

COFACE ASSESSMENT

State Of The European Union for Families

COFACE assessment of the European Union's work from 2019-2024

Achieving 8 positive outcomes...



...for families and society

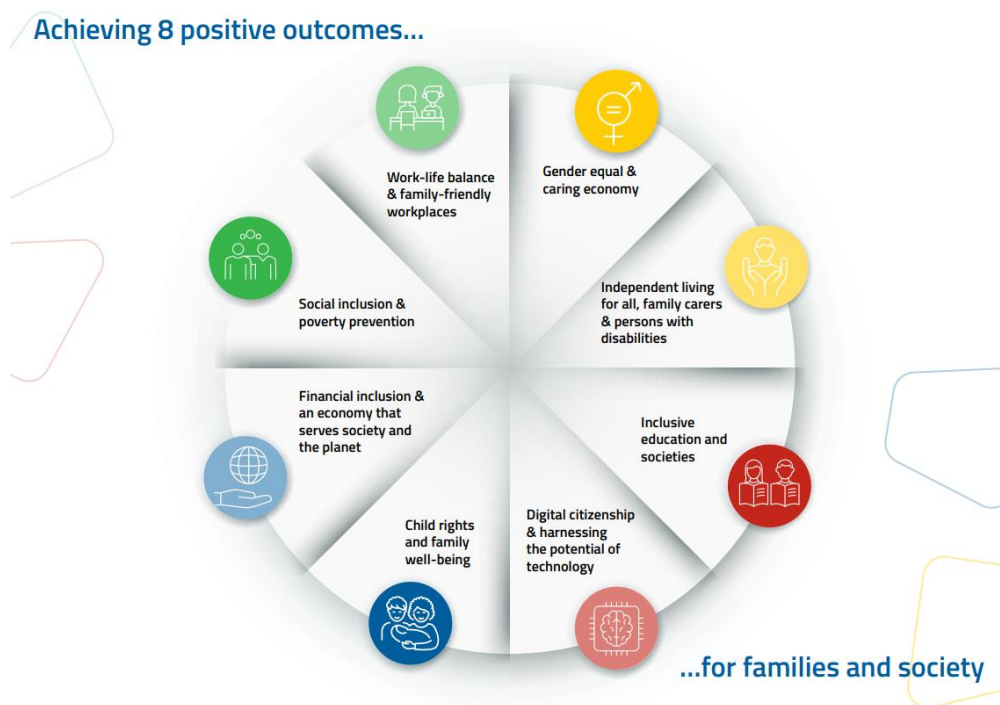
State Of The European Union for Families

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#SOTEUFamilies

Following the 2019 election of the new European Parliament and the publication of the [European Commission's political guidelines](#), COFACE Families Europe published its [New Deal for Families of Today](#) which is a list of key short-term demands (also available in [Easy-to-Read language](#)) to be achieved by the new European Commission from 2019-2024. They were to be seen as concrete steps to build a strong social Europe which meets the long-term goals of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

These demands reflect the needs and challenges of families of today and call for a mix of European actions (policy, law, funding, benchmarking, innovation) to drive real change. These recommendations are addressed at EU-level policymakers in the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of the EU, from whom we expect joint leadership to ensure tangible results for Europe's families.



It is on this basis that we have assessed the European Union's work from 2019 to 2024, and **how it contributes to achieving eight positive outcomes for families of today**. While this assessment refers to various initiatives to support families, it cannot fully assess the real impact on families at local level yet. It is crucial for the EU institutions to conduct monitoring and evaluation of their policies to understand the impacts (positive and negative) on families, in order **to review and consolidate existing frameworks under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and adopt any new measures needed to strengthen the Pillar.

Work-life balance and family-friendly workplaces: Promoting family policy systems based on a mix of Resources, Services and Time arrangements.

The Work-Life Balance directive was an important milestone for families. It had to be transposed by August 2022. This transposition still needs to be fully effective in some countries, and in case of non-compliant Member States, transposition needs to be enforced building on the 2020 European [Work-life balance monitoring framework](#) constructed in the context of the directive, which complements the first step analysis based on the [EU social scoreboard](#). Some countries are adopting transformative, gender responsive family policy reforms focusing on both mothers and fathers equally, but according to the [European Observatory on Family Policy](#) the “childcare gap” persists for working parents in most countries. Such family policy fragmentation must be addressed as a matter of priority, ensuring that entitlement to Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services aligns seamlessly with adequately paid parental leave periods. Such leaves should be accessible to all types of families and go beyond the minimum standards of the Work-life balance directive with decent duration, adequate pay, accessible to all types of workers regardless of their employment status, and as individual rights for both women and men.

Early childhood education and care efforts focus mainly on quantity not quality. The last five years have undoubtedly seen the EU make less progress on ECEC than COFACE had hoped for at the start of this Commission mandate. The European discourse on this sector continues to focus mainly on the 'quantitative' aspects of ECEC. Despite this, it appears that some shift is occurring. The [Council Recommendation](#) adopted in 2022 under the European Care Strategy for the revision of the Barcelona targets for 2030, has represented a promising change in acknowledging the importance of the qualitative aspect of ECEC. *It explicitly states that, to provide full benefits for all children, these services should be of a high-quality, inclusive, and avoid discrimination.* The Recommendation stresses the importance of improving monitoring and evaluation, while also extending minimum quality standards to both public and private providers. While this is a great effort, the Commission’s approach neglects important considerations. The first is how to effectively monitor and incentivise progress among member countries, not just in terms of quantitative supply, which is relatively straightforward to track, but also taking into account qualitative supply. Additionally, it is crucial to avoid penalising countries that invest in public spending to enhance and broaden their ECEC services.

The ECEC profession suffers from vocational crises, with low pay and harsh working conditions. There is a growing public interest in the ECEC sector, leading to discussions regarding the *quality* of provision. Families, in general, appear to be more sensitive to the quality level of early childhood education and care services. This awareness can be an obstacle to their use when the quality does not meet expectations. Challenges of this type can include [inadequate staff-child ratios](#), subpar infrastructures and play spaces, lack of inclusive ECEC to meet the needs of children with disabilities or children in migration. Many European countries now face the challenge of raising the minimum requirements for entering the ECEC profession during a time of staff shortage.

Progress on care for adults, but monitoring and evaluation are key for impact. Member States must develop strong measures on long-term care by June 2024 in the framework of the European Care Strategy implementation and the specific [Council Recommendation](#) on Long-Term Care. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) must be used to support appropriately funded, ambitious, time-bound and targeted measures to improve and expand their long-term care systems, supported by a national monitoring and evaluation mechanism. This needs to be backed by funding to build capacity of social partners and civil society to engage in actions in the framework of the national measures and action plans to sustainably address the needs of the long-term care workforce in view of enabling human rights-based principles.

Missed opportunity to promote lifelong learning opportunities for greater work-life balance. The EU's commitment to lifelong learning provides pathways for upskilling and reskilling, crucial for both men and women to adapt to changing labour markets and achieve career goals. Initiatives like the [European Skills Agenda](#) and the [Upskilling Pathways](#) programme should further promote flexible learning opportunities that can be tailored to individual needs and family circumstances. The 2022 [Council Recommendation](#) on micro-credentials goes in the right direction, offering a European approach to certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences – such flexible and targeted tools have the potential to help learners in vulnerable situations to expand their education and training opportunities.

Driving further change in workplace culture towards gender-responsive and family-supportive economies. Certain EU Legal measures were taken to address the gender employment gap such as the 2022 Directive on [Gender balance in corporate boards](#); the 2023 [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive](#) which imposes that companies report on their social sustainability measures namely in relation to work-life balance and equality; and the 2023 Directive on [Pay Transparency](#). However, women's participation in employment continues to be significantly affected by motherhood, and traditional gender norms play a huge role in maintaining these inequalities – further Horizon Europe research (like [PATHS2INCLUDE](#)) is needed to understand the extent to which gender norms account for the gender and motherhood employment gap across Europe.

Failure to adopt a European framework on the right to disconnect. While the 2003 [Working Time Directive](#) sets limits on working hours and regulates rest periods for all workers, the European Parliament called in 2021 for legislation specifically on the right to disconnect from work. The European social partners failed to adopt a legal framework on this, and hence the European Commission has launched a [first-stage consultation](#) of European social partners on fair telework and the right to disconnect. While telework may help solve childcare challenges for some professions, shifting away from the idea of “work being done only at the workplace” also carries some risks. In a period of rapid development of technologies, where we are all always connected, there is a risk of falling into a culture of total availability of the employee. It is crucial to clearly define the boundaries between work and free time in the online age.

Gender equal and caring economy: Closing the gender care gap, securing full social recognition of family carers, and ensuring their access to social rights.

[The Gender Quality Strategy 2020-2025](#) presented policy objectives and actions to make significant progress by 2025 towards a gender-equal Europe.

There were actions focusing on supporting an equal sharing of care responsibilities at home, evidenced from the European Commission [campaign](#) on gender stereotypes which focused on different spheres of life including in sharing care responsibilities and in career choices. The Commission monitored the availability of childcare, social care and household services, in particular for single parents, through [annual reports](#) on gender equality which also examined the extent to which the European Pillar of Social Rights principles 2 (gender equality) and 3 (equal opportunities) were mainstreamed in the European Semester. [Monitoring](#) was also carried out in the context of the European Semester, and this should be sustained in relation to the gender care gap, as a crucial element to close the gender pay and pension gaps.

Reports and studies focusing on gender and the gender gaps have increased, but show there is a long way to go. The work of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) over the last mandate to integrate intersecting grounds of discrimination in their gender equality index is appreciated. There are many studies on the effects of COVID-19 which have also put gender at the centre, with the topic of care coming to the fore of the social agenda. A [survey](#) by EIGE carried out in 2022 offers more insights on the impact of care responsibilities on gender gaps. It shows that different perceptions of gender roles for (unpaid) care work and actual differences in the division of tasks are still visible.

Reinforced social recognition of family carers, but still a long way to go. The [European Care Strategy](#) adopted end 2022 is a step in the right direction even though there is still more to be done to achieve a good level of recognition of the needs and rights of family carers in Europe. The Care Strategy aims to boost the workforce in care services as a matter of priority, but also refers to a wide range of measures to be adopted to support “informal” carers (measures such as access to training, mental health supports, short breaks and financial support). The Council Recommendation on Long-Term Care (which is embedded in the Care Strategy) highlights that relying heavily on informal care will not be sustainable, stating also that formal care needs and pressure on public budgets are expected to increase.

The EU adopts an intergenerational approach in developing the rights of family carers. The European Care Strategy focuses on care services from birth to old age, building on the approach of the EU Work-life balance directive which focuses on working parents *and* working carers. The transposition of the EU carers’ leave (5

days/year) needs to lead towards upward reforms - the duration and pay set out by the Directive are low, hence Member States should go beyond these standards and offer adequately paid and longer carers' leave.

Time to integrate a Long-Term Care Platform in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. This is an essential first step to coordinate the urgent measures needed to address underinvestment, lack of person-centredness and staff shortages in long-term care. This platform should involve the national coordinators on Long-Term Care, national and EU-level civil society organisations representing and supporting persons in need of care, their families and social service providers, and social partners. It can assist in coordinating the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Long-Term Care in a transparent manner, linking to the European funding programmes and mainstreaming care in the European Semester and Economic Governance Reform.

Invest in policy research to better understand the impact of care services on communities, workers and the economy. It is crucial to invest Horizon Europe budgets in studying the impacts of care services, their outreach to families who need the support, as a means to develop practical guidelines for the development of human rights-based long-term care service models at local level which support quality employment and fair working conditions.

A caring economy requires civic education that emphasises intergenerational solidarity, social responsibility and community engagement. This means promoting lifelong learning for all age groups, including seniors, fostering intergenerational exchange, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. Furthermore, there is still unequal access to education and support: disparities in access to quality education and support services, including for family carers, remain across Member States and social groups. Continued efforts are needed to ensure equitable access for all.

A new European directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence was adopted in 2024, with [measures](#) to prevent all types of violence against women, including domestic violence and setting new standards for victims' protection, support, and access to justice, for example, by obliging Member States to establish helplines and rape crisis centres to support victims.

Independent living for all, family carers and persons with disabilities:
Focus on implementation of the S.H.I.F.T. guide for the meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities and their families.

EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides much scope for progress, but still lacks enough binding measures. However, Member States who held the EU presidencies over the last five years showed commitment to the implementation of the Strategy, thanks notably to the creation of the [European Commission Disability Platform](#) that involves a variety of stakeholders in the monitoring, including various civil society organisations, European Commission DGs and Member State representatives.

Efforts to promote independent living based on good practices aligned with human rights, but more ambitious rethink of disability policies is needed. The European Commission Disability Platform has been developing guidelines on independent living, in consultation with stakeholders like COFACE Disability, but the guidelines have not yet been adopted. Using the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as the guiding vision, the COFACE Disability S.H.I.F.T. guide for meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities and their families highlights 5 objectives, 15 tools, and 45 actions. Deinstitutionalisation is not only about closing down large-scale residential institutions but refers to the whole process of putting inclusion and respect of human rights at the centre of all policy actions towards persons with disabilities, from birth to old age. The guide is available [here](#) in 5 languages, with [45 practices](#) to illustrate the actions in the guide – these are from all over Europe and beyond, and serve as great starting point for the use of ESF+ funding.

EU funding, law and policy have not been used enough to facilitate the transition from institutional settings towards community-based care, in line with the [deinstitutionalisation conditionalities](#) attached to use of EU funding. Institutions are still being renovated and built using EU funds, and community-based services are not developing fast enough. Regarding the rights of families with disabilities, attention should be placed on children with disabilities, parents with disabilities, and family carers, aiming to support transitions to independent living. The strengthening of national personal assistance schemes should be accompanied by ESF+ support to build capacity of the workforce to transition to new care service models which do not lead to segregation from society, but which are community-based.

Greater attention has been placed on families with disabilities, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and the huge burden for family carers following the closure of many care services across Europe. Children with disabilities are one of the target groups of the [European Child Guarantee](#) launched in 2021, however they are not always targeted clearly in the [National Action Plans](#). Parents with disabilities are also gaining visibility under the Child Guarantee and were mentioned in the 2023 European Parliament [report](#) on *reducing inequalities and promoting*

social inclusion in times of crisis for children and their families, indicating a shift toward better understanding of disability rights in the political sphere. There is still a failure to mainstream disability in key services for families, even when children with disabilities are a key target group of the European Child Guarantee. Additionally, the lack of uniform definitions in the EU also entails difficulties in collecting data on children with disabilities and some Child Guarantee National Action Plans have admitted this explicitly. It is expected that the EU and its Member States act swiftly to address these data gaps.

There are too many children with disabilities still excluded from participating in mainstream education and EU initiatives are having little to no impact on the cultural, political and practical transformation of the education systems which are needed to accommodate the different requirements and identities of all students including of those with disabilities. This is the case from the earliest age with a need for more inclusive early childhood education and care. This includes boosting childcare and teacher workforces and education systems, for instance through the Technical Support Instrument of the European Commission and making clear Country Specific Recommendations on inclusive education in the framework of the European Semester.

Efforts to boost accessible communications have been made, at least in European initiatives in the disability field. There have been efforts to communicate more in Easy-To-Read language to better reach out to persons with intellectual disabilities, at least in the disability field, which is appreciated and can boost participation, even though it is too early to see the effects.

A Directive establishing a European Disability Card and European Parking Card has been adopted for cross-border recognition of disability status in a range of services and preferential access to parking rights and facilities in all Member States. Moreover, its scope has been extended to third country nationals residing in the European Union. The transposition of these laws into practice across countries will take up to four years, and will be important to follow and monitor closely by the European Commission and civil society organisations.

A Disability Employment Package was adopted in 2022 but fails to include gender and work-life balance dimensions. This [package of measures](#) is a good effort to support more inclusive labour markets for persons with disabilities, with initiatives to boost accessibility of employment services and combating stereotypes. It is worrying that the gender perspective and the intersectionality of gender, disability and care has not been included. This would have allowed for more targeted measures to support working parents and carers with disabilities and their full access to family leaves without discrimination.

Inclusive education and societies: Boosting inclusive education from early childhood to ensure all children have a decent start in life, as a basis to build fully inclusive societies respectful of families in all their diversity.

Inclusive education is a tool to enable communities, structures and systems to combat discrimination and harmful stereotypes, to recognise diversity, to promote participation, and to overcome barriers to learning for all. Europe is taking different initiatives, but more could be done to drive real cultural, political and practical transformation of European education systems to accommodate the different requirements and identities of all students. It is time to see real commitment and political will to undertake an in-depth transformation of education systems in legislation, policy, financing, administration, design delivery and monitoring of education. Unfortunately, progress is far too slow and so many students are still excluded or suffer different forms of discrimination. The Erasmus+ programme and the EASNIE agency could play a stronger role in this area.

Tackling and preventing school bullying as a driver of inclusive education. Wherever possible, the local community should be involved in initiatives to promote inclusive societies. In the school environment this means ensuring that families have access to accurate information and support if needed, establishing and maintaining communication channels. As regards prejudice and discrimination, instances of bullying against children from diverse families remain. The lack of representation of diverse family forms in curricula and in education materials is misleading of the reality of families today. Building on the results of the 2023 European Year of Skills, the EU should implement comprehensive anti-discrimination measures and sensitivity training for educators, including intersectional approaches in teacher training, to help build communities where all children are treated equally regardless of their family setting, ethnicity, disability, gender, and sexual orientation.

EU legislation formally recognises family diversity. The 2019 [EU Work-life Balance Directive](#) includes reference to the term “equivalent second parent” in paternity leave and granting paternity leave irrespective of the worker's marital or family status. It recommends that Member States extend the directive's measures to adapt to the special needs of different kinds of families such as single parents, adoptive parents, parents with a disability, parents of children with a disability or a long-term illness, or parents in particular circumstances, such as those related to multiple births and premature births. Take-up of family leaves by these different types of families should be studied more in-depth. Some Member States have adopted legislation recognising same-sex marriage and adoption rights, which impacts positively the accessibility of social protection for diverse families. The Commission also proposed an ambitious [Regulation](#) on parenthood recognition across borders which aims to reduce the legal costs and burden for families moving across EU borders, with the best interest of children as a starting point. This regulation is under discussion, proposing to set up a European Parenthood Certificate ensuring that all families without discrimination can move freely across the EU. The full impacts of this regulation need to be carefully assessed.

EU household surveys must further uncover the realities of care relations between households. Most households live with family members, but there are also family relations happening beyond the household. Research of the [rEUsilience](#) Horizon Europe project shows that most EU surveys are blind to these realities and do not see that support dimension of family lives. With such data gaps, social policy can potentially have the reverse effect and perpetuate inequalities and discrimination. In a context of the ageing population in Europe and the diversity of families, it is essential to capture care obligations outside the household such as caring for older family members, co-parenting and more.

Implementation of the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum must not negatively impact children and their families. The new [Pact](#) introduces mandatory pre-entry screening at the EU's external borders, and individuals who do not apply for international protection or do not fulfil entry conditions will be subjected to forced return. Moreover, the Pact is largely focused on detentions and increasing cooperation with third countries. There is no general exemption on the detention of children. Those who apply for international protection will be subjected to another screening to assess whether their application is admissible. Applicants from so-called third-safe countries or countries with an acceptance rate of asylum applications of less than 20% will not be allowed to submit their applications. They will be returned to their country of origin or another one. For others, accelerated procedures will be applied in most cases, which will potentially limit people's access to legal assistance and fair hearings and will limit their chances of getting refugee status or subsidiary protection. These new measures will also be applied to families with children but not to unaccompanied minors. Civil society organisations have expressed concerns regarding the Pact due to allowing detention of children, focusing on returns, applying a narrow definition of family and not considering health-related issues including mental health.

Strengthening equality bodies to enforce anti-discrimination measures in the EU. The EU proposed a [Directive](#) aimed at strengthening the role and independence of equality bodies to fight discrimination on grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation in various fields. The new standards will address independence and resources of equality bodies, and ensure they have the necessary powers to deal with cases of discrimination, assist victims effectively and prevent discrimination with raising awareness initiatives. When formally adopted, this should be a useful legal framework to monitor the inclusiveness of education, societies and labour markets.

Digital citizenship and harnessing the potential of technology: Ensure policies empower children and families for reaping the benefits of digitalisation, while critically harnessing the potential of technology for learning, entertainment, socialising, working, and democratic participation.

The Better Internet for Kids+ (BIK+) Strategy adopted in 2022 is the digital arm of the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child, providing sound policy direction and awareness raising opportunities. The [Strategy](#) ensures that children are protected, respected and empowered online in line with European [Digital Principles](#) and through a mix of actions. Additionally, the Commission developed a [compendium](#) of relevant legislation on digital technologies. The BIK+ strategy provides spaces for family organisations like COFACE to interact and exchange information about digital parenting supports to help ensure online safety. Protecting children and vulnerable groups from cyberbullying remains a critical challenge, and families need continued support to help their children navigate the risks and opportunities offered by digital technologies.

Research on the impact of constantly evolving digital transformations on children and families is needed to ensure adequate policies and legislation can keep up with digital innovations. The [DigiGen](#) Horizon2020 consortium helped to understand how children and youth interact with digital technologies, looking at different areas of children's lives (family, school, leisure, civic participation). It highlighted measures to close the digital divide namely through equal access to digital infrastructure and access to digital skills. Horizon Europe should continue funding research on the digital transition and its impact on families and children.

Digital education action plan adopted in 2021 highlights role of parents in enabling digital learning of children. While this important role of parents as first learners is recognised in the [Plan](#), families also need support to acquire skills themselves to navigate the digital world safely and critically. Such skills can be acquired through work trainings or through NGO-based programmes on digital parenting, empowering parents to understand online risks and guide children in their digital interactions. Online safety education should also be strengthened in schools. This means curriculum integration of digital citizenship education and digital literacy, including on topics like cyberbullying prevention, online privacy, and responsible online behavior, is essential.

Digital deprivation and unequal access to digital technologies persists. [Research](#) has documented that even if digital technologies are transforming the lives of most children and young people, some are at a high risk of being left behind. 5.4 percent of children in Europe are digitally deprived. Disparities in access to technology and digital skills persist across Member States and socioeconomic groups. Continued efforts are needed to bridge these gaps and ensure equitable access to education and digital resources for all, providing more accessible and inclusive upskilling opportunities for all skill levels and backgrounds. This involves also embracing alternative learning pathways, recognising and valuing non-traditional learning channels. Furthermore, it is important to expand digital indicators in key EU statistical databases such as the EU-SILC and in national authorities' UN SDG monitoring to be able to map and develop targeted interventions to reduce digital divides.

Digital Services Act adopted in 2022 ensures that digital services do more to protect users' rights, keep families safe and stop the spread of illegal or inappropriate content. Some parts of this [legislation](#) (which has officially entered into force) directly target children. It covers different types and sizes of online services, used by anyone in the European Union, wherever the service is based. It sets stricter rules for the biggest services, and requires online platforms to consider the impact of their services on important issues such as fair elections, public safety, the mental and physical well-being of users, gender-based violence and child rights. It states that online platforms which can be used by minors need to make sure their services offer a high level of privacy, safety and security to young users (e.g. special privacy and security settings by default, limiting profiling and advertising). It also refers to parental control and the need for online services to offer settings that help parents and carers to monitor or limit children's access to the internet, to protect them from online risks and inappropriate content.

The fight against child sexual abuse online sees both progress and setbacks. The [EU Strategy](#) for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (2020-2025) offers a framework to respond to the increasing threats of child sexual abuse, both offline and online. There has been an increase in the number of child sexual abuse cases in EU Member States, but also a dramatic increase in reports of child sexual abuse *online*. In order to address this, the Commission proposed new [legislation](#) in 2022, with new rules for online platforms; however, so far no agreement has been found at EU level. The current voluntary framework for the detection of CSA material is valid until April 2026 under the revised Temporary Derogation ePrivacy Directive, but COFACE expects a long-term legal framework on risk assessment and detection of CSA material (as proposed in the new legislation) to be adopted swiftly. Policy makers and technology companies must play their part to keep children safe online and not leave the burden on children and their families. The [recast of the CSA Directive](#) proposed in 2024 is welcome, as it will update the minimum rules on the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in the light of the increased use of evolving technologies related to this offence. It also puts forward more specific requirements for prevention and assistance to victims. Support should also be provided to family members of children who are victims of child sexual abuse, where they are not suspected of the offence in question.

Adoption of Artificial Intelligence legislation in 2023 will be the first ever legal framework on AI in the world and would apply from 2026. This [law](#) contains rules on high-impact general-purpose AI models that can cause systemic risk in the future, as well as on high-risk AI systems; a revised system of governance with some enforcement powers at EU level; better protection of rights through the obligation for deployers of high-risk AI systems to conduct a fundamental rights impact assessment prior to putting an AI system into use. While the EU AI law promised to prioritise human rights, there are too many exemptions that could lead to serious risks, often for the most vulnerable.

Public-private partnerships through collaboration between digital industries and civil society organisations to promote child rights have increased, helping to raise awareness of the need for child rights by design in digital products and platforms. Additionally, digital industries could further partner with civil society organisations to create robust and sustainable lifelong learning ecosystems for digital skills development.

Child rights and family well-being: Implement the 2030 COFACE Child Compass vision to build a healthy environment, society and economy fit for children and their families.

Various EU policy frameworks were adopted in favour of child rights and well-being. Namely the [EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#) (2020), the [European Child Guarantee](#) and the [EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (2021). They reflect to a great extent the dimensions of the 2030 COFACE Child Compass vision to build a healthy environment, society and economy fit for children and their families. These three frameworks must be continued and strengthened under the next legislature.

After the slow adoption of the Child Guarantee National Action Plans (NAP), many of them contain a lack of future-oriented elements. Despite the focus put on the importance of consulting stakeholders and their representative organisations, the whole drafting procedure of some NAPs lacked transparency and consultation. Not all NAPs include new initiatives to tackle child poverty and social exclusion, some merely list already existing measures. To tackle child and family poverty it will not be sufficient to limit measures to those that already exist. In some cases, planned measures still need to start being implemented – COFACE expects greater ambition and tangible poverty reduction for children and their families, using family policy and local family centres as levers for Child Guarantee implementation. There was also failure to present clear budgets, timelines and monitoring mechanisms in the NAPs. The European [monitoring framework](#) on the Child Guarantee adopted in 2024 must be activated urgently.

Initiatives have been taken to promote quality family supports and early childhood intervention, but the European Union must be more ambitious. In recent years, the Council has taken a step forward in framing ECEC as a sector that not only helps with the reconciliation between home and work for the female workforce, but also has the potential to effectively reduce inequalities and create a level playing field for children. The 2019 [Council Recommendation](#) on High-Quality ECEC and the 2022 [Council Recommendation](#) on the ECEC 2030 targets highlight this development. However, this egalitarian promise can only be fulfilled with strong investments aimed towards progress, not just in terms of quantity, but also in terms of the services' quality (e.g. ensuring low child-staff ratios). Crucial importance should be placed on developing ECEC services that not only facilitate vital work-life balance arrangements, but also serve to bolster social cohesion and promote inclusivity. It is crucial to involve families in all facets of their children's education and care, as the family remains the primary and indispensable setting for children's learning and development. Parents and guardians bear the responsibility for their child's overall well-being, health, and growth. ECEC services, therefore, offer an ideal platform to establish an integrated approach across these dimensions, given their highly personal interaction with parents. Furthermore, for families facing difficulties, tailored counseling services can be provided, including through home visits. To ensure meaningful participation, it is imperative that ECEC services are collaboratively designed with families, grounded in trust and mutual respect.

Efforts were made to boost child participation and child-friendly communication. The Commission created child-friendly communication guidelines: [Child participation in political and democratic life - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#) and set up the EU Children's Participation Platform which held its first General Assembly in 2023, and which is a crucial mechanism for bringing children's voices in to the implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

Initiatives to support children's health must be more binding and support all children. While the Child Guarantee does focus on access to health services for children in vulnerable situations, it is not applicable to all children. The Commission adopted a [Communication](#) on a comprehensive approach to mental health with a focus on children and young people. This includes plans to adopt a prevention toolkit in 2024, which will also focus on bullying prevention in schools, very much in line with the first course of the [L.I.N.K. programme](#) on education for social rights co-created by COFACE and KMOP in 2022.

Shifting towards learner-centered approaches that respect children's individuality, interests, and learning styles. This fosters creativity, critical thinking, and self-confidence. The EU has developed resources like the European [Toolkit](#) for Supporting Student Wellbeing which offers guidance for educators. Additionally, integrating [Social and Emotional learning](#) into school programmes can equip children with essential skills like self-awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution, contributing to healthier relationships, emotional resilience, and positive mental well-being.

2023 European Year of Skills missed opportunity to focus on "skills for life". The [European Year](#) was useful in many respects, but mostly focused on labour market needs. It could have been used to promote essential skills for resilience and combating discrimination. The European Semester's focus on skills development could have been leveraged to invest in upskilling and reskilling opportunities for individuals from diverse families, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse, family-supportive workforce, with positive impacts for children.

Financial inclusion and an economy that serves society and the planet: Ensure that the economic system achieves a balance of growth, well-being, equity and environmental sustainability.

Preventing over-indebtedness through clear rules on consumer credit in order to support financial inclusion and equal access to financial services for all. Risky new loans, such as payday loans and buy-now-pay-later schemes (BNPLs), will be regulated under the [updated rules](#). The rules clarify the data that creditors are not allowed to use when assessing a person's creditworthiness, such as information on their ethnic origin, political beliefs, health data or social media data. The revised directive improves access to independent debt advisory services for struggling debtors and obliges creditors to provide forbearance measures where needed. However, there are no minimum or standardised interest rates caps, only a recommendation and the option for Member States to introduce interest rates caps; as well as no harmonised rules for credit worthiness checks, including the methodology and data to be used.

A lack of harmonised insolvency rules at EU level not only prevents the successful completion of the capital markets unions, but also prevents over-indebted families from enjoying minimum standards across the EU for personal insolvency. Over-indebted families could benefit from such minimum standardised rules by starting with a clean slate and become productive members of society.

The European Green Deal adopted in 2019 aims to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050 and 'reconcile the economy with the planet'. This [framework](#) provides important political guidelines, aiming to make the EU's economy sustainable, turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities and ensuring a fair and inclusive energy transition. The declaration of the Green Deal highlights the role of circular economy and the importance of a *just* green transition.

EU funds should match ambitions of the European Green Deal. The [Just Transition Fund](#) adopted in 2021 primarily focuses on supporting communities and workers affected by the shift to a low-carbon economy. It aims to ensure that this transition is fair and inclusive, providing resources for retraining, reskilling, job creation, and community development to mitigate the impacts of economic restructuring. The [Social Climate Fund](#) will run from 2026 to 2032 and is broader in scope aiming to address various social and environmental challenges related to climate change. It will provide a maximum of 65 billion euros of funding to Member States to finance measures and investments to support vulnerable groups impacted by higher carbon pricing. These funding mechanisms must match the ambitions of the European Green Deal, to ensure that families in vulnerable situations are supported financially to cope with energy prices.

Integration of Sustainable Development Goals in EU policy-making, by providing analyses of how EU policies are linked to the SDGs (e.g. through regular [Eurostat reporting](#)) and through concrete measures such as the Commission's [Clean Energy for all Europeans package](#) adopted in 2019 (which is aligned with SDG 7 to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all). The package aims to help decarbonise the EU's energy system in line with the European Green Deal objectives. Among other initiatives, a number of energy directives were revised ([Energy Performance of Buildings Directive](#), [Renewable Energy Directive](#), [Energy Efficiency Directive](#)); and Member States are required to establish integrated [10-year national energy and climate plans](#) (NECPs) for 2021-2030 focusing on 5 dimensions of the energy union towards 2050: decarbonisation; energy efficiency; energy security; internal energy market; research, innovation and competitiveness.

Progress in moving past “growth” towards more sustainable economic models also integrating the Sustainable Development Goals in EU policy-making, but little debate on alternative economic models. The EU has made progress in moving past “growth” towards discussing more sustainable economic models. It is worth mentioning the 2022 [Communication](#) 'Towards a green, digital and resilient economy: our European Growth Model' where the European Commission points out consensus-based EU priorities for the European economic growth model, such as the green and digital transitions, and improving economic and social resilience.

Measures which impose company reporting about the impact of their activities on people and the environment. Under the [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive](#) (still to be fully transposed into national legislation) companies must disclose information on what they see as the risks and opportunities arising from social and environmental issues, and on the impact of their activities on people and the environment.

Initiatives taken to encourage the education and training sector to take action to strengthen the sustainability competences of all learners. This includes empowering children on sustainability, promoting the [integration of sustainability principles](#) and environmental awareness into education, empowering children to become responsible citizens and contribute to a greener future. The [European Year of Youth 2022](#) highlighted youth engagement in social and environmental responsibility, with education that fosters empathy, social awareness, and environmental consciousness encouraging individuals to engage in volunteer work.

Social inclusion and poverty prevention: Boosting early intervention family supports ensuring they reach families in vulnerable situations, harnessing the opportunities of demographic change and migration.

A strong action plan for social rights to prevent poverty and social exclusion. The European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed in 2017 sets out 20 key principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and social protection systems. The European Commission adopted a European Pillar of Social Rights [Action Plan](#) in 2021 which aims to turn the Principles into concrete actions to benefit families. As well as a wide range of measures, it proposes headline targets for the EU to reach by 2030, namely a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (including at least 5 million children).

Streamlining of social rights in the European Social Fund Plus. The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan led to ringfencing of 25% of ESF+ funds for social inclusion through a [regulation](#) adopted in 2021. The previous incarnation of the fund (ESF) aimed to act against poverty and social exclusion but lacked the direct rights-based framework to do so. However, the take-up of such funds allocated to social inclusion remains a challenge for civil society since the calls for funding at national level are not always organised in a transparent way, the tight deadlines for submitting projects do not provide enough time for applicants, and in some countries the bulk of the funds go to public authorities leaving very little space for non-profit service providers and civil society to benefit. There needs to be greater harmonisation of rules to be used by ESF+ authorities across countries to ensure the same quality of management and access across countries.

Monitoring of ESF+ take-up for the European Child Guarantee. There are different projects being used to boost implementation of the Child Guarantee. See more [here](#). The biennial reports to the European Commission on the implementation of the Child Guarantee NAPs should include both substantive information on the national measures taken, as well as financial updates, in particular on the use of EU funds for the Child Guarantee. In general, funding is needed to strengthen the development of support services for families in the early years (e.g. early childhood intervention and detection of disabilities) and also during adolescence, as well as transitions to adulthood – for instance via the funding of local family/community centres. Moreover, EU funding programmes like Erasmus+ can contribute directly to reducing financial barriers for disadvantaged students by providing scholarships, grants and financial aid to promote equal education opportunities for all.

As a response to COVID-19, this Commission introduced the Recovery and Resilience Funding Facility (RRF). The main focuses of the [RRF](#) stem from this von der Leyen's Commission's priority to promote a green and digital twin transition, but there are also specific actions towards economic and social resilience and children and youth. Member States have been generally encouraged to address gaps in social policy development through the Country-Specific Recommendations of the European Semester. While there has been a strengthening of the social

dimension of the European Semester, with an increased focus on delivering an economy that works for people and planet rather than solely economic targets, both RRF and the European Semester must continue working hand in hand to steer further investment into social policies.

Stronger coordination of care and education providers for effective family poverty prevention. Building on the [Council Recommendation](#) on Minimum Income adopted in 2023 which supports access to financial resources, the EU should adopt a Council Recommendation on coordination of local support networks for families in vulnerable situations. This includes promoting stronger cooperation and coordination between care and education providers for families with young children. By creating local support networks that are multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary, and capable of offering families integrated and comprehensive care, similar to the model of comprehensive care between health care and social care, this can serve to ensure a holistic approach for families in need through a quality service delivery system.

Significant efforts to fight against energy poverty but a more families-sensitive approach is needed. In 2020, to support EU countries' efforts to tackle energy poverty, the Commission published a [Recommendation](#) on energy poverty ([updated in 2023](#)), issued as part of the Renovation Wave strategy. They also adopted the [Fit for 55 package](#) which includes specific measures to identify key drivers of energy-poverty risks for consumers, such as too high energy prices, low household income and poor energy-efficient buildings. However, moving forward, the Commission must take a families-sensitive approach in coordinating policies to address energy poverty, ensuring that the selection criteria for energy-related supports and benefits include resources for the whole family. This means considering e.g. the number of people or children to support in the household, or the presence of disability.

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