuals.

What is much less noticed in current 'new risk' literature is that recent social and economic transformations have also altered children's risk structure. **Today's children have a different structure of risk and different demands than those faced by previous generations.** Their care and education is no longer guaranteed by the existence of an abundant reserve of full-time housewives and, as a result of employment instability and family changes, they are more vulnerable than ever to poverty and social exclusion. Besides, in advanced economies a relatively high level of education has become a prerequisite for participation in the labour market. Hence, missing the opportunity of an education (by dropping out of school) is much riskier than before. **If we consider children as citizens on their own, then responding to their new social risks should logically be given the same priority in the welfare agenda as responding to the risks of their parents.**

While the need to provide adequate insurance against the new risks faced by children is in itself a powerful argument, there are two other reasons for paying greater public attention to the well-being of children. First, investing in early education is widely regarded as the most effective egalitarian strategy in post-industrial, knowledge-based societies. Clearly, child-focused interventions should not be seen as a panacea to resolve the inequality problem: there are serious limitations to the state's ability to eliminate family and social inequalities. Nevertheless, ensuring equal opportunities at an early stage of life is highly recommendable at a time when the process of globalisation has severely shrunk the state's capacity to equalise adults' economic conditions (that is, by reducing wage gaps and/or protecting employment). Besides, as noted already, life chances in today's economies are more dependent than ever on the skills and knowledge acquired during the school-age period. Guaranteeing that all children have equal access to education is therefore essential to ensure a basic degree of equality in their adulthood.

INVESTING IN EARLY EDUCATION IS WIDELY REGARDED AS THE MOST EFFECTIVE EGALITARIAN STRATEGY IN POST-INDUSTRIAL, KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETIES.

Second, **a child-centred welfare strategy is cost-effective.** It generates important long-term benefits which exceed by far its costs (Heckman: 2006). In particular, early interventions for disadvantaged children reduce the risks of school dropping-out, delinquency and other anti-social behaviour at adolescence (Danzinger and Walfogel: 2000). In this respect, child-centred policies might be regarded as a partial substitute for costly 'remedial' second-chance policies targeted at adults (Esping Andersen 2002). Besides, interventions in children's education yield large benefits from an economic perspective. Today's children are tomorrow's adults. Providing them adequate education is the best way of ensuring a highly-skilled workforce in the future (Jenson: 2006b).

## II - EU child-related interventions: An Overview

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**A**t present, the EU does not have a childhood policy, if we understand by that the existence of clear EU objectives on children's well-being and a deliberate course of action to attain these objectives. However, there are various EU interventions having direct impact on children.

**Table 1** provides an overview of the main EU child-related interventions. As can be observed there are at least five EU programs or actions being directly related to child education and care. These programs are run by different Directorates-General, and are inspired by different rationales. In three policy areas (**childcare**, **child poverty** and **education**), EU involvement is clearly linked to the achievement of the Lisbon strategic goal - that is, to give Europe a socially-inclusive, competitive and knowledge-based economy. In particular, the EU interest for **childcare** derives from its expected contribution to the rise in female employment and the achievement of gender equality in the labour market. EU action to combat **child poverty** takes place within the context of a broader EU strategy to fight poverty and

social exclusion, launched in 2002 as part of the Lisbon agenda. Finally, current EU action on **education** takes place within the framework program “Education and Training 2010”. Launched in 2002, this program aims to foster the “modernisation” of national education and training systems, to ensure that these “effectively contribute to the achievement of the goals set out by Lisbon” (COM (2005) 549 final/2, 30/11/2005)<sup>2</sup>.

The two other EU child-related actions have different origins. The Daphne program aimed at combating and preventing **violence against children**, was launched in 1997. It came as part of a broad-ranging response from the Commission to events of the summer of 1996 - the famous ‘Dutroux case’, which shocked European public opinion and raised concerns about the need to do something to better protect children from abuse or exploitation (European Commission: 2003)<sup>3</sup>. As regarding the **European Alliance of Families**, this was launched during the 2007 German Presidency on the initiative of the German Ministry of Family Affairs, Ursula Von Der Leyen. The note from the Council informing of the establishment of this initiative describes it as “a platform for the exchange of views and knowledge on family-friendly policies as well as of good practices between member states, in order better to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of demographic change”<sup>4</sup>.

In accordance with the Treaty provisions, EU actions on child education and care aim at supporting or complementing national action. There are, however, differences with respect to the expected impact on the national level. **In some policy areas (child care, child poverty or school education), the aim is to promote policy convergence towards commonly-defined**

2 European Commission (2005), Modernising Education and Training: A Vital Contribution to Prosperity and Social Cohesion in Europe: Draft 2006 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the “Education and Training 2010” work programme, Communication from the Commission 549 final/2, Brussels.

3 European Commission (2003), The Daphne Experience 1997-2003: Europe against violence towards children and women, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg

4 Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States on the importance of family-friendly policies in Europe and the establishment of an Alliance for Families (9317/1/07 of 23rd May 2007)

**objectives** through the use of the so-called Open Method of Co-ordination (the definition of targets and benchmarks and the establishment of a system of iterative monitoring and evaluation of national actions). **In others (family policies, violence against children), policy convergence is not the goal.** The ultimate aim in these cases is **to stimulate innovation, experimentation and ‘reflexive’ learning**<sup>5</sup> through the exchange of information, ideas and good practice on an open basis. Finally, only in one policy area (violence against children) EU action aims not only at having an indirect effect (influencing national policymaking) but also a direct effect – that of providing financial support and assistance to actors intervening in the field.

5 ‘Reflexive learning’ refers to a type of learning that “pushes member states to rethink established approaches and practices as a result of comparisons with other countries” (Zeitlin: 2005, p.476). This is contrasted to the so-called ‘adaptive learning’, which is the typical one in convergence-focused coordination procedures. Jelle Visser provides a clear explanation of the difference between these two types of learning: “Learning can be adaptive when there is full agreement about what the problem is and why it is important (the ends are given), and all attention can go to finding adequate solutions (the means to the ends). When the problem is not fully known, or when there is disagreement over its importance, learning must be reflexive as it involves a process of discovery of means and ends as part of the learning process (Visser: 2005, p. 180)

**TABLE 1. MAIN EU CHILD-RELATED INTERVENTIONS**

| POLICY AREA                                    | CHILD CARE   | EDUCATION   | FAMILY POLICIES   | CHILD POVERTY   | VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN  |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| <b>TREATY BASIS</b>                            | ARTICLE 127 TEU (EMPLOYMENT), ART 137.1-I TEU (GENDER EQUALITY)  | ART 149.1 (EDUCATION)   | ART 143-145 TEU (SOCIAL SITUATION AND DEMOGRAPHY)   | ART 137.1-I TEU (SOCIAL EXCLUSION)  | ART 152.1 TEU (PUBLIC HEALTH)  |
| <b>DG RESPONSIBLE</b>                          | DG EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS   | DG EDUCATION AND CULTURE  | DG EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS  | DG EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS  | DG FREEDOM, SECURITY AND JUSTICE   |
| <b>EU ACTION OR PROGRAMME</b>                  | EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY (CHILDCARE TARGETS INTRODUCED IN 2002)  | OPEN METHOD OF CO-ORDINATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING (SINCE 2002)   | THE EUROPEAN ALLIANCE FOR FAMILIES (SINCE 2007)   | OPEN METHOD OF CO-ORDINATION IN SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (SINCE 2002) | DAPHNE III PROGRAMME (2007-2013)   |
| <b>MAIN RATIONALE INSPIRING EU INVOLVEMENT</b> | RAISING FEMALE EMPLOYMENT RATES AND PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY BY HELPING MOTHERS CONCILIATE THEIR WORK AND CARING DUTIES | ESTABLISHING THE EDUCATIONAL BASIS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE, COMPETITIVE AND KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY   | SUPPORTING DEMOGRAPHIC RENEWAL BY DEVELOPING A FAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILD-REARING   | FIGHTING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN EUROPE                                     | PREVENTING AND COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND WOMEN   |
| <b>SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES</b>                     | EXPANDING THE COVERAGE OF PUBLICLY-FINANCED PRE-SCHOOL CHILDCARE SERVICES  | REDUCING THE PERCENTAGE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL DROP-OUTS, ENSURING THAT ALL PUPILS ACQUIRE THE BASIC SKILLS REQUIRED IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, EQUIPPING SCHOOLS WITH ICT AND IMPROVING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG OTHERS | PROMOTING BETTER AND MORE NATIONAL FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES AND, IN PARTICULAR, ENCOURAGING NATIONAL AUTHORITIES TO ESTABLISH MEASURES TO HELP PEOPLE CONCILIATE THEIR WORK AND FAMILY DUTIES | REDUCING CHILD POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION   | PROVIDING SUPPORT TO THE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE, PROMOTING THE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND GOOD PRACTICES AMONG ACTORS WORKING IN THE FIELD, RAISE PUBLIC AWARENESS ON THIS PROBLEM |
| <b>EXPECTED OUTCOME</b>                        | POLICY CONVERGENCE TOWARDS COMMONLY-AGREED OBJECTIVES  | POLICY CONVERGENCE TOWARDS COMMONLY-AGREED OBJECTIVES   | EXPERIMENTATION AND REFLEXIVE LEARNING THROUGH THE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICES   | POLICY CONVERGENCE TOWARDS COMMONLY-AGREED OBJECTIVES                               | EXPERIMENTATION AND REFLEXIVE LEARNING THROUGH EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICES ; FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ACTORS ACTIVE IN THE FIELD                                      |

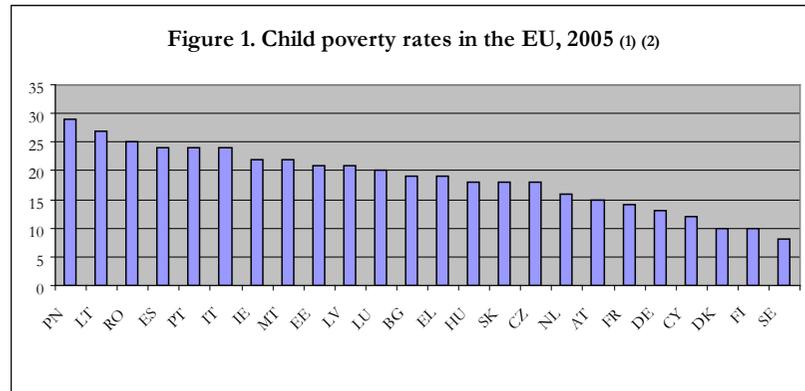
### III - The pertinence of re-thinking and strengthening EU action on children

The social and economic trends described in section one recommend a re-thinking and strengthening of public action on children. This argument has direct implications for national authorities: it points to a need to re-balance public social expenditures so as to direct more resources towards child education and care<sup>6</sup>. However, the same argument does not suffice to defend the development of a stronger EU action on childhood. In fact, **various well-known arguments against the development of common EU social policies seem to be easily applicable to the area of childhood.**

First, **there are significant differences in the situation of children around Europe.** Child poverty rates, for instance, differ markedly, ranging from 8-10 percent in the Nordic countries to almost 30 percent in Poland (figure 1). EU countries also diverge with respect to the proportion of working mothers. As shown in figure 2, 80 percent of mothers aged 20-49 with one

<sup>6</sup> At present, social spending at the national level is clearly elderly-biased. Public expenditure on pensions represents on average 46 percent of the total amount of social protection expenditure in the EU-27. Family-related benefits account for only 7,8 percent of social expenditures (SEC (2007) 329 of 6/3/2007)

or two children under 12 are working in Slovenia and Denmark, whereas the employment rate for this same group decreases to 50 percent in Estonia, Hungary, Spain and Italy, and to 28 percent in Malta. Finally, while family structures are changing in all EU countries, there are pronounced differences in the magnitude of this change. At present, single parents account for 24 percent of all households with children in the UK, whereas they represent around 5 percent of the households with children in countries such as Malta, Greece or Italy (figure 3).



SOURCE: EUROSTAT (2007)

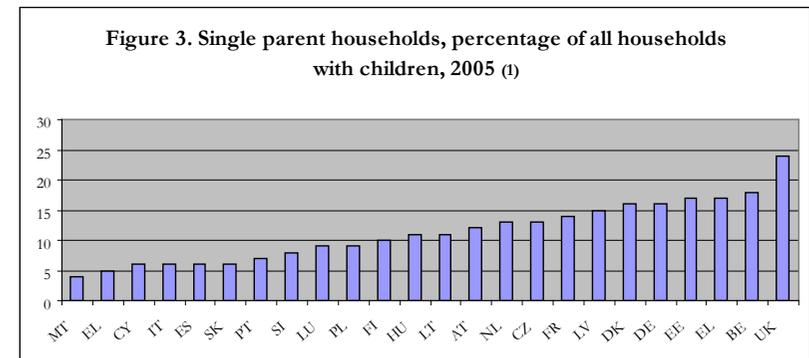
(1) ONLY INCLUDED THOSE COUNTRIES FOR WHICH THERE IS AVAILABLE DATA

(2) CHILD POVERTY RATE DEFINED AS THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE UNDER 16 LIVING WITH A DISPOSABLE INCOME BELOW 60 PERCENT OF MEDIAN NATIONAL INCOME.



SOURCE: EUROSTAT, EUROPEAN LABOUR FORCE SURVEY 2003.

(1) ONLY INCLUDED THOSE COUNTRIES FOR WHICH THERE IS AVAILABLE DATA



SOURCE: EUROSTAT (2007)

(1) ONLY INCLUDED THOSE COUNTRIES FOR WHICH THERE IS AVAILABLE DATA

**A second well-known argument is the need to respect national differences in values and policy preferences**<sup>7</sup>. This argument seems particularly applicable to the family policy field. As reported by various comparative studies (Gauthier: 1996, Letablier and Hantrais: 1996), differences in the amount and coverage of parental leave, the extension of childcare services or the design of the system of family allowances reflect different national values and/or policy preferences with regard to the role of the family as a caring institution or the position of women in the labour market. Besides, there seem to be no objective justifications for infringing the rule of respect for national differences – the provision of family benefits presents no risk of social dumping, and it is not clear what type of action on child well-being would obviously necessitate intervention at EU level<sup>8</sup>.

**NATIONAL DIFFERENCES SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS INSURMOUNTABLE OBSTACLES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMON EU ACTION.**

National differences in social conditions, values and policy preferences should be taken into account, but they should not be seen as insurmountable obstacles for the development of common EU action. Cross-national variation is a given in practically all social policy areas. Besides, there are a number of arguments that make both feasible and advisable the development of stronger EU action on childhood.

First of all, **EU member states show common concerns as well as shared values and policy goals with respect to childhood**. It is noticeable, for instance, that in nearly all EU countries children bear an above average poverty risk compared to other age groups (2007 Joint Report on Social

<sup>7</sup> This argument, which derives from a restrictive interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity, is clearly formulated in the Council resolution of 6th December 1994 on the European Social Policy. Art 16 of this Resolution points out that “the legislation of the European Community, and the supervision thereof, as well as all other Community measures such as, for instance, programs and recommendations, must comply with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, which commit all the institutions of the European Union to respect the multiplicity of economic and social traditions in the different Member States” (italics added).

<sup>8</sup> In accordance to the principle of subsidiarity (art 5 TEU), in areas where the EU does not have exclusive competence the EU can only intervene “insofar as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved at the national level and can therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at the Community level”.

Protection and Social Inclusion)<sup>9</sup>. This makes child poverty a common matter of concern throughout Europe. Likewise, all EU member states share a basic concern to guarantee children’s well-being and to recognise families as an important social institution, and they concur on the need to help working parents reconcile their work and caring responsibilities.

Secondly, the existence of various family and child-related policy models at the national level does not prevent the EU from adopting a more active role as an “ideational entrepreneur” (Kohler-Koch 2002) or, in other words, from formulating and disseminating its own vision and policy recommendations on child education and care. One might even wonder whether it is morally legitimate to maintain a neutral position in the name of a vague principle of “respect for national social values and traditions”. As argued by Mahon (2002), **there are currently different national models on early-childhood education and care, and each holds different implications for children’s cognitive development, well-being and life-chances** (Mahon: 2002)<sup>10</sup>. There seems to be a consensus that the Nordic model – which guarantees a right to high-quality, educationally-oriented care to all children from 12 months until they start school, irrespective of parental employment status – is the best one from a pedagogical perspective (OECD: 2005, Moss: 2006) and the only one promoting an early equalisation of life-chances (Esping Andersen 2006). If this model is indeed superior to the others, then respect to national values and traditions should not prevent the EU from promoting it, or at least promoting the principles on which it is based (the right to high-quality, pre-school education for all children).

**THE RESPECT FOR NATIONAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS DOES NOT PREVENT THE EU FROM FORMULATING ITS OWN VISION ON CHILD EDUCATION AND CARE.**

<sup>9</sup> The exceptions being the Nordic states, Greece, Slovenia and Cyprus

<sup>10</sup> Mahon (2002) identifies three main paradigms on childhood education and care in Europe: the ‘Third-way model (inspiring policies in the UK and the Netherlands), the ‘neo-familialist’ model (inspiring recent childcare reforms in France and Finland) and the egalitarian or Nordic model (inspiring policies in Sweden and Denmark).

CHILDHOOD  
CAN BE SEEN AS  
A 'WINDOW OF  
OPPORTUNITY'  
TO ENHANCE THE  
SCOPE OF EU  
SOCIAL POLICY.

Third, from the perspective of EU actors there are various reasons that make the development of an EU childhood policy both feasible and desirable. Childhood can be seen as a 'window of opportunity' to enhance the scope of EU social policy. Contrary to what happens in other policy fields (pensions, education, health care), family and child-related policies are somewhat under-developed at the national level. Moreover, the social partners and other similar organisations are less heavily involved in this policy field than they are in the more traditional social policy areas, and so the opportunities to develop innovative or ambitious policies at the EU level are greater. In addition, an EU childhood policy inspired by the notions of 'new social risk' and 'social investment' would fit well with existing EU approaches and activities in the field of economic and social policy. It would be coherent with the Lisbon-related goals and with the EU's longstanding commitment to equal opportunities. Moreover, **a stronger and more visible EU policy on childhood would represent a concrete response to the needs of ordinary citizens; it might therefore contribute to the legitimacy of the EU** (Larsen and Taylor-Gooby 2004).

Finally, **the need to re-think current EU action on childhood could be justified on an ethical and legal basis.** As already noted, many EU child-related interventions have developed as side-effects of broader policies oriented towards goals other than child welfare (for example, to promote gender equality or to support demographic renewal). Children have thus been treated as conduits rather than final beneficiaries of EU interventions. This way of treating children does not sit well with a conception of children as citizens endowed with rights. Furthermore, it runs against the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and the

European Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000). In particular, art 24.1 of the European Charter ("the rights of the child") states that:

1. *Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.*
2. *In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.*
3. *Every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests*

## IV - Analysing the rationale and output of EU child-related interventions: Two examples

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**A**s stated above, the EU does not have a common childhood policy, even if there are various EU interventions having a direct effect on children. This section describes and assesses the rationale and outputs of two of them: those dealing with the provision of childcare services and those addressing the problem of child poverty.

### 4.1. The EU childcare policy

The availability of childcare facilities has long been recognised by the EU as an essential step towards achieving gender equality and increasing female participation in the workforce. Accordingly, several EU initiatives have been launched to encourage member states to extend and improve childcare services.

During the 1980s, EU action on childcare developed within the framework of the Action Programmes on Gender Equality. At that time, **childcare fell**

**within the competence of the EU Equal Opportunity Unit and was clearly framed as a measure designed to promote gender equality.** EU interventions aimed essentially to promote out-of-home childcare services, which were considered as a necessary condition to ensure equal opportunities in the labour market.

The EU Equal Opportunity Unit launched various initiatives to encourage member states to move in this direction. One was the creation of the “Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women” (1985). Composed of 12 national experts, this group was dedicated to collecting and disseminating comparative data on childcare and to elaborating reports on the situation of childcare in Europe. In line with the Commission’s Equal Opportunities Unit viewpoint, the reports of the Network stressed the need to develop publicly-funded childcare services in order to allow women to enter the labour market on an equal footing; a secondary concern was shown for ensuring the quality of the care provided (Jenson: 2006). Another initiative promoted during the 1980s was the EU Recommendation on Childcare (1992). This called on member states “to gradually develop and/or encourage measures to enable women and men to reconcile family obligations arising from the care of children and their own employment, education and training”.

**IN THE 2000’s, A STRONG POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO RAISE FEMALE EMPLOYMENT RATES LED TO A RENEWED EU ATTENTION TO CHILDCARE.**

After the approval of the 1992 resolution, the EU interest in childcare faded. In the 2000s, however, the definition of the Lisbon strategy and, in particular, the establishment of a strong political commitment to raise female employment rates<sup>11</sup> led the EU to give new attention to childcare. As part of the measures to promote the implementation of the Lisbon strategy, the 2002 Barcelona Council set up specific

<sup>11</sup> The 2000 Lisbon council conclusions marked as objective to raise female employment rates from 51 to 60 percent by 2010.

targets for the expansion of childcare services. In particular, member states committed themselves to providing childcare services to at least 33 percent of under-3s and to 90 percent of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, by 2010.

Since 2002, member states’ efforts to achieve these targets have been regularly monitored in the context of the European Employment Strategy<sup>12</sup>. However, **the EU Commission’s capacity to keep track of these efforts has been extremely limited, given the lack of reliable national data on rates of childcare coverage.** In the year 2006, for instance, only 9 over 25 member states reported data on childcare coverage in their National Reform Programmes (NAP’s until 2005). Apart from that, there is a second factor making cross-national comparison and peer-review extremely difficult. Even if Barcelona targets set a clear objective (to reach a certain percentage of service coverage), member states are called on to strive for the attainment of this goal “in line with national patterns of provision”<sup>13</sup>. In practice, this means that differences in national care models - that is, the particular way each member state combines the provision of out-of-home care services with parental leave facilities - are to be respected and taken into account at the moment of evaluating national performance. Hence, EU employment reports publish the data on childcare coverage together with data on the length and intensity of maternity/parental leaves, and stress the need to interpret the first by taking into account differences in the second.

<sup>12</sup> Data on pre-school enrolment (percentage of 3 and 4 years old enrolled in pre-primary education) has been also used to monitor Member States’ progress in the modernisation of the education and training system. In particular, this data has been used to assess national progress in the implementation of objective 2 of the “Education and Training 2010” program, that is, “facilitating the access of all to education and training system”. Notice, however, that no benchmark has been defined with respect to the participation rates in pre-primary education -as it has been set for participation rates of adult population in education and training. Neither has been defined an indicator to assess the quality of the education provided to the 3 and 4 years old, in spite of references to the “important role that pre-primary education plays in children’s emotional and cognitive development” in the Commission Working Document for the 2006 Report on the implementation of the Lisbon objectives in education and training (SEC (2006) 639 of 16/05/2006).

<sup>13</sup> More specifically, the Barcelona Target call member states to “(..) strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” (Presidency conclusions, Barcelona European Council, March 2002)

Apart from these problems of measurement, the usefulness and pertinence of the Barcelona targets has been questioned on other grounds (see for instance Plantenga 2004). From a children's perspective, two main objections can be formulated.

First of all, as with prior interventions, **current EU interventions in childcare are grounded in the assumption that childcare is a service exclusively targeted to adult workers rather than to both parents and children.** By focusing exclusively on the extension of the service, Barcelona indicators serve to assess how well national childcare policies help parents reconcile their work and family responsibilities. However, they do not give any information on the quality of the service provided or, more precisely, on whether these services ensure an adequate education and care for the children.

Second, as is the case with most national childcare policies, **EU action is narrowly targeted to pre-school age children.** This focus on younger children is unsurprising given that EU action on childcare is essentially aimed at increasing women's labour market participation. Provision of pre-school childcare has been given priority because, in the absence of public support, mothers with early-age children are more eager to quit the labour market to care for their children than are mothers with school-age children. Besides, EU (and national) authorities work on the assumption that after-school childcare is provided by either the mother (not working or working part-time) or relatives such as grandparents. However, family changes, geographical mobility and women's increasing engagement in the labour market are challenging this assumption. Today, many dual-worker families find it increasingly difficult to take charge of their children during the afternoon period between school closure and the end of the working day.

If EU action on childhood is to be guided by a concern for children's well-being rather than by an (exclusive) attention to women's labour market participation, the care demands of early-age children and school-age children merit equal consideration. There are two further reasons to consider enhancing EU childcare policy by including the care of school-age children. First, this is an area of intervention largely under-developed at the national level<sup>14</sup>. And second, **ensuring adequate care for school-age children brings important benefits in terms of social cohesion.** There is strong evidence of the benefits of after-school intervention programs for the cognitive and emotional development of disadvantaged children (Danzinger and Waldfogel: 2000).

**IF EU ACTION IS TO BE GUIDED BY A CONCERN FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING RATHER THAN BY AN ATTENTION TO WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT, THE CARE DEMANDS OF EARLY-AGE CHILDREN AND SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN MERIT EQUAL CONSIDERATION.**

#### 4.2. The EU action on child poverty

The issue of child poverty emerged on the EU agenda in 2000, when EU member states agreed on extending the use of the Open Method of Coordination to the field of social exclusion. Following this decision, **the 2000 Nice Council** set up common goals in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and defined indicators to assess member states' performance in achieving these goals. One of the goals defined in Nice was "to move towards the elimination of social exclusion among children". National efforts in combating children's social exclusion were to be assessed by using an income-based relative poverty line: the percentage of children living with an equivalent disposable income below 60 percent of the national median income.

<sup>14</sup> As reported in a study of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions –Eurofound (2006), childcare policy for school-age children is largely under-developed in Europe. Only in the Nordic countries do we find publicly-financed formal centres or 'after-school clubs' designed to keep school-age children until their parents end work as well as to stimulate their growth and development (2006: 8).

In 2002, following the submission of the first two-year National Action Plans on Social Inclusion, the Commission published the first EU report on social inclusion. This report drew attention to the fact that children were at higher risk of poverty in almost all EU countries, but expressed satisfaction that child poverty had been defined as a key priority area in a number of NAP's. The second EU report on social inclusion, published two years later, was more critical. While recognising that child poverty had been defined as a priority in many NAP's, **the 2004 report criticized the limited focus on children's rights in many NAPs**<sup>15</sup>. In addition to that, it deplored "the lack of use of indicators defining children's and young people's experiences of poverty and social exclusion from their own perspectives" (2004 EU Report on Social Inclusion, p. 106).

Since 2006, there have been repeated calls to strengthen EU action on child poverty. In particular, in the 2006 Spring Council, Member States agreed on the need "to take necessary steps to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background". More recently, the 2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion has once again pointed out the alarming number of children at risk of poverty in Europe.

This rhetoric, however, has not been followed by significant action. For the moment, **all efforts have been focused on improving and refining the measurement of child poverty**. In particular, in the context of a general reform of the monitoring framework, most EU indicators on poverty and social exclusion have been broken down by age, thus providing more information on the living conditions of children at risk of poverty. In addition, a 'fixed' poverty rate has been established to evaluate improvement or worsening in the standards of

<sup>15</sup> In particular, the report stated that: "(...) in many countries, there is no acknowledgment of a rights-based agenda for children and young people. This means in effect that priority is given to basing children and young people's services on an adult understanding of what children and young people need rather than on their 'rights' to universally agreed services. (...) Countries that give less emphasis to the rights of children tend to focus more on children and young people as future employees rather than on improving the quality of life now" (EC: 2004 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, p. 106).

living resulting from economic growth or recession<sup>16</sup>. Since this fixed poverty rate is also broken down by age, EU authorities will have a more refined picture of the changes in national child poverty rates over time. Finally, a general indicator of material deprivation (also broken down by age) is being developed, in addition to a specific indicator of 'child-well-being'<sup>17</sup>.

**Notwithstanding the relevance of these improvements, there is a risk of getting trapped in a debate over methodology.** In this respect, the example of Canada should serve as warning: In 1980, an all party resolution committed the government of Canada to "seek to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000". Fifteen years later, a Unicef Report on child poverty deplored that the all-party resolution had "run into the sands of definitional debate and has not been followed by agreed yardsticks and clear targets" (Unicef: 2005, p. 8).

Defining and measuring child poverty is certainly a difficult task, but technical difficulties should not serve as an alibi for passivity at the EU level. Current EU action on child poverty presents various shortcomings related more to a lack of political will than to methodological difficulties.

**EU ACTION ON CHILD POVERTY PRESENTS VARIOUS SHORTCOMINGS RELATED MORE TO A LACK OF POLITICAL WILL THAN TO METHODOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES.**

First, while a monitoring system has been set up, **no specific commitments have yet been established to reduce child poverty in the medium or long-term future**. There is, of course, a general commitment "to take necessary steps to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty" (2006 European Council conclusions). But this unspecific statement has not subsequently been given body with a target (that is, a specific commitment to reduce to a certain percentage the number of children at risk of poverty by a

<sup>16</sup> A fixed poverty rate is a poverty rate anchored to a particular moment in time (2005, in this case) which is only up-rated by inflation over the years. It serves to compare the poverty rates in a given country at different points in time, regardless changes in the median income.

<sup>17</sup> For more details see European Commission (2006), Portfolio of overarching indicators and streamlined social inclusion, pensions and health portfolios ([http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/social\\_inclusion/indicators\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/indicators_en.htm))

certain period of time). Moreover, while the existence of a fixed poverty rate would allow the establishment of a ‘backstop’ child poverty line (that is, a political commitment not to allow the child poverty rate to increase beyond that existing at a certain point in time), EU member states have not committed to this minimum either<sup>18</sup>.

Second, based on the principles of “activation” and life-long learning, current **EU strategy on social inclusion is inappropriate, or at least insufficient, to address the problems of poverty and social exclusion among children**. Activation of unemployed parents is an important step to reducing child poverty, but it has serious caveats if applied alone. As stressed by Hoelscher (2004), not all non-working parents can be “activated” to take up employment<sup>19</sup>. Besides, combating poverty and social exclusion among children involves more than focusing on families’ financial resources: it also requires action to minimize the impact of poverty on children’s development and well-being. There is therefore a mismatch between discourse and reality, and EU authorities have not yet formulated a specific vision and strategy to combat child poverty. In consequence, national child poverty strategies have been narrowly focused on ‘activating’ the parents<sup>20</sup>.

18 A backstop poverty line works as a ‘backstop’ during periods of economic recession and as a ‘minimum test’ of progress during periods of economic growth. It ensures that poor children are given priority in the allocation of social resources during periods of economic decline and that they benefit, at least proportionally, from gains during periods of economic growth (Corak 2005)

19 According to Hoelscher (2004, p. 114), 51 percent of poor children live in households that can’t reasonably be expected to take up employment of more than 16 hours per week.

20 As it is recognised in the 2007 EU Report on Social Inclusion when assessing national strategies to combat child poverty: “Member states approach this issue in different ways (..) but tend to see the main route out of poverty and social exclusion in eliminating any obstacles to parents’, specially mother’s, labour market participation” (2007:44).

## V - Major shortcomings of current EU action on children

The analysis of EU interventions on childcare and child poverty serves to identify various shortcomings of current EU action on children. We highlight three: the dominance of an instrumental approach; the piecemeal character of this approach; and the exclusive reliance on weak coordination procedures.

### 5.1. An instrumental approach: Children treated as means rather than ends

EU interventions which address children are largely inspired by an instrumental approach. **Adopting an instrumental approach means treating children’s care and education as instruments or obstacles for the attainment of other goals – gender equality, female employment, and demographic renewal – rather than as ends in themselves**. It also means viewing children as either ‘citizens-workers-in-the-becoming’ (Lister: 2003) or

as a care burden for current workers - and not as citizens in the present, endowed with their own rights. It means, in short, showing secondary or no concern for the welfare of today's children.

While this instrumental approach is easily observable in the area of childcare, it is also present in EU action and discourse on child poverty. In EU documents on social inclusion, children's deprivation is considered a problem because of the negative effects it has on children's future life chances. Hence, when the EU talks of child poverty there is an emphasis on the need to ensure "equal opportunities with respect to education"<sup>21</sup>. This public concern for children's life-chances is laudable, but insufficient if not accompanied by a concern for the present well-being of poor children, for their participation in society and for their chances of realising their human potential as children. A child-centred approach to child poverty would require not only a focus on employment and education, but also on other aspects such as family relations, culture, sports and other leisure activities.

Notice that this instrumental approach is also present, to a lesser or greater extent, in other EU child-related interventions. While taking children's well-being into consideration, much of this action is guided primarily by other concerns, such as the need to respond to the demographic challenge (the European Alliance for Families) or to encourage the development of a competitive and knowledge-based economy (EU action on education).

<sup>21</sup> European Commission (2007), Proposal for the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007 (COM (2007) 13 of 19/1/2007)

## 5.2. A piecemeal character: The lack of a coherent and comprehensive EU vision on childhood

As previously noted, child-related interventions have developed as by-products of various sectoral EU policies. As a result, we now have an amalgam of separate EU actions directly or indirectly affecting children which are not necessarily united by the same vision of children's needs and demands. This fragmentation and absence of a general vision on childhood not only entails a lack of a coherence; it also translates into a narrow and unjustifiable focus on certain categories of children (e.g. early-age children, those at-risk-of-poverty), and thus neglects the needs and demands of the rest.

## 5.3. An exclusive reliance on weak coordination procedures

As noted in section 2, EU actions on children have essentially developed through 'soft coordination' processes. In some cases, the aim has been to promote national policy convergence towards commonly defined objectives (childcare, child poverty) whereas in others co-ordination has been used to stimulate experimentation and reflexive policy learning (family policies). **The analysis conducted in the previous section poses serious questions about the functioning of the existing mechanisms and procedures of co-ordination.** Leaving aside the potential benefits in terms of policy learning, the analysis raises doubts over the effectiveness of these procedures at encouraging the adaptation of national childcare and child poverty actions to commonly-defined EU objectives. In the case of child poverty, these objectives have been formulated in very broad terms. They have not been given substance in the form of specific national-level targets and benchmarks, which has made it impossible to monitor national progress towards the achievement of the goals. In the case of childcare

there are nationally-based targets, but the EU capacity to monitor the performance of national actions is extremely limited, given the lack of reliable national data on rates of childcare coverage.

Apart from these operational defects in the mechanisms and procedures of co-ordination, **the exclusive reliance on ‘soft’ co-ordination methods is questionable.** The EU makes use of other means of intervention – EU funding programs, the elaboration of ‘soft’ legislation – which might also be called on to support, guide and complement national action on child education and care.

## Policy recommendations

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**O**n the basis of the above analysis, this final section provides policy recommendations aimed at improving and strengthening existing EU action on children and preparing the ground for a more ambitious and comprehensive EU childhood policy.

### 1. Re-defining the Barcelona targets

Barcelona targets on childcare must be re-defined to make them responsive to the needs of both parents and children. In particular, **the exclusive focus on the extension of childcare services should be corrected by adding indicators and benchmarks to assess the quality of the services provided.** An option would be to set **minimum standards of quality** (such as a minimum staff qualification level or a maximum ratio of children to staff) to be guaranteed by all EU countries. However, the latter would require the development of harmonised indicators for the quality-related aspects of the service, a somewhat difficult task given the lack of compara-

tive research on this topic (Plantenga: 2004). An alternative to the establishment of minimum standards would be to develop an **indicator measuring the proportion of public expenditure which goes towards childcare**. Used in conjunction with the rate of coverage, this indicator would serve as a ‘proxy’ to assess the quality of the service provided.

## 2. Promoting a pedagogical approach to early childhood interventions

**EU interventions on early childhood cannot be confined to the monitoring of the Barcelona targets.** There is now ample evidence of the educational, social and economic returns of providing educational-based care to pre-school children. As reported by the OECD (2005), a high-quality early education improves the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children, in particular those coming from disadvantaged milieus. From a political-economic perspective, investing in early education promotes school standards, raises the quality of workforce and equalises children’s life-chances (Barrington-Leach et al: 2007).

In view of all this evidence, **the EU should take a clear position in defence of a pedagogical approach in early childhood interventions.** It should be noted that in many EU countries the pedagogical discourse on early childhood is marginal or even contested. In these countries, public intervention on early childhood is still founded upon, and legitimated by, a vision of childcare as a second best to parental/maternal care, in line with what Moss (2006) defines as an “attachment pedagogy” (that is, the idea that mother care is essential to secure the right development of children and that, in its absence, non-maternal care should be undertaken by carers deemed as similar as possible to the mother, such as grandmothers or female childminders). Under this vision, children are treated as passive dependants instead of active subjects, disregarding their capacity (and need) of social interaction and stimulation from an early age.

## 3. Incorporating out-of-school childcare into the EU agenda

Care services for school-age children are generally under-provided in Europe. While recent social and economic changes have boosted the demand for these services, **political actors at the national level have been largely unresponsive to this new social demand. Given this lack of attention at the national level, EU action in this area is highly recommendable.** It would serve to highlight the political relevance of the issue, to legitimise and promote national policy initiatives in this area, to stimulate ‘experience sharing’ and learning among national and sub-national authorities already operating in this field, and to encourage a re-examination and re-evaluation of existing actions – i.e., to promote ‘reflexive learning’. EU involvement in this area need not be deep. It could start with very basic measures, such as developing awareness-raising actions, financing studies and research, establishing an informal process for the exchange of information, ideas and best practices among national governments, and/or adopting an EU recommendation on this topic.

## 4. Setting a target and a backstop policy line on child poverty

As previously discussed, EU institutions are currently engaged in a process of ‘soft coordination’ of national child poverty strategies. This coordination is somewhat weak. While member states are called to “rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty”, the lack of specific targets and timeframes for the achievement of this goal is likely to convert the process into a mere assessment of national declarations. The EU political commitment to combating child poverty will not be credible if policy speeches and general declarations are not accompanied by specific predetermined objectives and prescribed timeframes for the achievement of these objectives. This could start with the **establishment of a backstop child poverty line** and eventually be complemented with **specific targets for the reduction of child poverty rates in the mid-term future.**

## 5. Strengthening the EU action to combat child poverty in Europe

The existence of a ‘soft coordination’ process does not prevent the EU from developing a more determined action to combat child poverty in Europe. The negative consequences associated with childhood deprivation are convincing enough to justify stronger EU involvement on this issue. This involvement could take different forms. One option would be **to launch an EU funding programme on child poverty**, similar to those existing on gender equality or youth. By setting objectives and defining the criteria for the selection of the projects to be funded, such a plan would not only provide direct funding to actors combating and preventing child poverty, but it would also provide more clear guidelines for the formulation of national child poverty strategies. Another option would be to **establish a Europe-wide child’s right to a minimum income**. This option was supported by the High-Level Group on the future of social policy in an enlarged EU, which defined as a major policy recommendation for the EU during 2006–10 the aim “to reduce child poverty, including through a basic income for children delivered by member states” (European Commission, 2004, p.44)<sup>22</sup>. More recently, it has been advocated by Eurochild (2007).

## 6. Ensuring that all EU actions affecting children take children’s needs and demands as their primary concern

If everything goes as expected, **the new Treaty of Lisbon** will come into force at the beginning of the next year. As has been widely reported, the entrance into force of the Treaty will entail major modifications in the goals, functioning and institutional structure the Union. Two of these changes are of particular importance from the perspective of child-related EU interventions. The first one is the inclusion of the “protection of the rights of the child” as part of the aims of the Union (art 3.3). The second one is the fact

<sup>22</sup> European Commission (2004), Report of the High-Level Group on the future of social policy in an enlarged European Union, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg

that the Charter of Fundamental Rights will become legally binding for the EU institutions. If this happens, a substantial change in the treatment of children on EU policies is required in order to meet the legal requirement of art 24.1.2 of the Charter. As seen above, this article states that, in all actions relating to children, the child’s best interest must be a primary consideration.

The need to ensure that all EU policies respect children’s rights has been highlighted in a recent Communication from the Commission on the subject<sup>23</sup>. One of the actions proposed in this Communication is **to mainstream children’s rights when drafting EC legislative and non-legislative actions that may affect them**. While welcoming this proposal, one might wonder whether mainstreaming is sufficient to ensure that all EU actions are respectful with children’s rights. In this respect, it is interesting to draw lessons on how mainstreaming has worked in the gender area. Empirical analysis has revealed that mainstreaming only works when there is a clear political commitment at the top level of the organisation and when there are institutional and organisational instruments to effectively monitor sectoral managers as they take steps to integrate a gender approach in their policy areas (Woodward 2005). Taking these experiences into consideration, the proposal put forward by Eurochild (2007) seems highly pertinent: **to set up a specialised child rights unit within the EU, under the direction of DG Freedom, Justice and Security**, which would be in charge of ensuring that children’s rights are effectively mainstreamed in all relevant policy areas.

## 7. Creating mechanisms for coordination

EU child-related interventions are currently run by three different Directorates-General and are implemented in the context of separated coordination processes (employment, social inclusion and education).

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (2006), Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child, Communication from the Commission 367 final, Brussels.

For an effective and coherent EU action on childhood, it is necessary to ensure that these various interventions are well-coordinated and that the interactions between the various programmes or actions are taken into consideration. One means to ensure coordination and articulation on a systematic basis, as suggested in a recent BEPA paper (Barrington-Leach et al: 2007), is to **publish an annual EU report on childhood**<sup>24</sup>. This report would be drafted by the various departments involved in childhood, and would stress the cross-cutting aspects of the different EU child-related interventions.

## 8. Launching a consultation process on childhood in Europe

At present, EU action on childhood is fragmented and ill-defined. It consists of an amalgam of actions and measures narrowly focused on certain age-groups or categories of children (early-age children in need of care, children at risk of poverty) and inspired by other concerns than children's needs. To redress existing EU action on childhood, we need to lay the foundations for a comprehensive and coherent EU policy on childhood.

Formulating such a policy would require an intensive prior consultation phase within and outside the Commission. On this purpose, the EU Commission could **launch a process of consultation, similar to what was launched in 2000 to discuss the situation of young people in Europe**. This consultation involved young people, experts and national authorities, and ended with the adoption of the White Paper on Youth, a document which has laid the foundations of current EU policy on youth.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the BEPA paper recommends the publication of EU annual reports on Youth, but the term "youth" is used in this paper to refer to both children and adolescents.

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