Reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty

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The European Parliament adopted by 569 votes to 77 with 49 abstentions, a resolution on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty.

Parliament recalled that between 2008 and 2012 the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe (EU27+Norway, Iceland and Switzerland) rose by almost one million, increasing by half a million between 2011 and 2012 alone.

According to Eurostat data, in 2013, 26.5 million children in the EU-28 were at risk of falling into poverty or social exclusion and in the EU-27 the risk of poverty or social exclusion increased between 2008 and 2012 from 26.5% to 28%.

Against this background, Parliament recommended that Member States **make a real commitment to developing policies to fight child poverty** that focus on correcting child poverty factors and increase the effectiveness, quantity, amounts and scope of the social support specifically directed at children, and promote labour laws that guarantee social rights, including a statutory adequate minimum wage.

A three-pillared approach: Parliament recommended that the Commission establish with Member States a roadmap for the implementation of the three-pillar approach taken in the Commission recommendation ‘Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ in terms of:

1. access to resources,
2. access to services,
3. children’s participation.

It considered that, in order to achieve better results with the three-pillar approach, it could be useful to develop precise and specific indicators of the level of child poverty and the areas more affected by this phenomenon.

It called on Member States to effectively integrate relevant aspects of the Social Investment Package and asked the Commission to set a Europe 2020 **sub-target on reducing child poverty and social exclusion.** It also called for making the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion visible and explicit at all stages of the European Semester.

Childhood: a priority: Parliament stressed that the reduction of child poverty by investing in children should be proposed as a core priority for the 2016 Annual Growth Survey, and as a key means of progressing on the poverty target.

It called on Member States, when using European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) resources and developing social policies, to devote greater attention to protecting families (especially single-parent families) with children with health problems against poverty.

It encouraged Member States and the Commission to agree on EU standards for determining the cost of raising a child and for defining adequate resources to prevent and combat child poverty.

Member States were also called upon to implement or enhance universal welfare benefits targeting children, such as:

4. the provision of **subsidised or free meals** for children, especially for disadvantaged and poor children;
5. adopting active employment measures as part of comprehensive strategies and policies to support parents access to good-quality employment and adequate income,
6. access to high-quality public services (particularly childcare, education, health, housing, and leisure activities);
7. strengthening the participation of children and their families in the development, implementation and monitoring of these policies.

No budget cuts: Parliament called on the Commission to **refrain from recommending reformulations and cuts in the public services** of Member States, from promoting flexible labour relations and the privatisation of public services, which have led unequivocally to the weakening of the social rights of children. It asked the Commission to emphasise the need for investment in free, public education by pinpointing specific education methods for the most vulnerable social groups, such as immigrants or people with disabilities of various kinds.

Reduce child poverty: Member States were urged to adopt, implement and monitor plans for alleviating multidimensional child poverty, putting the focus on the intrinsic rights of children and setting targets for reducing child poverty and social exclusion. They are also urged to implement plans to alleviate the sense of social exclusion felt by children with learning difficulties.

Ensure sufficient resources: Parliament called for the Commission and Parliament to take the opportunity provided by the midterm review of the multiannual financial framework to make better use of the European Social Fund, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived and the Programme for Employment and Social Innovation.

It recommended that Member States' national budgets contain visible, transparent, participatory and accountable provisions for appropriations and costs to combat child poverty. It also recommended that the Commission and Member States **set targets for reducing child poverty and social exclusion;**

Child Guarantee: Parliament considered the right to free and universal education, health and social security systems as **basic conditions for combating poverty**. It called on the Commission and the Member States, in view of the weakening of public services, to introduce a **child guarantee** so that every child in poverty can have access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, as part of a European integrated plan to combat child poverty.

Parliament urged Member States to devote greater attention to the creation and availability of a suitable out-of-school environment in which children can spend their time in a meaningful and stimulating way outside school hours and during school holidays. It called on the Member States to avoid ghettoisation of children experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

It recommended that the Member States should guarantee all children access to **free, inclusive and quality public education at all ages,** including **early childhood** education and care, and formal and non-formal education. It urged Member States to provide universal and equal access to crèches and preschools for children from all social groups.

Parliament urged the Commission to make the **early school leaving rate** and tackling child poverty an explicit priority in the European Semester and Europe 2020.

Child protection and reconciling work and family life: Parliament called on Member States to implement specific legislation to protect and increase maternity and paternity rights, including through the implementation of efficient instruments to ensure a balance between work and family. It urged Member States to conduct policies that facilitate the creation and maintenance of decent workplaces and develop systems for training, improving qualifications and amenities such as teleworking or flexitime facilitating parents' entry or return to the labour market following a break in their professional career.

The resolution recommended that the Member States move away from institutional care in favour of **stable foster care systems** which better prepare children and young people for an independent life, continued learning or work.

Moreover, it called for the development and implementation of integrated child protection systems to protect children against violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

Access to healthcare for children: parliament urged e Member States to guarantee universal, public, free and quality health care with regard to prevention, immunisation programmes and primary care.

It called on the Member States and the Commission to participate actively in combating the trafficking of children for any form of exploitation, including work, forced marriage, illegal adoption, illegal activities and sexual exploitation.

Lastly, Parliament recommended that the Commission and the Member States develop statistical methods that integrate multidimensional indicators, disaggregated by age, gender and particular disadvantaged groups, in measuring poverty, social exclusion, inequalities, discrimination and child well-being.

It should be noted that a replacement resolution tabled by the EFN group was rejected in Plenary.