

GUARANTEEING A HEALTHY NUTRITION FOR ALL CHILDREN IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Towards a greater commitment to the provision of school meals building on the European Child Guarantee

SAN SEBASTIÁN DECLARATION

On November 21, Member States, representatives of the European Union Institutions, civil society, academics and policy experts gathered at the Palacio de Miramar, San Sebastián, a day after the World Children's Day, which marks the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, at the event 'Guaranteeing a healthy nutrition for all children in the European Union. Towards a greater commitment to the provision of school meals building on the European Child Guarantee'. Following the proceedings of the event, the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union declares:

Considering that

- The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, ratified by all EU countries, sets out that States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24) and that States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the physical and social development and shall, in case of need, provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (Article 27)¹.
- The European Union, together with its Member States, is committed to the full achievement of the **United Nations 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, including those on ending poverty, reducing inequalities, and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education².

¹ The General comment no. 15 of the **Committee on the Rights of the Child** also states that "school feeding is desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day, which can also enhance children's attention for learning and increase school enrolment", recommending this to be combined with nutrition and health education.

² The **SDG 4 Quality education** included the thematic indicator 'Proportion of school attending children receiving school meals' in the early 2023 revision to monitor the progress of 'Target 4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all'.

- The **UN treaty on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, ratified by all Member States, recognises “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food” and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger (Article 11).
- The **European Pillar of Social Rights** establishes in its ‘Principle 11. Childcare and support to children’ that children have the right to protection from poverty and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.
- The **Porto Social Summit** welcomed the EU headline targets for 2030 on jobs, skills and poverty reduction presented in the **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and, accordingly, all Member States have established national headline targets. One of the complementary targets sets to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 5 million.
- The **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** establishes that the protection and promotion of the rights of the child is a core objective of the European Union, as well as the need to strengthen the mainstreaming of children’s rights across all relevant EU policies. The Strategy includes, as some of the targeted priority actions to guarantee children’s rights, combating child poverty, fostering equal opportunities and building inclusive, quality education.
- The **Farm to Fork Strategy**, within the framework of the **European Green Deal**, aims to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly, particularly by promoting healthy and sustainable diets, including organic products, in schools and public institutions. In addition, it identifies as a priority action to review the **EU school scheme** legal framework with the view to refocus the scheme on healthy and sustainable food and, in particular, to strengthen educational messages on the importance of healthy nutrition, sustainable food production and reducing food waste.

Recognising that

- One of the main instruments of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is the **Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee**, which aims to break the cycle of disadvantage and reduce the impact of poverty on child development through guaranteeing for children in need access to six key services including free and effective access to at least one healthy meal each school day and effective access to healthy nutrition.

- The **Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion** states that Member States should seek to rise the effectiveness and efficiency of their social protection systems and their monitoring. The Recommendation also highlights the potential of integrated robust social safety nets (including in-kind benefits) to improve social and health outcomes and deliver lasting social and economic benefits, including more specifically that social safety nets should help increase access to healthcare and healthy food for those in poverty.

Affirming

- In recent years, both the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a temporary closure of schools, and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, with important consequences in terms of the rise in food prices and the increase in the cost of living in general, have evidenced the need to guarantee the right to a healthy nutrition for all children and, in particular, for children in need and the youngest children, who are in a more vulnerable situation given their more sensitive health and development needs.
- The provision of free school meals is one of the most effective policies to fight against the food insecurity faced by a significant number of children and adolescents in the European Union and can contribute significantly to reduce child poverty and social exclusion. An effective school meals policy has the potential to improve several children and families' outcomes (e.g., disposable income, nutrition, education, health, well-being or work-life balance), both in the short and the long term, generating a high rate of return. Moreover, it presents also an opportunity to rethink and transform our food systems by increasing the demand for sustainable and local products.
- For these reasons, strengthening the commitment of Member States to this policy is key to moving towards greater social justice and a smarter social investment model. In this regard:
 - The key priority should be, according to the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, to ensure effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day to all children in need, expanding the coverage progressively for all children. At the same time, the provision of healthy meals during non-school periods should be expanded.

- In parallel, it is crucial to guarantee the provision of quality and sustainable food by setting common standards and menu planning; promoting and supporting a 'whole school food approach'; and deepening on the complementarity of this policy with a broader set of social, educational, health, agricultural and environmental policies to obtain multiplier effects.
- To properly monitor progress and the impact of this policy at the national and the EU level there is a need for targeted, reliable, timely and comparable indicators, prioritising those allowing to monitor the number of children, and especially children in need, benefiting from school meals programmes (e.g., using administrative data).
- Children are the present and the future of Europe. Investing in healthy, nutritious and sustainable school meals today can be a catalyst for broad transformations and systemic changes contributing to a fairer, more social and greener Europe.