



Mini-Toolkit: Use of the European Social Fund for actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform

Community of Practice on Social Inclusion

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Introduction

This mini-toolkit on the use of the European Social Fund (ESF) for actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children was developed as part of the work of the ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform (2020-2022)¹.

The toolkit draws on exchanges during a peer-to-peer training on programming actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children, held in January 2021, in the context of the emerging European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). It is designed for those managing or implementing the ESF, including managing authorities, intermediate bodies, relevant ministries, public bodies with responsibility for protecting children, stakeholders (in particular children's organisations), and relevant policy and desk officers in the European Commission.

The key objectives of the toolkit are:

- To ensure that the ESF is used to address poverty and social exclusion of children;
- To make key elements of the ESF+ Regulation accessible to relevant actors;
- To provide a good practice checklist to help in designing programmes and preparing calls.

Why is tackling poverty and social exclusion of children a priority?

In 2019, 22.2% (nearly 18 million) of children lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as opposed to 20.9% (around 91 million) for the total population. Growing up in poverty can negatively affect children's opportunities, with far-reaching consequences for their future education, health, participation in the labour market and society. Early interventions to address children at risk of social exclusion or poverty are not only a moral imperative but are also cost-effective. Such interventions should include investing in family and community support, early childhood education and care, and healthcare and social care services.

Digital transformation in education and work has the potential to further disadvantage children from marginalised groups or communities. 'Lockdown' measures during the COVID-19 pandemic strongly highlighted this reality and the need to invest to overcome such disadvantages. The Eurochild report '[Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19](#)' notes that the pandemic has exacerbated problems of social inequality, with job losses pushing many families further into poverty and school closures creating a wider educational divide. These effects had a negative impact on children's life chances, as well as their physical and mental health. The report highlights the lack of national policies to tackle child poverty and emphasises the need for a multi-dimensional approach. EU action is required to combat poverty and social exclusion of children. This will be addressed by the ESF+, notably through the requirement for Member States with an

¹ The Platform comprises four Communities of Practice (CoP): 1) Employment, education and skills, 2) Social inclusion, 3) Results-based management, and 4) Social innovation. These CoPs enable ESF managing authorities (MAs), intermediate bodies, expert and sectoral stakeholders to exchange knowledge, practices and experiences, and to deepen cooperation. The Social Inclusion CoP promotes social inclusion and combating poverty in a holistic manner. It works to integrate marginalised communities, tackle discrimination, enhance accessible, affordable and quality community-based services, and promotes the social economy and community-led development strategies. The CoP focuses on three sub-themes: Poverty and Social Exclusion of Children, Deinstitutionalisation, and Homelessness.

average child poverty rate above the 2017-2019 EU average² to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ financial resources under shared management for this purpose and all other Member States are required to provide an adequate amount. Funding will also be provided by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and its 6th pillar: 'Policies for the next generation, children and youth, including education and skills'.

The social inclusion and well-being of children and the promotion of children's rights are increasingly prominent in EU policy. The [2013 EU Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage'](#) offered a clear framework for the Commission and Member States to develop policies and programmes to promote the social inclusion and well-being of vulnerable children. Since then, principle 11 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) has reinforced the importance of promoting children's rights, as does the recent adoption of an [EU Child Guarantee](#), on 14 June 2021³. The ESF+ can provide concrete support to address poverty and social exclusion of children.

This mini-toolkit is divided into three sections:

1	Lessons learned from measures funded under the ESF and case studies	2	ESF+ Regulation and funding (2021-2027)	3	A checklist to programme actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children
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1. Lessons learned from measures funded under the ESF and case studies

Key lessons from the ESF should be considered for actions funded under the ESF+. The transnational exchanges and case studies during the January 2021 peer-to-peer training highlighted the following:

- Pay attention on the needs of the whole family, via family support, targeting adults, children and early intervention.
- Actions need to fit within national child poverty and inclusion strategies and policies.
- Focus on the most vulnerable groups, such as children from single parent families, homeless people, Roma/travellers, migrants, families already in contact with social services, children growing up in families experiencing long-term unemployment and children living in alternative care.
- Combine a universal approach that aims to provide all children with access to essential goods and services, with additional targeting for children in particularly vulnerable situations. Use integrated and person-centred approaches that focus on the needs of each child and address all relevant aspects, while engaging a range of local service providers in a partnership and multi-disciplinary approach.

² BG, CY, EL, HU, IE, IT, LT, RO, ES, HR and LU

³ Following the adoption of the EU Child Guarantee, the EU Member States should prepare – together with key stakeholders – national action plans on how to implement the Child Guarantee. They should nominate national coordinators and publish progress reports every two years. The Commission will monitor progress in the context of the European Semester, the framework for coordinating social and economic policies across the EU. Where the Commission sees a need for Member States to act, it will issue country-specific recommendations.

- Early intervention is key to successful strategies.
- Actions should be designed to be sustainable beyond ESF funding – they should be lasting and linked to key policies.

Two case studies presented at the peer-to-peer training illustrate these key aspects in addressing poverty and social exclusion of children.

Case study: Hela Familjen project (Whole Family Project) Malmö, Sweden



The Whole Family Project in Malmö ran from 2017 to 2019. The total project funding was EUR 3.09 million, with EUR 1.45 million from the ESF. Supporting parents to obtain work or training reduces children's vulnerability and social exclusion, thus the project sought to reduce child poverty by helping parents to (re-) enter the labour market and become self-sufficient. The target group was families with children in receipt of income support for a minimum of 24 months (long-term unemployed).

The project's holistic approach took account of the needs of the whole family. A social worker met the family regularly, identified each family member's needs and coordinated social services, employment services and primary care services. The project reached 817 families (36% more than the planned 600), with 167 adults gaining employment, 187 families achieving self-sufficiency, and children's school results improving. The project was mainstreamed as a city service as part of Malmö's support for the whole family.

Case study: National Project Support for the Deinstitutionalisation of Substitute Care in Facilities, Slovakia



This national project was part of the 'Operational Programme: Human Resources', run by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in partnership with the Centres for Children and Families (State and non-state) and Crisis Centres. The project cost over EUR 6 million and ran in eight regions in Slovakia from October 2017 to August 2019.

The project sought to transform and deinstitutionalise childcare through structural and innovative changes in the social and legal protection facilities for children and social guardianship. It targeted children and families involved in situations of socio-legal protection or guardianship, as well as employees of relevant services. The project aimed to:

- Develop selected measures for the social-legal protection of children and social guardianship;
- Develop lifelong learning for staff of centres for children and families and crisis centres;
- Create professional teams and improve professional activity;
- Create programmes and activities for clients during the process of deinstitutionalisation.

Key project activities were:

1. Support programmes and activities working with children and their families.
2. Work with the children and families in their natural family environment.

3. Create and implement programmes for work with children placed in Children's or Crisis Centres.
4. Update and implement Children's Centre and Crisis Centre transformation plans.
5. Use of a handbook for Centre employees to raise awareness of the benefits of diversity and prevent discrimination, racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.
6. Create awareness of transformation and deinstitutionalisation through information campaigns and exchanges of experience.
7. Evaluate the project.

By supporting the families, the project increased the number of children raised in their own families and worked towards deinstitutionalisation.

Other examples of ESF support in addressing poverty and social exclusion of children

Many investment priorities under the ESF have enabled projects and actions targeting children and carers. Other examples at the peer-to-peer training included:

- Czechia: ESF funding was used to set up an early childhood education and care infrastructure in a hospital. More than 70 hospital employees returned to the workplace as a result of access to childcare while they work⁴.
- Italy: The *LaFemMe* project (financed by Italy's Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, with support from the ESF) offers employees and employers training and counselling on work-life balance, improving employee well-being and productivity and increasing men's uptake of work-life balance measures⁵.
- Poland: The ESF funding created care places for children up to three years of age. It adapted childcare facilities to meet the needs of children with disabilities, trained professionals, created new care places and supported the employment of parents. In addition, the *Maluch Plus* national programme provides substantial funds to encourage local governments to establish crèches and kids clubs. It will be merged with ESF funding to facilitate allocation of funds to municipalities with an ongoing need for nursery places.
- Portugal: The ESF supported training for over 900 people from local teams and professionals working in the national early intervention system. These medical and nursing staff, psychologists, therapists and social workers support the multi-dimensional needs of children and their families.

The peer-to-peer training identified key mechanisms in tackling poverty and social exclusion of children. These key lessons can inform the programming of actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children (see section 3).

⁴ European Commission (2019), Work-life balance for all: best practice examples from EU Member States. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&furtherPubs=yes&langId=en&pubId=8212>

⁵ Ibid.

2. ESF+ Regulation (2021-2027)

The Regulation of the ESF+⁶ provides a broader scope of funding opportunities than its predecessor and should encourage greater investment and more projects addressing the social inclusion of children. This section of the toolkit identifies important dimensions of the ESF+ Regulation that support the use of ESF funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion of children.

The integration of the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) into the ESF+ should allow greater synergies between this Fund, which has been used to address child poverty, and the ESF+. With an overall financial envelope of nearly EUR 99 billion (in current prices), the ESF+ will support investment in job creation, education and training, as well as social inclusion, access to healthcare, and measures for eradicating poverty in the EU. It also aligns the ESF+ with the European Semester, as projects financed by the fund must address the challenges identified in the annual Country-Specific Recommendations. The ESF+ also links to National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

In January 2021, the European Parliament and EU Member States in the Council agreed the Commission's proposal for a Regulation on the ESF+ 2021-2027. Under the 'N+2' rule, spending can continue for up to two years after its allocation period (i.e. to 2029). Key elements from the Regulation in respect of tackling child poverty include:

Legal basis: The legal basis for the ESF+ includes Article 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, with its clauses: j) the combat of social exclusion, and k) the modernisation of social protection systems. This broadens the scope of ESF+ to social inclusion other than simply employment. The ESF is given prominence in supporting the implementation of all 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (including principle 11 on Childcare and support to children), which strengthens the case for support for actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children.

Enabling conditions⁷: The specific objective on [active inclusion](#) requires Member States to have national strategies against poverty and social exclusion (addressing child poverty and homelessness) if they are to qualify for funding under the ESF+. The ESF+ should promote the transition from residential/institutional care to family and community-based care, in particular for those who face multiple discrimination.

Specific objectives: Several specific objectives support the use of the ESF+ for children, notably:

(f) promoting equal access to and completion of quality and inclusive education and training, in particular for disadvantaged groups, from early childhood education and care through general and vocational education and training, to tertiary level, as well as adult education and learning, including facilitating learning mobility for all and accessibility for persons with disabilities;

(i) promoting socio-economic integration of third country nationals, including migrants;

(j) promoting the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people;

(k) enhancing equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, including services that promote access to housing and person-centred care including

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2021/1057, available at : <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1057>

⁷ Annex IV CPR, Regulation 2021/1060, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021R1060&qid=1625061592831&from=FR>

healthcare; modernising social protection systems, including promoting access to social protection, with a particular focus on children and disadvantaged groups; improving accessibility including for persons with disabilities, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services;

(l) promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children;

(m) addressing material deprivation through food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived persons, including children, and providing accompanying measures supporting their social inclusion.

Thematic concentration: Social inequality remains a major concern. At least 25% of resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management will be allocated to fostering social inclusion, progressing the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and ensuring that a minimum amount of resources targets those most in need. In addition, Member States should allocate a minimum amount corresponding to 3% of their ESF+ resources to fund measures addressing material deprivation.

The Regulation obliges all Member States to support structural changes and reforms to address poverty and social exclusion of children. Member States with an average child poverty rate above the 2017-2019 EU average (23.4%) must earmark at least 5% of their ESF+ financial resources for this purpose.

3. Checklist: programming actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children

The ESF+ may contribute to the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee, which aims to ensure that all children in Europe who are at risk of poverty, social exclusion, or otherwise disadvantaged, have access to good quality essential services. It specifically highlights early childhood education and care, healthcare, education, nutrition, housing, culture and leisure activities⁸.

Funding under the ESF+ may be used to test or upscale initiatives to improve access to these services, or to enable more effective use of national, regional, and local budgets. The ESF+ should be used to help Member States to develop new/improved mainline services/programmes to better reach children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

This section provides a checklist for those designing programmes and preparing calls to ensure effective use of the ESF+ in line with knowledge and good practice in combating child poverty and social exclusion. The following questions to consider build on the reflections during the peer-to-peer training that took place in January 2021.

⁸ Frazer, H., Guio, A-C. and Marlier, E. (eds) (2020). Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee: Final Report, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c312c468-c7e0-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



Setting objectives

- Does the programme identify objectives and investment priorities that support actions to address poverty and social exclusion of children? Does it include a strategic vision that will support a range of family and community-based responses?
- Are the objectives backed up by relevant data? Is there evidence of a thorough analysis taking into consideration national, regional, and local levels of poverty and social exclusion of children?
- Have participatory research methods been used to support and refine the definition of objectives (e.g. survey and interviews with children, engagement of all relevant actors, taking account of academic insights)?
- Does the programme consider risk factors for poverty and social exclusion of children at individual, family and community level?
- Have evaluations from other programmes or projects been considered?
- Is there evidence of coordination between ministries and services that will encourage integrated responses to the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion of children?
- Are clear objectives outlined that can facilitate programmes and actions to support a wide range of measures, depending on local or regional needs?
- Will the objectives contribute to ensuring that children at risk of poverty can access their rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), while supporting the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (inclusive societies for children, fight child poverty, emphasises child participation)?
- Do the objectives focus on helping Member States to develop new/improved mainstream services/programmes to better reach children at risk of poverty or social exclusion?
- Can the objectives be measured via a set of indicators?



Identifying the target group

- Is there a focus on the most vulnerable groups, including children from single parent families, Roma/Travellers, homeless people, third-country nationals and migrants, children in alternative care, families already in contact with social services or children growing up in families experiencing long-term unemployment, within a vision of universal access for all children?
- Does the approach address the needs of children experiencing multiple discrimination? Does it include a gender-based analysis?
- Is the selection of the target groups backed by reliable data and needs-based assessment?
- Does the strategy allow for an action plan that responds to the needs of children, their families, and communities, in geographical areas experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation?
- Are the target groups identified through a local, place-based approach, involving practitioners, such as professionals working in local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), schools, health and social services, including social workers, who can identify groups needing increased support and early intervention?
- Is there evidence that the programme is comprehensive, integrated, tailored to local and individual needs, and located close to the children targeted?



Comprehensive approach

- Do the objectives, investment priorities, and calls for projects allow for a whole family approach?
- Are children recognised as experts in their own lives? Have children been invited to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of projects aiming to impact on their lives?
- In addition to inclusive employment, does the programming address access to services such as housing, healthcare, nutrition, early childhood education and care, education, and access to culture?
- Will the approach strengthen strategic and planning capacities at national and local levels, including reform of education, social inclusion, health and child welfare and protection systems?
- Does capacity-building and skills training for professionals working with vulnerable children and families reflect deinstitutionalisation and development of home care and community-based care services?
- Is synergy envisaged between different funds, such as the use of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to improve public transport, housing and school equipment/infrastructure, while the ESF+ could be used to invest in human resources, and the FEAD in supporting basic needs?



Partnership and consultation

- Are stakeholders (local authorities, social partners, NGOs, advisory bodies, schools, social workers, academics) involved in selecting objectives and designing programming and actions?⁹
- Will end-beneficiaries (families and children) be directly involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the actions? ¹⁰
- Have trained staff used to working with children experiencing disadvantage been involved in developing the strategies and actions?
- Can NGOs, social partners and other relevant actors access funds in order to be directly involved in the delivery of programmes and actions? Are the requirements to deliver programmes and actions user-friendly?
- Are there opportunities for constructive criticism to enable better delivery of ESF+?
- Is the [European Code of Conduct on Partnership](#) respected?

⁹ ESF Transnational Platform (2018) Review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d26c92e2-9abc-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

¹⁰ ESF Transnational Platform (2018) Enhancing the role of Co-Production: Enhancing the Role of citizens in governance and service delivery <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/publications>



Respecting the enabling conditions

- Do the key documents (Partnership Agreements and Programmes) include a clear link to local and national strategies and policies to fight poverty and social exclusion of children? Are they backed by comprehensive disaggregated data and indicators?
- Is there evidence of equality and non-discrimination mainstreaming? Is there evidence that stigmatisation of children, families or communities is avoided?
- Will the strategies and actions promote the shift from institutional to community-based care and avoid segregation or isolation from communities and services?¹¹
- Are mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with the UNCRC, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights?
- Are the actions in line with national strategic frameworks for gender equality and Roma integration?



Sustainability

- Are the actions linked to a long-term vision based on national strategies and policies? Are they designed to continue after ESF+ funding ends?
- Are services/programmes new or improved? Will they better reach children at risk of poverty? Are they transferable? Will they mainstream the lessons learned?
- Are projects long enough (at least two to three years) to learn lessons and establish links with mainstream programmes?
- Does it include a public awareness campaign and/or engagement of political representatives?
- Does it prioritise investment in mutual learning, dissemination of good practice and engagement in transnational networking?



Indicators, monitoring and evaluation

- Is there a monitoring or evaluation framework setting out the method, data requirements, timeframe and budget to monitor actions?
- Does the framework include cooperation arrangements in respect of its design, implementation, monitoring, and review?
- Do the indicators include both hard (numbers starting and completing a training course, numbers accessing services, numbers moving into accommodation) and soft (improved levels of self-esteem, increased levels of trust, perceived well-being of families and children) indicators?
- Do the indicators reflect progress in moving from institutional to community-based care?

¹¹ European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care (2014) Toolkit on the Use of EU Funds for the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care
<https://deinstitutionalisationdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/toolkit-10-22-2014-update-web.pdf>

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