

INTRODUCTION

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In 1989 the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and opened it for signature on 20 November 1989. Currently, 194 countries are party to it. Article 27-1 of the UNCRC states that “the state parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”.

The same year the UNCRC was adopted, Canada’s parliament approved an all-party motion that called for the elimination of child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. A decade later, in 1999, the British government committed itself to halving child poverty in ten years and eradicating it in twenty. The British government was willing to see progress measured by a wide range of indicators including absolute and relative incomes, health, housing, crime, lone-parenthood, teen pregnancy and educational achievement.

During the nineties social scientists conducted new research on the subject of child poverty and child well-being, initially predominantly in the US (B.N. Bergmann, 1994; M. Jantti and S. Danziger, 1994; L. Rainwater and T.M. Smeeding, 1995; ...), but by the end of the decade also in Europe¹.

According to UNICEF’s first Innocenti Report Card, published in 2000, this “new interest” appeared to be driven by the “ethical imperative that poverty, and particularly child poverty, is a stain on the record of today’s advanced nations – and one that should not have been allowed to seep into the 21st century”. However, it was also driven, in part by “a growing recognition that many of the other problems confronting today’s industrial societies – from drug abuse and crime to educational underachievement and alienation from common values – are strongly associated with the poverty-amid-prosperity that afflicts a significant proportion of their populations.”

(1) In 1999 a conference was organised by the LIS Cross-national Data-Centre on the subject of “Child poverty and child well-being in industrialised nations”, which was co-financed by the US Government and the European Commission, with the main purpose of bringing US and European experts in this domain together. This conference led to several publications, including UNICEF’s first Innocenti Report Card (2000) and a book edited by Smeeding and Vleminckx (2001).

Until the Lisbon Summit in 2000, children and their families were relatively absent from the European Union's policy agenda. The social inclusion strategy and the Open Method of Coordination allowed children to come in. However, half a decade later the issue of child poverty became much more prominent when the European Council asked the EU member states in its March 2006 Presidency conclusions "to take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background".

EU member states and the European Commission responded to the European Council's challenge with clear commitments to breaking the cycle of deprivation. In their 2006-2008 National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NRSSPSIs), the vast majority of Member States prioritised the need to develop a strategic, integrated and long-term approach to preventing and alleviating poverty and social exclusion among children.

Furthermore, the European Commission and the EU member states chose tackling poverty and social exclusion of children as a key focus for the year 2007 in the context of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on social protection and social inclusion. In 2007 Hugh Frazer and Eric Marlier drafted a synthesis report of an independent overview based on the 2007 first semester national reports of national independent experts on social inclusion: "Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children in the EU – Key lessons". In 2008 the Social Protection Committee endorsed the report "Child poverty and Well-being in the EU: Current Status and Way Forward".

In 2010 the Europe 2020 strategy was adopted and promised to give a new impetus to efforts to address (child) poverty and social exclusion, by setting a common European target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020.

By way of the June 2012 Social Protection Committee advisory report on child poverty and child well-being, as well as the October 2012 EPSCO² Council's conclusions on "Prevention and tackling child poverty and social exclusion and promoting children's well-being", the EU member states reaffirmed their commitment to this issue.

In 2013, the European Commission called on the EU member states to prioritise social investment and to modernise their welfare states. The call features in a "Communication on Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion". The social investment

(2) Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council.

package includes a Commission Recommendation against child poverty³, providing strong arguments for tackling child poverty and calling for an integrated approach to child-friendly social investment (C(2013), 778 final).

In Belgium, the fight against child poverty has increasingly and undeniably become a part of the political agenda on all policy levels. During the last decade various plans on preventing and tackling (child) poverty and social exclusion were drafted at federal, regional, community, and local levels. A first national plan to combat child poverty was presented in June 2013.

However, up to now all these declarations and commitments have unfortunately not been met by results on the ground. On the contrary: in a large majority of EU member states child poverty and the multidimensional 'at-risk-of-poverty' rates for children have increased during the last decade. Also, child poverty in Belgium, statistically speaking, increased significantly between 2009 and 2011. In the majority of EU countries, children are a greater risk of poverty than the total population and, as many EU member states have made progress in reducing pensioner poverty, higher than the poverty rate among the elderly population.

This issue of the Belgian Review of Social Security is dedicated to the prevention and tackling of child poverty and social exclusion and the promotion of children's well-being. Several experts on the subject will react to this striking difference between policy commitment and the lack of results on the ground. Several contributing authors, such as Jonathan Bradshaw and Gosta Esping-Andersen, were among the first Europeans to address the issue.

In the first article, Dominic Richardson, who was OECD's leading family policy expert for about a decade and recently moved to the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, discusses the evolution of child poverty in the OECD member states and explains why efforts to reduce child poverty have not been successful despite innovation in family interventions. He also identifies policies and policy strategies that work in reducing child poverty.

In the second article, Jonathan Bradshaw and Yekaterina Chzhen compare the changes in the under-18 and 65-plus anchored poverty rates over time. As a result, they discuss the shift in poverty from the elderly to the young and the unbalance between social spending on children and the elderly in many EU member states.

(3) European Commission Recommendation, "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage", 20/02/2013, C(2013) 778 final, Brussels.

Frank Vandenbroucke and Julie Vinck explain why Belgium remains a mediocre performer with regard to child poverty by highlighting features in the Belgian welfare edifice which are exceptional when subjected to cross-national comparison. The authors systematically identify Belgium's main policy challenges in addressing the issue of child poverty at both federal and regional (Flanders and Wallonia) level. They also formulate some recommendations for Belgian policy makers.

In the fourth article, Gosta Esping-Andersen discusses the lack of progress in terms of equal opportunities despite many efforts in the pursuit thereof. As what happens in pre-school ages is fundamental for children's ability and motivation to learn when they subsequently embark in formal education, he argues in favour of focusing more on what happens within the family during these early pre-school years.

In the following article, Rense Nieuwenhuis and Laurie C. Maldonado discuss some of the implications of social investment and assess this strategy in order to better respond to the needs of single-parent families. In this research note they present a framework to analyse how social investment policies, implemented by EU member states, stimulate employment and reduce poverty in single-parent families.

In the sixth article, Agata D'Addato, Senior Policy Coordinator at Eurochild, traces the emergence of child poverty on the political agenda of the European Union whilst also outlining the scale of the challenge faced by most EU member states. The article reflects on the progress made in protecting and promoting children's rights and well-being in Europe, emphasising the particular role the EU has played, and can play in the future.

In the final article, Gaëlle Buysschaert, Child Rights Officer of UNICEF Belgium, discusses the extent of child poverty in Belgium and underlines the importance of tackling the vicious circle that damages childhoods and future prospects as well as putting the long-term well-being of our society at risk. She identifies a number of key issues and challenges, and formulates a number of key tasks and policy recommendations for policy makers.

The issue concludes with a summary and conclusion.
