

# Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe

## Growing up with good opportunities – How can state support reach all children and families?

### Editorial

By Sarah Molter and Christina Schliffka

Dear readers,

in all European countries, there are systems of state benefits for children and their families. However, despite sometimes far-reaching efforts on part of the state, children are affected by poverty more often than the general population, even – with a few exceptions - in the economically strong European states. Child poverty touches upon many areas of life and can affect the development of children in numerous ways. The effects often translate into less favourable opportunities, far beyond childhood and adolescence.

#### *Measures to empower children and families*

Therefore, reforms of child and family benefits rank high on the political agenda of many European countries. Family policy measures can take many forms and sometimes overlap with other policy areas, such as labour market policy.

For one thing, children and families receive cash benefits<sup>2</sup> – for example the child benefit – which differ in form and extent between the EU member states. In addition to monetary support, a well-developed childcare infrastructure is important and in the interest of the European states. On the one hand, it ensures educational and participatory opportunities for children and on the other hand, it is an essential prerequisite for parents to be able to pursue gainful employment. Counselling and support services for families regarding all issues related to upbringing and family are also considered important. Finally, many states are trying to support the participation of all children in activities in the areas of play, leisure, sport and culture. Social security and tax issues can also play a role if, for example, they reduce the financial burden on families.



Government support instruments designed to prevent poverty among families and their children raise several issues. First, the basic structure of family-related benefits is crucial: Is the benefit oriented towards the actual needs of the children and their parents? Are all target groups that need support included in the measures? Moreover, it has become apparent that not everyone who is formally entitled to

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### Dimensions of child poverty

These four dimensions in particular shape the life situation of children!<sup>1</sup>

- **Material aspects**, such as clothing, nutrition and housing
- **Social aspects**, in particular social contacts
- **Health aspects**, both physical and mental
- **Cultural aspects** like education and language

1 Holz, Gerda / Laubstein, Claudia / Sthamer, Evelyn (2012): *Lebenslagen und Zukunftschancen von (armen) Kindern und Jugendlichen in Deutschland. 15 Jahre AWO-ISS-Studie. Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik e. V.; see here.*  
2 See also: Molter, Sarah (2019): *Finanzielle Absicherung von Kindern. Ein Blick in andere europäische Staaten. Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik e. V.; see here.*

make use of the services offered does indeed do so. This is often referred to as “hidden poverty”.

### *National approaches and European initiatives*

Many European countries have set the goal of optimising their services for children and families. In Germany, for example, the “*Starke-Familien-Gesetz*” (“Strong Families Act”) entered into force on 1 July 2019. It aims to provide more targeted support for families with small incomes and their children.



Measures to combat child poverty are also being discussed at the European level. A comprehensive feasibility study for a “Child Guarantee”, which was requested by the European Parliament, has recently been commissioned. The Observatory presents the child guarantee and other current initiatives at EU level in the final article of this newsletter.

The well-being of children in Europe was also the focus of the European Expert Meeting “Tackling Child Poverty and Social Exclusion – Approaches and Experiences of State Support for Children in Europe” organised by the Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe and the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) in May 2019 in Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Representatives from six European countries presented and discussed national efforts and approaches for the conception and simplification of state benefits for families and children.

The current newsletter takes up two points raised during this European Expert Meeting: Easily accessible counselling and support services bundled in one place, and the linking of different state services.

A first contribution looks at family centres. These institutions offer easily accessible counselling and support for children and families. Lieve Krobea, employee at the Flemish agency Kind en Gezin, and Irma Leisle, head of a district and family centre in Berlin, report on the work of the family centres in Flanders and Berlin. The following contribution by Professor Eva Österbacka from Finland then takes a closer look at the structural level. Here, too, the aim is to reach as many families and children as possible by interlinking different state benefits and services.

The team of the Observatory wishes you an exciting read.

## Interview on family centres in Germany and Flanders

**With Irma Leisle, head of the district and family centre of the Paul Gerhardt Stift Soziales gGmbH in Berlin, and Lieve Krobea, advisor at the Flemish agency Kind en Gezin.**

*Family centres combine a variety of services and counselling for children and families in one place. The aim of the various services is to provide families with easily accessible support in everyday life, combined with the provision of help from one single source. There are family centres in several European countries now, but their organisational form, target groups and concepts differ. In the Belgian region of Flanders, almost all of the 300 municipalities have a “Huis van het Kind”. The legal basis for this is the “Decree on the Organisation of Preventive Family Support” by the Flemish government from 2013. In Germany, most federal states have launched special support programmes for family centres. The programme for the family centres supported by the Berlin Senate Administration was launched in 2012.*

### Hidden Poverty

When persons do not claim a benefit to which they are entitled, their poverty often goes unnoticed. Figures on hidden poverty are thus based on estimates.

Reasons for not claiming benefits could be:

- **Insecurity** when dealing with the relevant authorities
- **Lack of knowledge** about existing benefits
- **Complicated application processes** and bureaucratic hurdles
- **Low benefits**

### “Strong Families Act”

The “Strong Families Act” includes reforms to the “Education and Participation Package” (“*Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket*”). Low-income families can apply for educational and recreational benefits for their children. One objective of the reform is less bureaucracy for parents, service providers and administration.

Moreover, the school start allowance rises and parents’ own contributions for lunch in the day care centre and at school are dropped.

In addition to this, the so-called “child benefit supplement” (*Kinderzuschlag*) as an additional financial benefit for families at risk of poverty is to be made less bureaucratic. The range of eligible beneficiaries also increases, and the maximum amount rises.<sup>3</sup>

3 BMFSFJ – Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (2019): *Starke-Familien-Gesetz*; see [here](#).

4 The documentation of the European Expert Meeting will be available soon.

In this interview, **Irma Leisle** from Berlin and **Lieve Krobea** from Flanders report about the work at these family centres.

**Which offers for children and families do you provide at your family centres?**

**Leisle:** We offer a variety of educational, counselling and meeting opportunities in our family centre. In the field of education for parents, babies and toddlers, for example, there is a themed café called “*ElternStärken*” (“EmpowerParents”), which deals with various issues such as communication in the family or nutrition and diets. Numerous parent-child courses, such as the mother-child language-learning group, music for children or toddler groups are offered, as are dance and theatre groups for children between the ages of five and twelve. We also offer targeted counselling, for instance via open consultation hours. We facilitate meetings and thus contact as well as low-threshold exchange with a variety of open activities such as breakfasts for families, the baby meeting club “*Von Anfang an*” (“Right from the start”) and many others. For primary school children, we offer holiday programmes and courses such as Street Dance or an Arabic language course. Individual events such as the Long Night of the Family, Advent celebrations or the Market square for secondary schools are open to all families and all generations; and they are very popular.

**Krobea:** A “*Huis van het Kind*” (hereafter: family centre) is a collaboration among a number of organisations that provides multidisciplinary, integrated and appropriate services in support of (future) families with children and youngsters. In this way, family centres are just as diverse and unique as the families they support.

Generally speaking, a family centre brings together diverse services in the field of preventive family support. These services are based on the principle of progressive universalism. This means offering a basic set of services and facilities to each child and each family. This basic set consists of at least three pillars: Firstly, preventive healthcare including vaccinations, early detection of health risks, and health-promoting actions, secondly, upbringing-related support and thirdly, activities for promoting meetings and social cohesion, for supporting social networks, and for facilitating the creation of a social mix.

In addition to this basic set of offered services and facilities, a family centre must pay extra attention to the needs of specific families, in particular socially vulnerable families. This principle of a policy for anyone, with specific attention to those with more needs, contributes towards the fight against child poverty.

**What do you do to reach as many families as possible with your offers? Do you have strategies to specifically target vulnerable families or families with migrant backgrounds, for instance?**

**Leisle:** We pursue different strategies in the areas of employee structure, service types, cooperation, public relations, and finance in order to reach socially vulnerable families and families with migrant backgrounds.

With our heterogeneous, diverse team of full-time employees, volunteers as well as honorary staff, we offer a visible cultural diversity for the families. This - in combination with open offers without registration formalities - helps to lower possible thresholds and reluctance. Fathers, mothers, and partners can first get to know the team at regular open family café events, experience the atmosphere, and then decide whether and how much they want to take advantage of other offers including, for example, counselling.

Close cooperation with a wide range of institutions in the social sphere also makes access to different interest groups easier. For instance, close cooperation with a project for mothers in the neighbourhood have significantly facilitated and strengthened access for families with a migrant background. Some participants in this project are now also part of the open family breakfasts and meet their clients there. This lowers the inhi-



bitions and thresholds to visit the family centre and if, for example, language mediation is necessary, it can be offered directly. With regard to public relations, direct contact and so-called word-of-mouth propaganda is often the most effective way to reach this target group. It is thus essential to be well connected with many stakeholders in the social sphere. We try to formulate materials such as flyers, programmes, and our website as simple as possible in order to break down possible barriers here as well. To ensure that nobody is excluded for financial reasons, our offers are offered free of charge as far as possible; children's activities are always free of charge.

**Krobea:** The services for families are often too fragmented which complicates the accessibility and visibility of the services. At the same time, families are often supported by different organisations at once. The combination of both makes families lose their way or their motivation to seek help. A family centre offers an opportunity to match the existing services to the actual needs of the families. A local request for help usually reaches an individual organisation but the families are better off with a comprehensive and integrated answer, rather than a carousel of referrals.

This implies that organisations should seek to better know what each of them can offer. It is important to ask the following questions: For whom are the current services accessible? Are there any target groups that are left out? Are there any exclusion mechanisms at work? A family centre, as a network of organisations, offers a platform to ask these questions and to collectively search for answers. In that way, local organisations will not focus on the same thing but will combine their expertise and strengths.

Regarding the strategies for targeting families in vulnerable situations, respect for the diversity in families and the motivation to put the perspective of the family at the centre will get you a long way. For example, a mother who goes to a local family centre said: "They helped my family a lot by taking into account the whole context in which my child had to grow up, without judging."

It is also crucial to make sure that the service does not stigmatize vulnerable families, or that the support is not too problem-oriented when not necessary. When a parent says it is normal to go to a family centre, because everybody goes there, then you know you have nailed it. One of the strategies we see to achieve this goal, is to start as early as possible, from the pregnancy on.

**Ms. Leisle, many benefits for children and families are currently being reformed, such as the child benefit supplement, the benefits for education and participation within the framework of the "Strong Families Act" or the free childcare offers in Berlin since August 2018. There are many offers and benefits, but different authorities are responsible for them. This can often be a challenge for families. How can the family centre support families in such cases? And how are the employees prepared for the various tasks in counselling and supporting families?**

**Leisle:** As a family centre, we see counselling and information for families as a very central task. The counselling topics are quite diverse. We therefore offer various counselling services by employees with different focal points. For instance, a volunteer lawyer currently offers legal advice in the area of social law and family law. Her work can also be utilised by the other counsellors in the family centre; or legal questions coming from clients can be clarified quickly. Another member of staff offers special migration counselling for adult immigrants, while a colleague from the educational counselling takes the role of a parents' coach for questions and topics relating to everyday family life. Employees have the opportunity - and the obligation - to improve their skills and knowledge continuously. For this purpose, we make use of offers in the field of social counselling, among others from our umbrella organisation *Diakonisches Werk Berlin Brandenburg*. Further training, for example to become a parent's guide or a specialist for child protection, as well as the opportunity to study social work part-time, are promoted by the organisation, too.



Families' counselling needs are often very complex and stretch over many areas. The fact that we now have several experts in different areas in our team is very advantageous. In this way, clients can be referred to other colleagues via very short communication channels, or colleagues can exchange ideas and learn from each other. However, the challenges for employees to always be up to date with continuously changing services are significant. The goal of strengthening families in a way that they can cope with the bureaucratic demands independently is difficult to achieve, in particular with such a high rate of changes as well as the language in the individual forms, which is usually quite different from everyday language.

**Ms. Krobea, the family centres claim "it is important that there is one label and one logo for all Huis van het Kind. In this way the services in Flanders will become more visible"<sup>5</sup>. Is there some kind of "branding" you try to achieve with the name "Huis van het Kind"?**

**Krobea:** The main purpose of the logo is to enable organisations to let families know at the local level that their services are interconnected. At the same time and within this framework it is also important that each organisation can keep its own profile or label. We did deliberately choose a playful and colourful logo that is inviting to both parents and children. The name "Huis van het Kind" was a bit contested at first because it can be interpreted in different ways, but it is now a generally accepted concept.

**Ms. Krobea, where do you see the family centres between a consistent structure and a consistent program of services offered (for example shared quality standards over all centres) and the autonomy of each family centre (for example focussing on special circumstances and needs in the area)?**

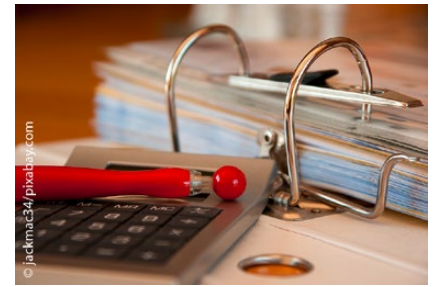
Family centres are objective-oriented: "The domain of the preventive family support should contribute towards the strengthening of the rights and interests of children, and strives to promote the well-being of future parents and families with children and youngsters by supporting them in the field of welfare and health."<sup>5</sup>

We believe these objectives are better realised by bringing actors together. In that way, preventive family support will be maximised as for content and organisation. The key word for me is therefore consideration: Did the family centre have a debate on whether or not to include a type of support? Does it actually cater to a local, specific need or not? I must admit it is still a challenge to monitor this new type of "objective-oriented network" from a governmental viewpoint, since it demands a lot of trust in local networks and the ability of letting some things go. But it is very rewarding in the end if you see a local family centre growing and blossoming.

## Finland – Family policy and the idea of universalism

*The idea of universalism regarding welfare state services is deeply rooted in Finland. The same holds true for the orientation of family policies and the benefits that the Finnish state offers for children and their families. In some cases, families only receive financial benefits if they take further measures, for example in the area of preventive health care. With these structures, the state deepens the contact with the families.*

*Eva Österbacka is professor at the Åbo Akademi in Turku, Finland, as well as researcher for the national insurance agency Kela. She explains which benefits Finland offers for children and their families, how these benefits are linked to each other, and why the take-up rate for some of these offers is at almost 100 per cent. She also highlights the role that the trust of citizens in the state organisations plays in this regard.*



### Universalism

In comparative welfare state research, universalism is seen as the core concept of many welfare states in Northern Europe. In general, everyone is entitled to state benefits due to their rights as citizens. The same services provide comprehensive coverage for those with both high and low incomes. Measures or benefits for particularly vulnerable groups thus used to play only a minor role in the policies of Nordic welfare states.<sup>6</sup> However, one can increasingly observe deviations from this principle over the past decades.<sup>7</sup>

5 Huis van het Kind (2018): Huis van het Kind; see here.

6 Korpi, Walter / Palme, Joakim (1998): The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State Institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries. In: American Sociological Review, Vol. 63 (5), 661–687.

7 Köhler, Peter A. (2009): Der Wohlfahrtsstaat Schweden: Modernisierung – Stabilisierung – Modifizierung. Max-Planck-Institut für Sozialrecht und Sozialpolitik; see here.

By Professor Eva Österbacka, Åbo Akademi, Finland.

Family policies differ between countries and the development is related to their history but also a response to changes over time. For instance, economic circumstances or changes in family constellations can introduce changes. Finland belongs to the Nordic welfare regime and the contemporary family policies developed late, in the 1960s and 1970s, when both the modern welfare state was introduced and the view of the family was updated. The ideal of a modern and equal family became dominant. The family policy supported two-earner families from the start. At the same time, the individual became a more important unit than the family. Every individual should be able to support him- or herself. Children's rights were emphasized and the upbringing of children became a mutual task for the welfare state and the parents.<sup>8</sup>

For a Non-Nordic citizen, this might sound strange. However, the citizens in Nordic countries are known for trusting each other, which in turn increases the trust in the welfare state.<sup>9</sup>

So how is the mutual upbringing of children manifested? There are three main actors providing benefits and services to children besides the family: the public health care system, the social insurance institution of Finland (*Kela*), and public schools. These three actors cooperate and provide universal benefits to children and their families.

- *Municipalities* provide health services to their residents. Among other things, they provide maternity clinics for pregnant mothers, child health clinics, and health care for school-aged children free of charge.
- *Maternity clinics* provide guidance in all matters related to pregnancy, to both mothers and fathers. They monitor the health of the fetus and the mother and provide screening, for instance for fetal chromosome and growth defects during pregnancy. Furthermore, the health clinic confirms the pregnancy to the social insurance institution *Kela*, from where the mother applies for the maternity grant and the maternity allowance.
- *Child health clinics* monitor and support the physical, mental, and social growth and development of children below school age. They also provide vaccinations according to the national vaccination program. The clinics provide at least nine visits when the child is under one year old and at least once a year after the first year. If the nurse or the doctor at the child health clinic notes that the child, or the family, needs extra support, they are obliged to ensure extra support for the family.<sup>10</sup> Approximately only 0.4 percent of children do not use the services at child health clinics.<sup>11</sup>
- Children start preschool the year they turn six years old. After that, the compulsory primary education follows for nine years. The public schools follow a national curriculum and every child gets the same basic education. Besides basic education, *public schools* offer health care. Every school has a nurse and a doctor assigned. They check children's health and development and give first aid in case of an accident. They also provide vaccinations according to the national vaccination program.
- *Kela* administers all public assistance to families. Assistance to families starts from the maternity grant,<sup>12</sup> which is a popular box filled with baby clothes as well as care products. After the introduction of the maternity grant in 1937 to poor families, it became available to all mothers in 1949, which fits well with the universal social policy model Finland has adopted. The maternity grant as well as the maternity and parental leave allowances are based on residence, as well as public health care. It is almost unheard of that parents would not use paid maternal or parental leave.

The division of children's upbringing between the family and the public sector is relatively successful. For instance, the lion part of children and their parents are doing well. Parents usually tell professionals if their children need support. Yet, their own difficulties as a parent or in the relationship with their partner are not as easy to bring up.<sup>13</sup>



### Publications of the Observatory on Finland

Finnish municipalities offer extensive care facilities for children up to school age. Additional information on this as well as on the National Core Curriculum, which aims for cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood education and care, can be found in the **documentation** of the European Expert Meeting on childcare organised by the Observatory.

- 8 Takala, Pentti (2005): *Perheen muutos ja pohjoismainen perhepolitiikan malli*. In: Takala, Pentti (ed.): *Onko meillä malttia sijoittaa lapsiin? Kelan tutkimusosasto*.
- 9 Rothstein, Bo / Uslaner, Eric M. (2005): *All for All. Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust*. In: *World Politics*, Vol. 58 (1): 41–72; Gianmarco, Daniele / Geys, Benny (2015): *Interpersonal Trust and Welfare State Support*. In: *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 39: 1–12.
- 10 *Social- och hälsovårdsministeriets (2005): Barnrådgivningen som stöd för barnfamiljer. Handbok för personalen; see here.*
- 11 *See also here.*
- 12 *See also here.*
- 13 Vuoranmaa, Maaret (2019): *Pienten lasten ja heidän perheensä hyvinvointi 2018*. THL; *see here.*

However, the universal public support is not always sufficient. Some families need extra support. For instance, single-parent families are more vulnerable than two-parent families, or when drug abuse among parents is occurring, children and parents are more likely to need extra support. Even though parents are not proud of their failings, seeking additional support is not generally stigmatised in a universal welfare state like Finland.

## Fighting child poverty and social exclusion sustainably – Current initiatives at EU level

*In many European countries, the issue of child poverty ranks high on the political agenda. There are also different initiatives at EU-level trying to counteract child poverty and social exclusion. Just like national reforms, initiatives at European level aim to optimise financial support for children and families, develop counselling and support services, and ensure equal educational and participatory opportunities for children. The following contribution offers a short overview of the central initiatives.*



Principle 11 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** establishes the right of children to early childhood education and care and to protection from poverty.<sup>16</sup> Children from vulnerable backgrounds are granted the right to special measures in order to promote equal opportunities. The European Pillar of Social Rights is flanked with the **Social Scoreboard**, which tracks developments and progress in the member states

in areas such as equal opportunities, social protection, and inclusion. In the sphere of social protection and social inclusion, for instance, the effectiveness of transfer payments for poverty reduction as well as the proportion of under-three-year olds in childcare are illustrated. The results of the Social Scoreboard are also incorporated into the **European Semester for economic policy coordination**. In this context, civil society organisations call for even greater emphasis to be put on social objectives included in the European Semester.<sup>17</sup>

The **Commission Recommendation “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”**<sup>18</sup> was already adopted in 2013. Access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services, and the right of children to social participation and involvement in decisions affecting their lives are identified as the key pillars for combating child poverty and social exclusion.

Reacting to a proposal by the European Parliament, the European Commission has commissioned a feasibility study on the so-called **“Child Guarantee”**. The child guarantee is intended to drive forward the implementation of the Recommendation “Investing in Children” as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights. The child guarantee aims to ensure access to free health care, free education, free childcare, decent housing, and adequate nutrition.

On 1 August 2019, the **Directive on work-life balance** has entered into force. It stipulates European standards for reconciliation policy. Paid leave schemes and flexible work arrangements are intended to strengthen families in their balancing act between gainful employment and care work.<sup>20</sup> With regard to the fight against poverty, the European institutions stress that gainful employment of women directly contributes to improving the socio-economic situation of families.<sup>21</sup>

The so-called **Barcelona Objectives** were already adopted in 2002. They set objectives for the expansion of childcare services. At least 33 per cent of children up to the age of three shall have access to affordable, high-quality childcare in all EU member states. For

### European Pillar of Social Rights and European Semester

The European Pillar of Social Rights aims to provide citizens with new and more effective rights in terms of equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection, and social inclusion. The European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission have jointly signed it in 2017 at the Social Summit in Gothenburg.<sup>14</sup>

The European Semester “is a cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination within the EU. It is part of the European Union’s economic governance framework. [...] During the European Semester the member states align their budgetary and economic policies with the objectives and rules agreed at the EU level.”<sup>15</sup>

### Child Guarantee – Next steps

A feasibility study is currently being conducted to determine the potentials and practicability of the envisioned child guarantee. The study looks at four target groups with particularly high needs for support: This includes children living in precarious family situations, children of recent migrants and refugees, children residing in institutions as well as children with disabilities or other special needs. First results are to be presented in early 2020. On this basis, the next step is to consider a child guarantee for all children in the EU.

Regarding the financing of such a child guarantee, the European Parliament plans to make 5.9 billion euros available in the European Social Fund Plus within the framework of the multiannual financial framework of the EU 2021-2027.<sup>19</sup> The negotiations between the EU-institutions on the multiannual financial framework are still ongoing.

For further information: European Commission (2019): Child guarantee for vulnerable children; see [here](#).

14 European Commission (2017): Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture. The European Commission’s contribution to the Leaders’ meeting in Gothenburg, 17 November 2017 – COM(2017) 673 final.

15 European Council (2018): European Semester; see [here](#).

16 European Commission (2018): The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles; see [here](#).

17 See for example: Eurochild (2018): Making social rights work for children. 2018 Eurochild Report on the European Semester; see [here](#).

18 Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013. Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage – 2013/112/EU.

19 European Parliament (2019): Amendments adopted by the European Parliament on 16 January 2019 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+); see [here](#).

20 Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU – 2019/1158/EU.

21 Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – 2019/C 189/02: 2.

children between the age of three and of school age, at least 90 per cent shall have access to childcare. The European Commission is constantly monitoring if member states reach these goals, also within the scope of the European Semester, most recently in May 2018. On EU average, the objectives were met in 2018. However, 16 member states did not meet the objectives for both age groups.<sup>22</sup> With these results in mind, a revision and potential update to the Barcelona Objectives is currently under discussion. A **Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care** of May 2018<sup>23</sup> picks up on the Quality Framework Proposal for early childhood education and care, which was already drawn up in 2014.<sup>24</sup> It urges the states to improve access to high-quality early childhood education and care, to make childcare services affordable and inclusive, to support professionalization, to develop curricula, and to promote monitoring and evaluation processes. The European Council adopted the Recommendation in May 2019.<sup>25</sup>

During the Bulgarian presidency of the European Council in the first half of 2018, **Council conclusions on early childhood education** were adopted that also consider early childhood education and care to be a core component in the fight against child poverty and social exclusion.<sup>26</sup>

The **EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027** as well as the **Youth Guarantee** target youths and young adults. The EU Youth Strategy covers the three focal areas of participation, exchange, and empowerment.<sup>27</sup> The Youth Guarantee is to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeships, or traineeships within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.<sup>28</sup>

## News from the Observatory

The Observatory analyses sociopolitical developments in Europe and considers their potential impact on Germany. To this end, it carries out research and studies – often comparative analyses of the general European context –, monitors European developments, and organises international conferences. Its aim is to link stakeholders so as to promote European exchanges and encourage mutual learning.

### Financial protection of children in other European countries

The issue of child poverty receives a lot of attention in many European countries. Despite financial support and further measures to improve the opportunities for participation, children are affected by poverty more often than the general population. Against this backdrop, an **expertise** offers insights into approaches and reforms in the field of family-related services in Europe. The expertise is available in German.

### State benefits for children and families to combat poverty and social exclusion

The Observatory's European Expert Meeting in May 2019 focused on the European exchange of approaches and experiences in the field of state support for children and families in various European countries. First, the question was raised of how children and families are provided with financial security and how this stands in relation to supporting children in education and participation. Second, several approaches were presented on how access to financial services, but also to other services, can be improved in terms of information, counselling and application processes. The results of this Expert Meeting will soon be published on our [website](#).

- 22 *European Commission (2018): Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the "Barcelona objectives") – COM(2018) 273 final.*
- 23 *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – COM(2018) 271 final.*
- 24 *European Commission (2014): Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.*
- 25 *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – 2019/C 189/02.*
- 26 *Council of the European Union (2018): Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion. Council Conclusions – 10306/18.*
- 27 *European Commission (2019): EU Youth Strategy; see [here](#).*
- 28 *European Commission (2019): The Youth Guarantee; see [here](#).*



## Violence against women: The implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Europe

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) is, to date, the most far-reaching international, legally binding instrument for preventing and combating violence against women as well as domestic violence. The convention, which was signed in Istanbul in 2011 and entered into force in 2014, considers violence against women to be a violation of human rights, being an expression of a historically developed unequal power balance between men and women. The aim of the Istanbul Convention is to improve the protection of women against gender-based violence in Europe in a holistic approach and to create Europe-wide minimum standards. The Observatory examines the concrete implementation of the Istanbul Convention in various EU member states. Corresponding publications will be made available on our [website](#).

## Reconciliation policy from a gender equality perspective

The Observatory took the EU work-life balance package as an opportunity to organise a series of European Expert Meetings on reconciliation policy, in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The focus of the first two Expert Meetings was on leave options for employed persons with care duties. The third Expert Meeting took a closer look at the necessary infrastructure in the field of childcare. The question of how gainful employment and care work can be divided fairly between the sexes was the focus of the contributions and discussions at the fourth and final Expert Meeting of the series. In October 2018, numerous national and international experts from politics, science, and associations discussed different approaches in Berlin. The results of the Expert Meeting can be found in the [documentation](#) of the event.

## Cross-border cooperation to safeguard services of general public interest

Cross-border cooperation is a promising opportunity for municipalities in border regions to meet the challenges of demographic change with regard to safeguarding services of general interest. The Observatory's working paper analyses opportunities and benefits as well as success factors and obstacles to cross-border cooperation. The working paper is available in German and is published on our [website](#).

## Volunteering in hospice and palliative care

The [working paper](#) provides an overview on volunteering in hospices and palliative care in France and Poland. Legal regulations, national and regional organisation, practical implementation of the assignments, and the tasks of volunteers as well as qualification procedures and future recruitment of volunteers are examined.

You can find all the results of our work here:

<https://www.beobachtungsstelle-gesellschaftspolitik.de/en/publications/>

Stay tuned and subscribe to our mailing list. You will then receive our Newsletter regularly as well as additional information about our work. Register [here](#).

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