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## Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage

[A Study of National Policies](#)

Ireland

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# **Investing in Children:**

**Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage**

**A Study of National Policies**

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**COUNTRY REPORT - IRELAND**



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## 1. Summary<sup>1</sup>

Child poverty is very high in Ireland and is on an upward rather than a downward trend. Severe material deprivation among children is also increasing at a very steep rate. There appears to be a generational curve to the recession in Ireland (and the economic and social policies pursued to address it). This is to the disadvantage of the younger generations, as evidenced by higher child poverty rates as compared with adults, and high rates of unemployment and emigration among those in the younger cohorts.

Child poverty is on the policy agenda in Ireland and some relevant measures have been taken to address child poverty in Ireland over the course of the last year. . These include the introduction of a sub-target on child poverty (as a contribution to the achievement of the overall National Social Target for Poverty Reduction). In addition, the Children Plus Initiative announced in Budget 2012 is an important initiative. It has three strands: 1) funding for the roll-out of an area-based approach to tackle child poverty focused on early intervention and prevention; 2) funding for an additional 6,000 afterschool places; 3) additional funding for the school meals programme. But these developments occurred in a context of significant cut backs to income and other supports for families with children. Furthermore, in regard to early childhood education and care – which is under-developed in Ireland in comparative context and also in the context of the Commission Recommendation – commitment made prior to the recession has not been sustained and the level of provision has fallen. On the latest evidence Ireland fails to meet either of the Barcelona targets. To the extent that the Commission Recommendation primarily espouses a social investment approach, policy in Ireland can be said to be adrift of the EU approach.

Since the last report on this issue (in 2007), it is my opinion that Ireland has lost ground in regard to having a concerted approach to child poverty. At that stage I concluded that this was a *bona fide* domain of policy in Ireland and one that had seen significant development and innovation. That is less clearly the case today. While measures in relation to child poverty have been taken and there is innovation in this regard, there is no overall integrated strategy around child poverty in place. In relation to the approach espoused by the Recommendation I conclude that Ireland:

- Has elements of a children’s rights approach and a history in this regard. However, the rights approach in place does not generally extend to income benefits and is relatively weak for services;
- Is in the process of rebalancing its universal and targeted policies for child income and other supports but has not yet achieved sufficient focus on children at increased risk because of multiple disadvantage;
- Has made some movement on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and this is generally in the right direction – in terms for example of aiming for universal free access – but just one cohort is prioritised for free provision;
- While a range of providers are involved in services and there is some local level oversight, this is not generally on the scale of the partnership basis implied in the Recommendation and the involvement of children in this regard remains under-developed;
- Is working on putting in place evidence-based approaches and evaluation of the impact of policies introduced in response to the crisis on children;
- Is not making a sustained investment in children and families.

<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that the report was first drafted in September 2013 and is based on information and data available at that time. In a few instances some new information that became available subsequently has been referenced. However there has not been an opportunity to do a comprehensive screening for updates since September.

The main obstacles that I see to implementation of the Recommendation in Ireland are:

- Relatively weak integration of poverty (in general and in relation to child poverty specifically) into the National Reform Programme (NRP) which is seen primarily as a strategy for fiscal correction and economic growth;
- The fact that child poverty competes with other objectives for limited resources;
- A certain lack of 'ownership' on the part of the current government of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 -2016 (which was put in place by a former government), although there is an explicit commitment in the Programme for Government 2011 to 2016 to address child poverty using an area-based approach;
- The integrated approach underpinning the Recommendation is also a challenge for Ireland where policy tends to be particularised to different domains and problem areas or groups and where income support has a deeper history than service provision.

#### Recommendation 1

In terms of strengthening the Irish approach I suggest that Ireland needs to implement and update in a comprehensive fashion the child poverty strategy that was set out in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 - 2016. In particular, an updated policy on child poverty needs to ensure that there is integration between different measures and across policy domains (e.g., child-related policy, activation, unemployment, work-family reconciliation, income support policies in general and services such as education, housing and health). It is a demanding programme but the Recommendation on Investing in Children provides a blueprint that can be followed.

#### Recommendation 2

Ireland should return to and renew the children's rights basis that was laid down by the National Children's Strategy and the recent successful Referendum and consider ways in which this could form the basis for an extension and embedding of a children's rights-based approach across policy domains. This could, for example, take the form of benefits and services engaging directly with children and being made a right of the child. It could also take the form of greater consultation with children (through the Youth parliament (Dail na Nog) for example and the National Children's Advisory Council).

#### Recommendation 3

The sub-target for child poverty (as well as that for poverty in jobless households) should be made more precise, augmented by other targets and embedded in a programme of measures developed to address poverty and social exclusion among children and adults more broadly. In addition, the Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative (which was introduced this year as part of the Children Plus Initiative) is a welcome step that should be widely extended and allocated greater resources.

## 2. Assessment of Overall Approach and Governance<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this report is to review developments in Ireland in the context of the implementation of the Commission Recommendation 'Investing in Children'. For the purposes of the analysis the framework against which the Irish situation is assessed is that of the Recommendation. This framework is reflected in the structure and foci of analysis of the report (as per the guidelines issued to the Network).

### 2.1. Introduction

Children comprise 25% of Ireland's population, compared to an EU average of 19%. Moreover, the child population in Ireland increased by 34% between 2002 and 2011 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012). The number of Traveller children increased by 30.3% between 2006 and 2011 and the number of foreign national children increased by 49.5% between 2006 and 2011 (ibid). In 2011, approximately one in six children (18.1%) lived in a family headed by a lone parent and 26% lived in a jobless household (CSO 2013).

Ireland is one of the Member States where the poverty rate is higher for children than it is for adults. In 2011, children were 1.6 times more likely to be in consistent poverty<sup>3</sup> compared to adults (Department of Social Protection 2013a: 12). The differential remained unchanged between 2010 and 2011. Moreover, for all years since 2004, the at risk of poverty rate for individuals living in households with children was higher than for those in households without children. The differentials are quite large. In 2010 for example, the at risk of poverty rates for individuals living in households with children and those living in households without children were 18.7% and 11.8% respectively (CSO 2012: 19). The table below presents the evidence on poverty among children and, for comparison, among adults of working age. In 2011, 18.8% of children (aged 0-17 years) lived in income poverty, up from 18.4% in 2010 and 18.0% in 2008. Children's consistent poverty rate shows a very steep rise over the period – up from 6.3% in 2008 to 9.3% in 2011. The rate of basic deprivation is also very high among children – almost a third were living in such circumstances in 2011. The upward trend on all three measures should be noted but there are important variations over periods. The at risk of poverty rate for both adults and children tended to decline between 2004 and 2008; remained relatively stable between 2008 and 2009; and then rose in 2010 and 2011. Compared to the 27 EU countries, child poverty rates in Ireland are towards the middle of the distribution, but are higher than most of the EU 15 countries. As can be seen from Table 1, the comparisons with adults of working age are quite stark with significant gaps between them and children on all three measures, and especially large gaps in basic material deprivation.

<sup>2</sup> Readers should note that the report was first drafted in September 2013 and is based on information and data available at that time. In a few instances some new information that became available subsequently has been referenced. However there has not been an opportunity to do a comprehensive screening for updates since September.

<sup>3</sup> Income poverty, also known as 'at risk of poverty', consists in having a household income (adjusted for household size and composition) below 60% of the median. Ireland has a number of specific measurement conventions that differ from EU practice. 'Basic deprivation' is used in Ireland and consists in being unable to afford two or more of 11 basic goods and services regarded as normative in Irish society. Consistent poverty is an Irish national indicator which consists in being both income poor and suffering basic deprivation.

**Table 1 Poverty and Basic Deprivation Rates among Children aged 0 to 17 Years and Those of Working Age, 2008 -2011**

	2008	2009	2010	2011
At risk of poverty				
0-17	18.0%	18.6%	18.4%	18.8%
18-64	-	13.0%	14.2%	15.9%
Consistent poverty				
0-17	6.3%	8.7%	8.8%	9.3%
18-64	-	4.9%	6.2%	6.8%
Basic deprivation				
0-17	18.1%	23.5%	30.5%	32.1%
18-64	12.8%	16.0%	21.6%	23.7%

Source: CSO 2013, EU SILC various years.

There are variations among children by age group. The oldest age group (12-17 years) has a higher at risk of poverty rate than the younger age groups (CSO 2012). Detailed analyses by Watson and Maitre (2012) of the reasons for this suggested that a part of the pattern by age of child is due to family size and another part is due to measurement factors (and in particular the way incomes are adjusted to take account of the needs of the household based on size and composition). Over one-third of those in jobless households in 2010 were under 18 years of age (36%).

In the latest Innocenti UNICEF Report Card (2013) on child well-being, Ireland ranks 10<sup>th</sup> out of 29 countries overall but only 17<sup>th</sup> on children's material well-being (UNICEF 2013). In terms of monetary deprivation, Ireland ranks 9<sup>th</sup> for the relative child poverty rate but 26<sup>th</sup>, among the bottom third of countries, for the child poverty gap. Ireland ranks 8<sup>th</sup> for the child deprivation rate alongside the five Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Ireland is 16<sup>th</sup> on the low family affluence indicator among the middle third of countries.

Against this backdrop what is the policy approach to children and child poverty in Ireland?

There is a history of action against child poverty in Ireland, although it has varied in priority as a policy concern over time. It was a strong focus of the first National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997 which aimed to reduce the numbers of children in consistent poverty to below 2% by 2007. The 2007 National Action Plan for Social Inclusion took this forward, having as one of its strategic objectives to ensure that children reach their true potential. Notably though, it made no specific commitment to a child poverty target. The 2007 Plan could be said to have had a stronger focus on social exclusion among children than poverty in that it primarily targeted education. Three of the four high level goals made in regard to children focused on education.<sup>4</sup> Child poverty is back as a specific target in Ireland since last year (Department of Social Protection 2012b). In the case of children, the aim is to reduce the gap between their consistent poverty rate (8.8% in 2010 but up to 9.3% in 2011) and that of adults (5.5%). While the details are not made clear in the text, it appears as if the target is to bring the child poverty rate down to 5% by 2016 and 2.5% by 2020. It is notable that a

<sup>4</sup> The fourth renewed an older commitment - to maintain the value of the combined child support payments to between 33 and 35% of the minimum adult social welfare rate (a goal which according to the calculations of the Combat Poverty Agency (2007) has already been met).

significant differential between children and adults will still exist even if the interim and final targets are achieved.

## 2.2. Integrated and Multi-dimensional Strategies

In the absence of an explicit strategy being followed by the government, one has to divine the Irish approach by trying to piece it together from a range of documents and sector-specific policies. The following is my reading.

The new initiatives – the child poverty sub-target and the Children First Initiative (including the expansion of early childhood intervention for low income children to be taken forward by the Area based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative) – spell a focus on service provision targeted on children from poor backgrounds.

A second element of the approach to child poverty is to move poor parents into employment and education (as per activation policies for example, especially those for lone parents). This is a very important element of the Irish policy approach, because there is such an overlap between joblessness, lone parenthood and child as well as adult poverty. In this regard the One Parent Family Payment is the subject of extensive reform, whereby over the period between July 2013 and July 2015 the age threshold for the youngest child for a lone parent to qualify for the benefit will be reduced on a phased basis to 7 years. Once their youngest child reaches 7 years, the recipient will no longer be entitled to the One Payment Family Payment and will have to transfer to another payment and be available for full-time work. More generally, through such developments as the Pathways to Work programme among others, relevant social and employment policy has concentrated on three objectives in this regard: to continue to streamline and cut-back the benefit system so that it is financially more sustainable and also more compatible with employment incentives; to reform existing provision for the unemployed and those receiving benefits and put in place better co-ordinated and employment-oriented provision; to stimulate job creation through an action plan on jobs. Progress is underway on all three. While these are all steps in the right direction, questions can be raised about the volume of resources directed to them and the extent to which they are targeted on the most needy – the unemployed and those in jobless households (including lone parents) - especially in a context of child poverty.

A third, extremely important and prominent, general feature of the approach to child poverty in Ireland is income support specifically associated with children and family (and more general income support policy also). As will be discussed in detail in the next section, there are three elements to child income support in the Irish system: a universalist benefit, one targeted on children of benefit recipients, and another on families living on low pay. The balance between these has shifted over time as has the resources devoted to them. In the period of recession especially, the universal benefits for families with children have been heavily cut back. Overall while there are some efforts to ensure that children and families are protected from the impact of the crisis, these are rather weak and over time somewhat inconsistent.

A fourth prong of Irish anti-poverty policy is services and especially ECEC. While these will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, it is important to point out here that progress in this regard is underway in Ireland but is slow by the standard of provision in the most developed

member states and also by the standard implicit in the Recommendation. For example, of the ECEC provision that exists, childcare far outstrips early education; there are major shortages in supply; costs are very high and subsidies do little to make the services affordable; the vast majority of provision is 'private' (either market based, community-based or individual childminders) which heightens the risk of fragmentation, inequality in access and variation in quality of provision and in staff training/education.

While policy is proceeding and the new developments are to be welcomed, there are grounds to express doubts over whether they comprise an overall strategy. Ireland has an exemplary history in this regard. The 1997 National Anti-poverty Strategy and the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016 had very strong elements in regard to children. In both, measures for child well-being ranged across early childhood development, health, education and income support. Although the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion is still in place, the actual policy being pursued does not consistently follow it. It is difficult to characterise policy as joined up or integrated. This is so for two reasons. First although there are some cross-departmental initiatives these are rather small in scale. Second, there is not the range of connected policies that is implied by the Commission Recommendation. The Area-based Approach to Child Poverty under the Children Plus Initiative (which will be outlined below) tends to have a primary policy focus on ECEC. While this is welcome, it does not link in an integrated fashion to such areas as housing or even income support. Progress towards an integrated approach made during the Celtic Tiger period is in danger of being overturned by the policies pursued during the economic crisis.

### **2.3. A Children's Right Perspective**

In terms of the question of whether Ireland's approach is informed by a children's rights perspective, in my opinion the answer to this is that while it is a stated commitment and principle in some policy areas overall it is underdeveloped. In the early days of children's policy in Ireland, there was a much stronger focus on children's rights, but this has not been developed or embedded in the interim. For example, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007-2016, although it did not explicitly use the language of social rights, placed children in a societal context and set out a series of long-term goals in regard to their welfare. These were specifically: growing up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, leaving primary school literate and numerate, completing a senior educational cycle, having access to a world-class health, personal social services and accommodation, as well as quality play, sport, recreational and cultural activities and appropriate participation in local and national decision making. To take a further example, the National Children's Strategy (introduced in 2000) was highly innovative in an Irish (and European) context, recognising children as individual actors and treating them as a group with interests that need to be reflected in the public policy agenda. It was therefore strong on granting children political rights (by giving them some political and administrative participation rights through a national children's parliament). A rights basis was further strengthened by the Referendum on children's rights, which announced initially in November 2006, was finally held (and passed by the electorate) in November 2012. In essence, the Referendum sanctioned a stand-alone article dedicated to children in the Constitution. The Article gives explicit expression to the rights of children as individuals, clarifying the state's commitment to the protection of children and strengthening the Constitutional foundation for the child protection system, enabling the state to prioritise the best interests of the child and, where appropriate, ascertain the views of the child.

While there is a clear foundation to be built on here, a rights perspective is seeing limited traction in social and economic policy at the present time. And measures are

being taken in income support policy that may work against a rights' approach. For example, the universal Child Benefit – paid for all children as an expression of the nation's support for all children – has been significantly cut back and may be rendered selective. Children in Ireland have no personal or individual rights to childcare or other services (as is the case in other countries). Ireland's understanding of and approach to children's rights is not one that goes so far as to give children specific guarantees or recognise them as independent rights holders.

The proposal to establish a new Child and Family Support Agency – which is currently in train – is likely to be a positive development in regard not just to mainstreaming children's rights but also in terms of being a 'centre of strategic planning' for services dealing with families and children and also interagency working. However, the Children's Rights Alliance – in response to the *Child and Family Agency Bill* which was published in July 2013 – has suggested that the children's rights perspective needs to be more deeply embedded and the best interests of the child made the paramount consideration of the Agency's work.<sup>5</sup>

#### **2.4. Balance between Universal and Targeted Approaches**

To answer the question of whether there is a good balance between universal and targeted policies, this is actively under consideration (see section 3.2 below) but has not yet been achieved. Existing provision is both universalist and targeted and policy is actively changing the balance. But these changes appear as somewhat ad hoc in nature and there is no agreement on an overall strategy. In regard to whether there is sufficient focus on children at increased risk because of multiple disadvantage, my opinion is negative. Resources devoted to the most disadvantaged children – the ethnic minority children and those in jobless households – have been cut back and there is no particular prioritising of such children in existing measures.

#### **2.5. Involvement of Relevant Stakeholders**

With regard to governance, the Recommendation is notable in emphasising the spirit and practice of partnership and that it should prevail at every level, including the local level. Looked at from this perspective, there are some positive developments to report for Ireland. For example, there has been ongoing interdepartmental and inter-agency groups monitoring and reporting on social inclusion matters including discussions on child poverty reduction. It is not clear how often these meet or how active they are in terms of initiating policy reform.

There is also a National Children's Advisory Council, which was established in 2001 as part of the National Children's Strategy. The Council has an independent advisory role reporting to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Council includes representatives of the statutory agencies, voluntary sector, research community, parents and young people. The Council's overarching role is to contribute to the development of a strong collaborative interface between statutory and non-statutory providers of children's services in order to improve outcomes for children and young people. It is not clear how often this meets but it is potentially a very important vehicle for consultation and engagement between stakeholders and policy makers.

Turning to the local level, this is most pertinent with regard to services. There are some elements of localism and partnership in the provision of ECEC– with strong involvement of NGOs and local elements to governance.

It is also important to point out that with regard to stakeholder involvement in social policy more broadly, there is no permanent partnership between government and the stakeholders in Ireland at the present time, especially if viewed against the very

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://childrensrights.ie/resources/alliance-responds-child-and-family>.

strong history of social partnership in Ireland. However, the signs are pointing in a more positive direction than heretofore. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has been very actively convening consultations with stakeholders on various aspects of children's and youth policy since 2009 and the Department of Social Protection held two consultations to inform policy on child poverty with stakeholders in 2011.

In addition, the Social Inclusion Forum continues to be held on an annual basis (the 2013 meeting was held on March 26<sup>th</sup> last).

While all of this is pointing in the right direction, as it stands consultation with and engagement of stakeholders is still relatively weakly embedded in national policy making on poverty and especially child poverty policy in Ireland.

## **2.6. Evidence-based Approaches**

As regards the use of an evidence-based approach, there is some movement underway in this regard in Ireland also especially in regard to the area of early childhood development which, as mentioned, is being taken forward for low-income children through the Area-based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative . However, the use of evidence-based approaches in the field of child poverty is confined and rather new in Ireland and there has been no official evaluation of the impact of policies introduced in response to the crisis on children. In this regard the Social Inclusion Monitor recently initiated by the Department of Social Protection might be used to more actively monitor progress (Department of Social Protection 2013a).

## **2.7. Sustained Investment in Children and Families**

In terms of strengthening the Irish approach I suggest that Ireland needs to articulate an explicit, up-dated child poverty policy. At the time of writing two constituent elements of such a policy are notable recent introductions : the sub-target on child poverty and the Area-based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative (which consists of a range of services targeted at families on low incomes and was introduced as part of the broader Child First initiative). These do not amount to a complete policy. For such, Ireland needs to identify its policy approach and set of principles as well as putting in place a programme of activities and measures to be rolled out over time in the service of a wide-ranging but inter-connected set of objectives around child poverty. This must focus on children but at the same time be broad-ranging and set out how existing income support, activation-oriented measures and services oriented to other sectors of the population and other goals are to have an anti-child poverty focus and effect.

## **2.8. Recommendations**

In terms of strengthening the Irish approach to child poverty, Ireland needs to implement and update in a comprehensive fashion the child poverty strategy that was set out in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 - 2016. In particular, an updated policy on child poverty needs to ensure that there is integration between different measures and across policy domains (e.g., child-related policy, activation, unemployment, work-family reconciliation, income support policies in general and services such as education, housing and health). It is a demanding programme but the Recommendation on Investing in Children provides a blueprint that can be followed.

Ireland should return to and renew the children's rights basis that was laid down in the National Children's Strategy and the recent successful Referendum and consider ways in which this could form the basis for an extension and embedding of a children's rights-based approach across policy domains. This could, for example, take the form of benefits and services engaging directly with children and being made a right of the

child. It could also take the form of greater consultation with children (through the Youth parliament for example and the National Children's Advisory Council).<sup>6</sup>

The sub-target for child poverty (as well as that for poverty in jobless households) should be made more precise, augmented by other targets and embedded in a programme of measures developed to address poverty and social exclusion among children and adults more broadly. In addition, the Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative is a welcome step that should be widely extended and allocated greater resources.

### 3. Access to Adequate Resources

#### 3.1. Policies to Support Parents' Participation in the Labour Market

Encouraging employment for all those who can work is now a general goal of social and economic policy in Ireland. A host of measures have been put in place to 'activate' Irish jobseekers and others claiming social welfare benefits. Measures for the activation of lone parents have been of central importance here. Reforms to the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) scheme since 2011 have sought to prevent long-term dependence on social welfare support and facilitate financial independence among lone parents through participation in employment and training. Towards this end, there has been a major reform to the OFP scheme - the reduction in the age threshold of the youngest child for OFP which is being reduced on a phased basis to 7 years of age for qualification purposes for the payment. In addition, the introduction of the Jobseeker's Transition scheme for lone parents, recently announced, is meant to enable recipients to seek work on a part-time rather than a full-time basis if this is better suited to their family requirements. They will also be able to access existing childcare supports to enable them to engage in education and training programmes. The transitional period will run until the youngest child reaches the age of 14 years.

As well as lone parents, other sectors of the population not in employment have been targeted by activation measures which have become a strong current of recent policy reform in Ireland. Encouraging employment for all those who can work is now a general goal of social and economic policy in Ireland. A host of measures have been put in place to 'activate' Irish jobseekers and others claiming social welfare benefits.

As I have noted on several occasions, these measures have all involved significant reform of the Irish social and economic policy architecture and administration. The strengths are significant, including: a more personalised approach to service provision; better co-ordination between the benefit system and the employment and education services; better targeting of those furthest from the labour market. There are significant weaknesses also though, relating to both the general policy approach adopted and the amount of resources committed.

But apart from lone parents, the targeting of other parents is not very intensive. These are generally expected to be 'swept up' by the general activation measures. The targeting of jobless households for anti-poverty purposes is likely to help in the fight against child poverty (given that many of these are families with children) but generally the issue of back-up services, supports and pathways to work for parents needs more attention in Ireland. In regard to the activation of parents, childcare is one of the biggest barriers (see section 4.2 below). It also has to be pointed out that these and other measures are not explicitly part of an anti-child poverty plan but function as so by default, especially in a context of welfare and service cuts.

In terms of measures oriented to the reconciliation of work and family life, Ireland lags behind other countries. Pregnant women in employment are entitled to 26 weeks of

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.dailanog.ie/2006/site/coiste.php>.

maternity leave, during which they receive maternity benefit. An additional maternity leave of 16 weeks is unpaid. There is no statutory right to paternity leave, but both parents have an equal entitlement to parental leave of up to 14 weeks for each child. This can be transferred between parents if they work for the same employer and the employer agrees. This is unpaid and must be taken before the child is more than eight years old. The leave may be taken in one continuous period or in two blocks of 6 weeks or more, with at least 10 weeks between, but 14 weeks is the maximum that can be taken in any 12 month period. With the agreement of the employer parental leave can be taken in other formations. Looked at comparatively, Irish statutory leave entitlements are at the lower end of the EU spectrum. While maternity leave has increased significantly over recent years, parental leave continues to be unpaid and there is no entitlement to paternity leave. The Irish system tends to reinforce gender divisions in respect to care and employment (Barry 2011).

#### *Areas for Urgent Action*

In the context of the Recommendation, the issue of back-up services, supports and pathways to work for parents qua parents needs more attention in Ireland. In addition, Ireland needs to put in place a policy around the reconciliation of work and family life, involving measures such as paid paternal leave and paid parental leave.

### **3.2. Policies to Support Adequate Living Standards**

The centrepiece of the child support package in Ireland is Child Benefit. Paid until the child reaches the age of 16 years (or 18 in the case of educational participation or physical or mental retardation), it was historically a universal benefit but since 2004 (when it was restricted for immigrants and asylum seekers) and the onset of the recession in 2009 it has been subject to limitations and cut-backs. Approximately two-thirds of child income support in Ireland is distributed through Child Benefit. A second strand of child support in the Irish system is Child Dependant Allowances which consist of additional payments to claimants of social welfare benefits when they have dependent children. These used to vary in value depending on the particular payment being claimed but have been standardised since 2007. The third income support strand for families with children is Family Income Supplement which is a means-tested wage supplement paid to families with children where there is at least one person in employment and income is below a threshold.

Over the course of the Celtic Tiger period and since, dramatic shifts were made to child income support. Both the level of cash support and the way in which it was structured were altered. From 1994 to 2007 the rates of payment for the targeted Child Dependant Allowances – as mentioned a payment received only by those in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment – were frozen, while very substantial resources were devoted to increasing the rate of Child Benefit which actually increased fourfold in value (from €40 to €160 per month in the case of the minimum payment, i.e., for the first and second child) during the decade between 1997 and 2007. The primary underlying rationale for the shift of focus to Child Benefit was its neutrality between family form and with respect to labour market status of the parent(s). The outcome in terms of the balance between payment rates for Child Dependant Allowances and Child Benefit is significant (Callan et al 2006). The rate of payment for Child Benefit rose from just under 2% of the average industrial wage in 1994 to just under 6% in 2005. While the Child Dependant Allowance rates remained constant in nominal terms, rising real and nominal wages meant that they declined as a proportion of the average industrial wage from about 5% in 2000 to 3% in 2005. Hence in this period the balance was tipped in favour of the universal over the targeted provision.

In policy responses over the period of recession, the balance has tipped the other way and it is the universal Child Benefits which have been targeted for significant cuts. The

cuts to Child Benefit have been deep - four consecutive budgets have reduced monthly child income supports by almost €100 for families with three or more children. The children's charity Barnardos has complained that the flat-rate reduction of the Child Benefit was unfair (Barnardos 2011). In addition to the cuts in child-related benefits, the government is making numerous cuts to top-up benefits (all of which were introduced not as luxuries but as means-tested assistance to families to meet real needs). The result is to significantly reduce the income of many families with children, leaving them exposed to having to meet the costs out of their own dwindling resources. However, it is also important to note that the target of maintaining child income supports set out as Goal 4 in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 to maintain the combined value of child income support measures at 33%-35% of the minimum adult social welfare payment rate over has continued to be met even over the course of the recession. In effect, this functions as a floor but it is not an absolute measure of good practice because it is not immune to cuts in the adult benefits.

The evidence on the impact of the benefit system and the effects of social transfers is both good and bad. The social transfer system in Ireland generally performs an anti-poverty well (in its own right and in international comparison) for the population as a whole and for children. In 2011, for example Irish social transfers (excluding pensions) reduced the at risk of poverty rate from 40% before social transfers (excluding pensions), to 16% after social transfers. Therefore, 23.8% of the population was lifted out of income poverty as a result of social transfers in 2011 (CSO 2013). Moreover, effectiveness in this regard has improved considerably over time. And yet, the Department of Social Protection's own research shows that households worst affected by the main welfare and direct tax measures of Budget 2013 were those with children, particularly lone parent families (Department of Social Protection 2013b). Employed lone parents suffered the most, with a loss of 1.4% in their average income. Other households with high losses included non-earning couples with children (loss of 1.3%), non-earning lone parents (loss of 1.2%), dual-earner couples with children (loss of 1 to 1.2%), and single-earner couples with children (loss of 1.2%).

Overall, the cutbacks of recent years impacted on almost all sectors of the population but they especially hit families with children and among these large families. Implicit in the underlying policy position now - although this has never been made explicit - seems to be that families are required to subsidise their children's welfare and development to a considerably greater extent than heretofore. The policy currently seems to be to cut back on income and other supports for families with children. There is more targeting and a move away from universalism. This is not counterbalanced by a greater provision of in-kind services. For example, in this context the Children's Rights Alliance (2013) points out that the cuts to Child Benefit and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance in Budget 2013 made for savings of €153 million in 2013, but only €18.5 million - 11.6% - was redirected into services and programmes for children under the Children Plus Initiative (to be discussed in the next section). This suggests the need for a concerted and expansionary approach to investment in services.

While the 2012 NRP Update highlighted that the key objective of the major reform of child income support and of working age social assistance welfare schemes was 'to better support the transition from welfare to work', it would be difficult to claim that reforms are being made on a principled and long-term basis. Each of the three forms of child income support in place is oriented to a different objective: Child Benefit is a payment for the welfare and support of all children; the Child Dependant Allowances are for the welfare and additional support of children in low-income families; and the Family Income Supplement is for assistance to families in low-paid work. In my view all are needed but each has evolved over time and their exact role and relationship

needs to be reconsidered, especially with an eye to functionality, complementarity and the situation that prevails at the present time.

Several policy proposals are on the table for long-term reform of the cash supports for children and a number of reviews have been undertaken. Two reform proposals are prominent at the present time:

- The first option is a two-tier payment, which consists of a universal first tier and a selective means-tested, employment neutral second tier that would be reduced as income increases. This option is set out in the NESC (2007) report *Ireland's Child Income Supports: The Case for Targeting* and a variation of this approach is contained in the Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare 2012 report on child and family income supports.
- The other reform option is taxation of Child Benefit. This approach was most recently considered in the report of the Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare (2012) on child and family income supports. While some members of the Group found taxation of Child Benefit an attractive option, the Group as a whole recognised that this option, being limited to one child income support payment, does not contribute to a better design of the overall child income support system and does not provide for a comprehensive approach to the system of payments supporting families with children. The report also noted that taxation of Child Benefit is also subject to a number of legal questions and in particular the requirement that cohabiting couples with children would not be treated more favourably than married couples with children.

No decision has yet been made by the Government on the core recommendations of the report.

Another issue is how broad an anti-child poverty policy or strategy should range. There is considerable discussion in the literature, including the Irish literature (see Callan et al 2006), about whether child poverty is best addressed by focusing on child-specific measures or on a more general approach to poverty. Attention has been drawn to the approach taken in the Scandinavian countries, for example, where relatively large parts of the benefit system are not child contingent but succeed in keeping children as well as adults out of poverty (Sutherland 2005). One detailed analysis of Ireland in comparative context concluded: "Tackling child income poverty requires a strategy that takes a broad view of welfare income supports, and "activist" measures to increase participation in employment. Solutions lie not with welfare alone, or employment alone, but a combination of both" (Callan et al 2006: 36). I tend to agree that child poverty needs to be tackled by a broad approach, which takes into account a range of benefits, taxes and services but has child-poverty specific measures at its core.

In all of this, the situation of children at special risk needs to be given more attention, even though these sometimes constitute rather small groups. Ethnic minority children (especially Traveller and Roma) are a group who might be prioritized in this regard. Measures might also include separated children (those outside their country of origin who are separated from their parents or caregivers). In Ireland (as elsewhere) these children tend to be of refugee or asylum seeker background. At any one time it is estimated that there are some 200 such children in Ireland.

#### *Areas for Urgent Action*

Ireland needs to develop and apply a consistent policy on income supports for families with children. The diversity and lack of consistency or clear direction in impact of recent policy – and the fact that families with children have been the sector of the population most negatively impacted by reforms and cut-backs – is at odds with a policy approach enabling activation and countering child poverty. Among the good

practices that should be developed are: proofing all proposals for their impact on children's rights in advance of decision-making, with a particular focus on poverty proofing, and the development of clear proposals for the redirection of resources to ensure better income supports, services and better outcomes for children and their families.<sup>7</sup>

## 4. Access to Affordable Quality Services

There are a number of relevant developments to report in this regard. In this section considerable discussion is devoted to ECEC<sup>8</sup> services because these are not only central to the Recommendation but are critical in the Irish case.

### 4.1. Generic Measures/Initiatives

The Children Plus Initiative, which was announced in Budget 2012, is a new initiative funded by the Department of Social Protection to be run jointly with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It has a number of elements. One is to provide 6,000 afterschool childcare places for children in primary schools aimed at low-income families where the parents are availing of an employment opportunity. It also includes a school meals programme. A third component is an Area-based Child Poverty Initiative (known as the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme). Targeted on low-income areas the goal of this programme, building on and continuing the work of an earlier programme, the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), is to provide services and interventions oriented to improve early child development and prevention. The new initiative was allocated €2.5m in Budget 2013. The amount allocated will rise to €4.75 in 2015. A philanthropic organisation, Atlantic Philanthropy, has agreed to co-fund this Initiative. This will mean that the total amount of funding available in 2013-2016 will be €29.7m. The projects involve a range of pilot programmes to improve outcomes in areas such as literacy, speech and language, parenting, health and pro-social behaviour. They rely by and large on evidence-based interventions. The specificity of the Irish approach should be noted. Rather than an initiative such as Sure Start in the UK - which was oriented to resourcing families in low-income communities through the provision of a range of area-based services for children and families and a community development approach - the Irish initiative seems to concentrate on parenting and child-related interventions specifically and limit the catchment group to low-income families and to the provision of a relatively narrow range of services.

A second measure announced in the latest Budget is also directed at the poorest and most needy children. This is the extension of the school food programme to provide food to disadvantaged children in school and pre-school. The aim of the scheme is to provide school meals for children who otherwise would be unable to take full advantage of the education provided due to a lack of food. There are two components to the school meals programme. The first is the Urban School Meals Scheme which is operated by local authorities. The meals provided are in the form of a light snack (e.g., sandwiches or buns and milk). The second component is the School Meals (Local Projects) Scheme through which funding is given directly to national and secondary schools, local groups and voluntary organisations which operate their own school meals projects. In 2004 this provision was extended to nursery schools catering for disadvantaged pre-school children. These meals must be targeted at areas of disadvantage or at children with special needs. Significant extensions of the school meals programme are planned, targeting take-up in the existing schools where the service is provided and increasing the number of participating schools by some 215.

<sup>7</sup> See The Children's Rights Alliance (2013) policy proposals for the forthcoming budget.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the term used in Ireland is ECCE, referring to early childhood care and education.

### **Areas for Urgent Action**

Taken as a whole, the Children Plus Initiative is a very welcome initiative it is suggested that consideration be given to deepening it and certainly extending the Area-based Child Poverty Initiative.

#### **4.2. ECEC**

While very under-developed historically – part of a general tendency of service underdevelopment in Ireland but also closely associated with values around the home and family as the best locus and provider of childcare – concerted efforts were made during the economic boom to put an ECEC infrastructure in place in Ireland. Between 2000 and 2005 for example, the government invested some €500 million in the creation of 32,000 new childcare places and the enhancement of a further 24,500 existing places. This rapid development of the crèche sector increased the choices available to parents but supply shortages and problems around costs and quality remained in many areas. In recognition of this, over the ten year lifetime of National Development Plan (produced in 2006), €1.3 billion were to be allocated to the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP). This operated in the same way as its predecessor (the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme) in providing grant assistance (for costs associated with staffing and/or capital) to community based, not for profit and for profit childcare providers. The Programme had a budget of €575 million and a target of generating a further 50,000 new places, including 5,000 school-age places and 10,000 pre-school places. Had it achieved its targets, Ireland should have been well on the way to achieving the 205,000 childcare places needed to meet the Barcelona targets. The Programme had a strong decentralised focus, run in collaboration with the County Childcare Committees who advise on local needs. However, the recession and economic crisis intervened and progress and resources dried up.

In the latest review of the Barcelona targets, Ireland is one of a small number of countries where the enrolment of children in childcare has fallen (European Commission 2013). This is true for both those aged between three and school age and the youngest age group, and subverts a pattern of continued growth in Ireland between 2006 and 2010 (see graphs 2.2.2 and 2.2.23 in European Commission 2013: 29-30). The enrolment rate of children under three fell by 8 percentage points between 2010 and 2011 which is very large in its own right but also in a context of a general increase in provision for this age group for the EU as a whole. In terms of progress in relation to the achievement of the Barcelona targets, Ireland is close to achieving one (the provision for children aged 3 years and over) but relatively far from achieving the target for the younger age group with only about 20% of the age group in formal childcare in 2011. Moreover, it should be noted that the vast majority of formal childcare in Ireland is part-time in nature with some two-thirds of the provision for less than 30 hours a week. This is the case to an even greater extent in regard to the provision for those aged over 3 years.

When it comes to funding of ECEC, Ireland has favoured an approach that focuses on the supply side. Public funding has primarily taken the form of capital grants to encourage private and community sector provision, rather than public provision. Such funding mainly funds crèches which are defined as 'childcare'. In a context of low and generally limited support for households and individuals combining paid employment with care responsibilities, families (and women especially) rely heavily on relatives and informal arrangements for childcare. However, Ireland has also followed a policy of paying subsidies to encourage or support demand. In 2006 an early childcare supplement was introduced. This consisted of a payment of €1,000 per annum for every child aged under 6 years. Its purpose was to compensate for the higher childcare costs of young children although it was a universal payment paid for every

child under 6 years, regardless of age<sup>9</sup>, place in family or employment status of parents. Estimated to be paid to about a half of all families with children, it represented a further expansion of the structure of child support in Ireland. However, it was abolished in 2009 as part of the cost-cutting moves (and also perhaps because a universal approach was going out of fashion). But Ireland does offer low-income families help with childcare costs. From 2008 to 2010 disadvantaged and low-income families were supported with childcare costs by the Community Childcare Subvention (CCSS). From September 2010 the CCSS was replaced by the improved Community Childcare Subvention Programme, under which increased subvention rates are paid to low-income working parents and those on welfare-based training and education programmes.

When it dropped the early childcare supplement in 2009, the government announced that it was replacing it with an Early Childhood Care and Education scheme which provided a free year of early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age. In general, children are eligible for this scheme if they are aged over 3 years and 2 months and less than 4 years and 7 months on 1 September of the year that they will be starting. This too is universal but it is part-time – consisting of a maximum entitlement of 3 hours per day, 5 days per week, 38 weeks per year. Since its establishment in January 2010, there has been a very positive response to it and data collected in September 2010 reported that some 94% of eligible children were enrolled in ECEC services. This is a very positive development. The state pays a capitation fee to participating playschools and daycare services. In return, they provide a pre-school service free of charge to all children within the qualifying age range for a set number of hours over a set period of weeks. Childcare services taking part in the ECEC scheme must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of *Síolta*, the national framework for early years care and education, and to those of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework. There is, then, in Ireland some movement on ECEC and this is generally in the right direction – in terms for example of aiming for universal free access – and there are also moves to implement the national framework but just one cohort is covered.

In addition to this, there is the Early Start programme - a pre-school programme for 3 and 4 year olds which offers one year of pre-school to children in designated areas of disadvantage. The programme aims to provide children who are most at risk of educational disadvantage with an educational programme that will enhance their development and prevent failure at school. Parents' involvement is one of the core elements of the programme. The Home School Community Liaison coordinator works with the Early Start staff to develop a structured plan to support parents, ranging from initial contact with families to the enrolment of new pupils at open days. A programme of structured activities throughout the year is developed. The purpose of the parents' involvement is to develop the parents as prime educators, providing them with the relevant skills to maximise their child's participation in the pre-school process and thus laying the foundations for future educational achievement.

#### **4.2.1. Strengths and weaknesses**

Starting from a low base, Ireland has struggled to prioritise both early education and childcare and to make sufficient provision in both. Most of its provision falls into the latter category as pre-school has traditionally been optional in Ireland. Hence the investment in early childhood development implied by the Recommendation cannot be said to be strong in Ireland, although the increased investment in these services in low-income areas should be noted. The main form of provision for the under 3s, as Barry (2011) describes it, is largely paid and unpaid relatives, home-based

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<sup>9</sup> The eligibility age was reduced to 5 and a half years and then to 5 years over the life of the supplement.

childminders, and crèches/nurseries on the private marketplace or run by community organisations. With a considerable volume of the childcare in Ireland provided in people's homes, the children may not necessarily get a developmentally-enriching experience.

Another very notable feature of the Irish childcare model is the high cost at the point of receipt. Indeed, on the basis of figures for 2008 Ireland has the distinction of being the member state where parents pay the highest proportion of the average wage for childcare at some 45% (OECD Family Database, Chart P.F.3.4.C). This is for a combination of reasons: childcare fees are very high, public spending on childcare is low (and minimal for the under 3s) and the set of benefits and tax allowances does relatively little to reduce the cost to the average parent. Van Mechelen and Bradshaw (2012) find that when childcare costs are added in to the child benefit package for lone parent families on low earnings, they have the effect of turning the package negative in Ireland (and also in Latvia and Poland). Only in countries where childcare is heavily subsidised – such as the Nordic countries – does the child benefit package remain positive.

One consequence – and another notable feature of the Irish case – is the very steep social class gradient in childcare use in Ireland. For example, when it comes to care of children under three years, only 8% of those in the two lowest income quintiles are in childcare compared with 34% of those in the richest quintile (European Commission 2013: 38). Staff-child ratios are also very high in Ireland. At 19.8 children per full-time staff for the pre-primary school cohort as a whole, Ireland compares badly to the EU-27 average of 13.4 (ibid, p. 40).

Inadequate training and lack of qualifications on the part of those working in the sector is another big problem in the Irish case. For a start, with care by relatives so widespread – recent research on new mothers' patterns of returning to employment after childbirth found that some 42% of the relevant infants were cared for by relatives – lack of formal qualification or training is to be expected (McGinnity et al 2013). The same study found that over 50% of childminders and over 80% of relatives caring for these mothers' children had no childcare-related qualifications. The study also found that care by relatives – frequently a grandmother – was more important for low-income families and younger mothers as compared with other sectors of the population. Qualification levels were highest among centre-based carers, but even here they were relatively low. One in five childcare centre employees had Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) or third-level qualifications in childcare.

The survey undertaken by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2012 sheds further light on the features of Ireland's ECEC provision and how it ranks vis-à-vis that of other countries (Pascal et al 2013). Ireland scores 18<sup>th</sup> overall (out of 43 countries) in terms of the elements considered to constitute quality in provision (comprehensive and effective strategy, clear legal right to preschool, effective subsidies that reach underprivileged families, student/teacher ratio of under 15, well trained teachers, parental involvement in preschool, at least 98% of preschoolers enrolled at age 5/6, well-defined curriculum and health and safety standards, healthy nourished children upon entry). Ireland performs least well in terms of effective subsidies and the level of training of staff. This survey also raises the big issue of affordability, with Ireland in 29<sup>th</sup> position on this criterion.

Administratively, ECEC is fragmented also. The Department of Education is in charge of pre-school provision while the Office of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for early care and education services where that provision is outside of schools. The Health Services Executive (HSE) is responsible for the inspection of childcare services and implementing regulations. A number of institutions

are responsible for training childcare workers (primarily Vocational Educational Colleges and Institutes of Technology). At local level, City and County Childcare Committees were established in 2001 to support childcare services. They mainly offer supports to childcare service providers. Regulation has tended to concentrate on health and safety issues and working conditions rather than the quality of care. Adult-to-child ratios are specified to range from 1:3 for children under one year old in full-time day care; 1:5 for 1-2 year-olds; 1:6 for 2-3 year-olds and 1:8 for children over three (Department of Health and Children 2006). Childminders may not look after more than five pre-school children, including their own, or more than two children younger than 15 months. The regulations are also limited to those caring for three or more children, which excludes many childminders.

### **Areas for Urgent Action**

Ireland needs to put in place a policy for ECEC which attends to: full coverage for the cohorts; equal access for all children and parents, affordability, and training. While there are moves towards a strategy around ECEC, this is under-developed in Ireland. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced in January 2012 that such a strategy was in preparation but it is still not finalised. But there is an earlier document that could help point the way. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2007) published a national policy document on the provision of services for children which emphasises the importance of developing complementary and joined up services for children and their families within local communities. It recommends that all services for children be evidence-based, accessible, effective and sustainable. This document was designed as a 'working tool' to aid the planning and provision of services and the delivery of better outcomes for children and contains recommendations on a 'whole child' approach and 'national service outcomes' for children.

### **4.3. Other Services**

In regard to education services and disadvantaged areas in particular, the main vehicle for improving the educational system's impact on equal opportunities is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. This programme, which focuses on the needs of 3 to 18 year olds from disadvantaged communities provides for a standardised system for identifying levels of disadvantage and an integrated School Support Programme (SSP). Under DEIS schools and school clusters or communities are allocated supplementary resources and supports in line with their concentration of disadvantage. Hence it seeks to counter spatial and individual inequalities

One of the issues associated with DEIS and educational expenditure in Ireland relates to the level of resources. Ireland is a comparatively low spender on education in general, in regard to both ECEC provision and spending on education for those who are disadvantaged. While an increase in capital investment is to take place this year and the education budget has generally been protected from cuts in the recent period, many changes have been made which have significant import for the most vulnerable (for example, many allowances to enable those with low-income to participate in education have been cut back or abolished and special education supports for those with education difficulties have been significantly cut back since the recession period began). It is vital, as NESC (2013) points out, that data is available on the impact of the cuts that have been made, in general and on those in low-income situations in particular.

In terms of other services, health and housing continue to be cut or held at current levels. Continuing a master trend over the last years whereby health spending was cut by some 11% (National Economic and Social Council 2013), health services were again hit in Budget 2013 with cuts of over €780 million (more than 5% of the total

budget for health). On the evidence available, the largest absolute falls in expenditure have been in primary care and the medical card scheme (down 17%) (ibid). Health Service Executive staff numbers decreased by 6% over the four years from 2008 to 2012, and there was a reduction of 4% in the number of clients receiving home help or a home care package. The number of adults waiting more than six months for a procedure increased, with the absolute number just under 12,000. However, many other aspects of HSE services show an increase in the levels of service provided over the four years. For example, there has been a 25% increase in the number of medical-card holders, and a 47% increase in the number with GP-visit-only cards. There has been a 26% increase in the number of day cases (and a corresponding decline in in-patient discharges). However, the evidence presented by NESC (ibid) also suggests a decrease of 12% in grants to outside agencies, with almost half a billion euro less allocated to such agencies in 2008 than in 2011. This is highly likely to affect the level and quality of health-related service provision.

In regard to housing – and especially the provision of social housing – the system of provision is also problematic. Waiting lists are increasing (now standing at some 100,000) as is homelessness. 2013 will see an increase of no more 5,000 units of social housing. In terms of housing-related need, EAPN Ireland (2013b: 7) in their submission on the Structural Funds highlights the following as needing urgent action:

- Growth in housing needs and in the social housing waiting list, currently exceeding 100,000 families;
- Vacant private homes throughout the country;
- Insufficient insulation in both social housing and private houses owned by low-income families compounding the issues of energy inefficiency and fuel poverty.

#### **Areas for Urgent Action**

As I have pointed out on a number of occasions, the cuts to services are not being accompanied by any targets or benchmarks on quality or better value or worked out standards and procedures to protect the most vulnerable. These should be put in place and need to be the focus of a renewed programme of quality services.

## **5. Addressing Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in the European Semester**

Attention in this regard turns to the NRP. There are a number of relevant weaknesses in the Irish NRP. One concerns the relatively weak degree of integration of the poverty and social inclusion objectives into the NRP in general. Weak integration has also been the case for child poverty, which is generally seen as distant from the 'hard' economic and labour market issues. However, of central significance in the developments over the course of the last year - and reflected in the NRP Update for 2013 - is the agreement to update the poverty target and introduce sub-targets for children and jobless households. There has also been an attempt to develop a programme of work relevant to the child poverty sub-target, although this is at an early stage (although this is not mentioned specifically in the NRP Update).

My overall judgement of the NRP process and content in regard to Ireland is that poverty and social exclusion are not that well integrated into it, although there have been some positive moves in that direction over time. A fundamental problem concerns the lack of a clear social strategy and working through of how poverty and social policy more broadly are to be addressed by economic policy. This may be because there is a strong sense that the NRP is treading water in regard to doing anything other than meeting the demands of the Memorandum of Agreement. For this and other reasons, there is a short-term character to the reforms in Ireland (EAPN Ireland 2013a). But there is also the fact that the NRP Update is literally that – an

update (rather than an analysis and reworking) of reforms that are underway. Furthermore, an ongoing omission from Ireland's NRP, especially in the context of radical cut-backs, is targets for services.

Against this backdrop it is possible to identify the obstacles that might hinder the implementation of the Recommendation in Ireland:

- Relatively weak of integration of poverty (in general and in relation to child poverty specifically) into the NRP which is seen primarily as a strategy for fiscal correction and economic growth);
- The fact that child poverty competes with other objectives for limited resources;
- A certain lack of 'ownership' on the part of the current government of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016 (which was put in place by a former government) and other strategies such as the National Children's Strategy;
- The integrated approach underpinning the Recommendation is also a challenge for Ireland where policy tends to be particularised to different domains and problem areas or groups and where income support has a deeper history than service provision.

In my first report this year one of the recommendations I made was that the sub-target for child poverty (as well as that for poverty in jobless households) should be made more precise, augmented by other targets and embedded in a programme of measures developed to address poverty and social exclusion more broadly. I reiterate that here. Furthermore as pointed out already, an elaborated policy on child poverty needs to ensure that there is integration between different measures and symmetry across policy domains (e.g., child-related policy, activation, unemployment, work-family reconciliation, income support policies in general and services). In my view the Recommendation on Investment in Children is exemplary in this respect and could provide the blueprint for taking these issues forward in Ireland. But for this to happen the above obstacles need to be overcome. Targets for services also need to be put in place. Such targets should cover both volume and quality standards. The National Economic and Social Council has undertaken a major review initiative on the topic of achieving quality in a range of types of services (especially in a context of reform) which could help in identifying targets and standards.<sup>10</sup>

In regard to monitoring, I have little information on any new developments, although the Social Inclusion Monitor recently initiated by the Department is a step in the right direction and could be used for the purposes of monitoring the national response to the Recommendation (Department of Social Protection 2013a). In addition, regular dialogue fora involving all key stakeholders are more necessary than ever so as to feed in the social and community sector responses to the NRP and NSR process. The annual social inclusion forum could have a role in this regard. Furthermore, local community-based partnerships for social innovation in child poverty and well-being should be encouraged.

## 6. Mobilising Relevant EU Financial Instruments

The Human Capital Investment Operational Programme (HCI OP) 2007-2013 is Ireland's only ESF-supported programme in the 2007-2013 'round' of Structural Funds, with a total of €375 million in ESF aid allocated to the Programme. The overall funding for the programme, including the State's contribution, now stands at €751 million (Department of Education 2012). The Programme has three priorities: increasing activation in the labour force; increasing participation and reducing inequality in the labour force; technical Assistance. A wide range of activities are funded, including labour and training initiatives for unemployed and long-term

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <http://www.nesc.ie/en/publications/publications/nesc-reports/>

unemployed, undergraduate skills, adult literacy, youthreach, equality mainstreaming and gender equality unemployed as well as migrants and third level access. The number of persons supported in 2012 was up from 2011 at 155,210, (which comprised 73,280 males and 81,930 females), mainly due to an increase in the numbers supported under Skills Training for the unemployed. This figure exceeds the 2013 yearly target for the number of persons supported by the programme.

These obviously all indirectly affect children and directly affect young people. The main children-related funding is towards the cost of childcare to enable participation by those with childcare needs and courses are often organised at times when children are at school. For young people the Gardai Youth diversion projects are specifically devoted to a very young target group (12-17 years old). The cohort of young people who receive benefits from ESF under Sub Measures 2.6 and 2.7 would not easily receive any support or educational intervention from other sources because they are marginalised in the community and may not be admitted to other programmes.

Looking to the future use of the Funds, long-term unemployment should continue to be a major priority. And so also should child poverty and family-work reconciliation. In these regards, this report points to many shortcoming in existing provision and thinking in Ireland. ECEC is one of them and a universalist, affordable and highly skilled system would go a long way to addressing child poverty, in the short- and long-term.

In relation to planning and execution, EAPN Ireland (2013a and 2013b) has expressed concern about the degree of consultation and partnership in relation to the Structural Funds in Ireland. They say that over the years EU funds including Structural Funds have become increasingly more distant from community and voluntary organisations and more difficult to access (EAPN 2013a: 8-9). This is something that also needs to be looked at in the Irish case.

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