

## The COFACE “Child Compass” 2030 Discussion note

*As a follow-up from the conference in Helsinki in 2019 on shaping a healthy environment fit for children, this is a first discussion note to propose key follow-up actions in building our Child Compass 2030.*

### **1. Context– do you see similar trends in your country?**

More than 30 years ago the International Community signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ratified by all EU countries, which committed to respect the rights of children.

Since the publication of the Recommendation on Investing in Children, in 2013, the EU monitors family and child policies across its Member States. Family policies are being reviewed across countries, to meet new challenges and needs, yet, there are considerable differences among countries in how the support is offered<sup>1</sup>. Although the EU economy recovered from the last recession and it is now in a good moment, inequality has increased and some families face multiple problems. Single-parents’ families, large families, migrant families and families where members have disabilities or long-term conditions face a high risks of social exclusion and material deprivation.

There is an increasing tendency to focus on children support, fostering access to services directed to children. The new European Commission committed to deliver a European Child Guarantee that would help ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to free healthcare, education, early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition. In Member States consistent efforts have been put in increasing the availability and use of the early childcare provision over the past decade. These are promising initiatives, but the effects of providing education and other services to vulnerable children are not large enough to tackle their social exclusion, which is strongly interlinked with the conditions of their parents and with the quality of family relationships.

The education and social problems of poor children stem in large part from the home environment. Factors of social risk are related with many elements including parents’ unemployment and low material level of a family, poor housing and unfavorable living conditions, absence of one or both parents, parents’ chronic diseases, disorders of internal interpersonal relations in the family, parents’ pedagogical failures, not sufficiently emotional and distrust-based relationships between parents and children, and violence in the close environment. When experiencing these challenges, children face more social problems because their feeling of safety and confidence in oneself and environment are not formed: difficulties in

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<sup>1</sup> Recent Trends in Child and Family Policy in the EU, European Platform for Investing in Children: Annual thematic report, 2019 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8240&furtherPubs=yes>

communication, anxiety, lack of self-control, tendency to conflicts, and aggression might increase, while initiative and cognitive activity might weaken<sup>2</sup>. Family policies should act towards the establishment of the conditions for a family to be an autonomous, responsible, firm, stable, active and independent institute, able to independently perform its functions, and to ensure the welfare of generations. This is the basis for the development of healthy, vital and creative societies. To fulfil this task, policies must have holistic approach towards the inter-related well-being of children and of their parents. Narrowing support to ensuring basic services to children is a risk to allow cuts in the other forms of support parents need to ensure their children a healthy development.

Another element is about mainstreaming child participation and the best interest of the child and children's participation not only to family policies, but to all the areas which have an impact on their well-being and development. These are two fundamental elements of the human-rights based approach of the UNCRC. However environment, consumer, digital, urban, and fiscal policies, that have a huge impact on children health and future, do not necessarily take their perspective and needs into account. In our fast changing society and in a world becoming more complex, the focus on children cannot slacken.

## **2. Proposals for COFACE action – do you agree?**

A child compass can provide a way forward for referring EU policy. It could be implemented through three main actions:

- a. Adoption of a position paper,
- b. Collection of good practices,
- c. An annual meeting gathering national and local policy-makers.

### **a. Adoption of a position paper with our Child Compass vision**

COFACE has always pushed for a societies that are kind to children **and** families. Building a Child Compass would provide a comprehensive, integrated, long-term, crosscutting strategy to better respect the rights of children and respond to the needs both children and their families, and a new kind of working method that would allow to identify and implement a vision, forecasts, aims and recommendations in the field of child well-being.

This would help establish a European child-friendly policy based on the needs of children at various levels, examined from the perspective of children and it should be anchored in strategic objectives within the different policy domains.

It would be based on shared values and vision of family and child well-being, ensuring the living environment of children and their families are mainstreamed into all areas of government policy.

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<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the opportunities of social inclusion of children from families at social risk in communities, Daiva Alifanovienė, Odeta Šapelytė, Nomeda Bėčiūtė, Siauliai University, Lithuania

COFACE wants to “**shape a healthy and safe environment fit for children**” and shares the opinion that all measures that intervene in society should be adapted to children, the most vulnerable and valuable elements of our societies. Children are no mini adults, their developing bodies are more vulnerable to e.g. environmental contaminants, but standards are too often based on healthy adults (men). We must ensure children receive healthy building blocks for their physical and emotional development. Based on the **precautionary principle**, we must also prevent damage to children’s developing bodies.

The conceptual approach of the paper would use a **two-generation approach**, to ensure that both children and families receive support promoting programs supporting the child by fostering their learning and social competence, while supporting their home environment through actions supporting parents in their needs for education, training, counselling, parenting and psychological support, access to services, employment and income. This can build child- and family-friendly societies that put children, young people and families at the heart of their value-decisions and policies.

**Taking the individual child health and well-being as starting point**, we could highlight key dimensions of our Child Compass:

- **Child (human) relationships** (family planning, parenting support, counselling, family mediation, sexual and emotional education, peer support);
- **Inclusion of child and families in the community** (children’s participation in decision-making processes, promoting family-based care, child-friendly spaces and cities, transports and housing, human rights education, children and families access to play, recreational, social, cultural and sport activities and volunteering);
- **Family time** (work-life balance: enabling take-up of maternity, paternity and parental leaves, flexible work arrangements, family-friendly workplaces);
- **Individual growth and learning pathways for every child and parent** (quality and inclusive ECEC, education, training and lifelong learning);
- **Reduce poverty** (universal / targeted measures to provide access to services, nutrition, child benefits and other income support, quality employment, including addressing in-work poverty and energy poverty);
- **Security and health** (access to quality health services fit for children, environmental policies to protect children, nutrition, air pollution, health education);
- **Safety online** (digital citizenship; media and advertising; addressing cyberbullying).

#### b. **Collection of good practices in policy-making**

In the current context, we are seeking **promising new approaches** that implement the child rights through the two-generation approach: a child and family led culture. During our Helsinki conference the Finnish Child Strategy, an integrated system to better respond to the needs of children and families was presented as a very inspiring practice. We could collect more information on existing policies and practices across 10+ European and present them in September 2021.

We could also include the practices from our members presented during the Helsinki event on sexuality education, child-friendly cities, inclusive ECEC, family poverty, environmental standards.

**c. Annual meetings of civil servants from national/regional ministries**

With the Child Compass as guidance, we could bring together a cluster of civil servants from around 10 countries) to create a positive intergovernmental dynamic on family policy under our COFACE “umbrella”. They could be called **Families2030 Study Group**. We could organise the first meeting in Berlin, as a side meeting of the European Expert Meeting on the European Child Guarantee.

**Long-term strategy:** This Berlin event could be the first in a series of Child Compass 2030 annual events in the run-up to 2030. Spotlight on the family environment in 2020. Spotlight on economic environment in 2021 (Slovenia). Spotlight on education environment in 2022 (France). Digital, health, consumer, etc.