

CYPRUS PRESIDENCY
OF THE COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION



Background Paper

High-level Conference

“No Child is Left Behind: Promoting Child Well-Being
and Combating Child Poverty”

LEFKOSIA (NICOSIA), CYPRUS
20-21 May 2026



Co-funded by
the European Union



BACKGROUND PAPER

Child well-being and investing in children are key European social priorities. These are highlighted by the successful adoption during the Cyprus Presidency of the **Council Conclusions on «Investing in children: Strengthening Child Well-Being, Social Inclusion and Combating Child Poverty in the European Union»** at the EPSCO Council on 9 March 2026. **The recent adoption by the Commission of the first-ever Anti-Poverty Strategy, as well as the initiative on strengthening the European Child Guarantee, underscore the importance of investing in children’s future.** Building on this achievement, the Cyprus Presidency continues to place child well-being at the center of its political agenda, recognizing that investing in children, in particular the disadvantaged children, is both a social imperative and a strategic driver of Europe’s future competitiveness, cohesion and resilience.

In this context, the High-level Conference aims to stir a forward-looking discussion, bringing together high-level representatives of Member States, academia, leading experts and representatives from civil society organizations, alongside the European Commission, the European Parliament, practitioners and children. The Conference seeks to foster a shared understanding of current challenges and identify concrete, actionable solutions to strengthen child well-being and combat child poverty across the European Union. It also contributes to paving the way for the implementation of the first ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the strengthening of the European Child Guarantee, supporting preventive, inclusive and integrated approaches.

Child poverty and social exclusion remain among the most pressing challenges in the European Union. Despite overall economic progress, millions of children continue to face barriers in access to key services, limiting their opportunities and leading to persistent disadvantage. Under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the European Union has set the ambitious target to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 5 million by 2030, compared to 2019 levels. However, more than 19 million children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and this number is not decreasing. Achieving this objective requires decisive investments in preventive, integrated and child-centered policies, supported by effective governance. Furthermore, more sustained and coordinated actions will be needed to meet the

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.”



Commission's ambition to help eradicate poverty by 2050, as highlighted in the 2025 State of the Union address of President von der Leyen.

The European Child Guarantee plays a central role in this effort by promoting effective access for children in vulnerable situations to key services, such as early childhood education and care, education, school meals, extracurricular activities, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing **together with other measures addressing child poverty such as support to parents' access to quality jobs and to social safety nets.** At the same time, broader policy developments, including the first ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and ongoing discussions on demographic change and intergenerational fairness, underline the importance of addressing the structural and multidimensional nature of child poverty.

Significant challenges remain. Policy responses are still fragmented, with insufficient coordination across sectors and levels of governance. Financing gaps persist, particularly as regards prevention and early intervention. Children in the most vulnerable situations often remain unreached, due to barriers in access limited awareness and administrative complexity. Early-life inequalities continue to have long-lasting effects, contributing to persistent social exclusion. In addition, limitations in monitoring and data availability can hinder the ability to assess policy effectiveness and ensure measurable outcomes.

Addressing these challenges requires a more coherent and strategic policy approach. Strengthened governance and coordination are essential to ensure alignment across policy areas and effective implementation at all levels. Sustainable investment in children, with a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention, must be prioritized. Policies addressing child poverty and disadvantage should combine universal and targeted measures to ensure both inclusiveness and effectiveness. Integrated service delivery, including community-based and outreach approaches, is key to reaching those most in need. Finally, improved monitoring and evidence-based policymaking are necessary to ensure that policies deliver tangible and lasting improvements in children's well-being.

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.”



Breaking the cycle of poverty requires a life-course and intergenerational approach. Investing in children is not only a social imperative but also a strategic investment in Europe's future, contributing to social cohesion, economic resilience and long-term competitiveness.

First Panel Discussion, Session 1: Eradicating Child Poverty and Social Exclusion: Tackling Structural Drivers of Child Poverty through Family Support Systems (Policy tools / social protection focus)

This panel discussion will examine how structural drivers of child poverty can be effectively addressed through integrated policy responses. Discussions will focus on the role of income support, social protection systems, and family benefits in reducing poverty risks, alongside measures to support parents' labour market participation. Particular attention will be given to adequacy, coverage, and accessibility of benefits, as well as the need for coordinated approaches that combine financial support with enabling services.

Questions for discussion will include among others:

- How can policies shift from reactive support to preventive action, ensuring that families are protected from falling into poverty in the first place?
- What design features of child and family benefits (adequacy, targeting, take-up) are most effective in reducing child poverty?
- How can income support be better combined with access to employment and enabling services for parents?

Second Panel Discussion, Session 2: Investing in the Early Years: Ensuring Inclusive Child Services for Children in Need (Prevention / investment focus)

This panel discussion will explore how investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) can contribute to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. It will highlight reforms aimed at the participation gap of vulnerable children, improving access, affordability, and quality of

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.”



ECEC services, for children in need. The discussion will also consider workforce challenges, governance, and the long-term social and economic returns of early years investment.

Questions for discussion will include among others:

- What models of integrated early childhood services (care, education, health, nutrition, family support) show the strongest results?
- What reforms are needed to ensure that early-years investments, including cash benefits and services effectively support families in vulnerable situations and promote equal opportunities for all children?

Third Panel Discussion, Session 3: Safeguarding the Best Interest of Every Child: How Member States can Operationalize the Strengthened European Child Guarantee (Political / ministerial)

This high-level panel discussion will bring together high-level representatives from Member States to reaffirm political commitment to strengthening the European Child Guarantee. It will focus on ongoing and planned national reforms, implementation challenges, and opportunities to enhance coordination and delivery. High-Level representatives will be invited to share concrete policies and priorities to reinforce access to key services for children in need, while strengthening governance, monitoring, outreach to vulnerable groups and investment frameworks.

Questions for discussion will include among others:

- How can Member States translate political commitments to fight child poverty into effective implementation of the European Child Guarantee?
- What governance mechanisms are needed to ensure coordination across Ministries and levels of government?
- How can EU funding and national budgets be mobilised to ensure sustainable investments in children in need?
- How can children's voices and participation be systematically integrated into policy design and delivery?

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.”