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## Reimagining Child Welfare – Structural Solutions to Combat Child Poverty in High-Income Countries

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Child poverty persists in high-income countries despite strong welfare systems, highlighting the need for policy innovation.

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National policies play a decisive role, but must be reinforced by locally tailored, integrated services that address families' real-life circumstances.

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Intergenerational inequality and in-work poverty reveal that employment alone doesn't ensure child well-being – stronger social protection is essential.

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Universal child benefits, coordinated services, and investment in the care workforce are critical to building equitable and resilient systems for children.

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## Introduction

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Despite comprehensive welfare systems and historically high public investment in social services, child poverty continues to persist – and in many cases grow – across high-income countries. This paradox was central to an expert meeting convened under the Horizon Europe Mapineq project (Mapping Inequalities Through the Life Course), which brought together academics, policymakers, and civil society representatives to examine the structural drivers of child poverty and identify promising solutions.

Participants included **Christina Boll** (German Youth Institute DJI), **Olivier Bontout** (European Commission), **Jonathan Bradshaw** (University of York), **Naomi Eisenstadt** (Independent Advisor), **Ludovica Gambaro** (German Federal Institute for Population Research), **Jani Erola** (University of Turku), **Markus Jäntti** (University of Stockholm), **Daniel Molinuevo** (Eurofound), **Alba Lanau** (Pompeu Fabra University), **Eirin Mølland** (University of Agder and NORCE), **Natalie Picken** (RAND Europe), **Kate Pickett** (University of York), **Francesca Pisanu** (Eurochild), **Mathis Porchez** (European Commission), **Tiina Ristikari** (Family Federation of Finland – Väestöliitto), and **Antonia Torrens** (COFACE Families Europe).

What more can be done at both national and local levels to alleviate child poverty? Drawing on data, comparative research, and policy experiences, the meeting deepened understanding of the challenges and outlined policy options to ensure equitable childhoods in wealthy societies. Key recommendations include the introduction of universal child benefits and enhanced service coordination at the local level.

## National Structures and the Persistence of Child Poverty

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A key insight emerging from the Mapineq project is the dominant role of national policies and opportunity structures in shaping child poverty outcomes.

Although local factors – such as regional GDP, employment rates, and housing markets – appear influential, their effect diminishes significantly once national disparities are taken into account (Jäntti & Karonen, 2025). Likewise, while parental education and family structure affect children's future income and living standards, the impact varies by country and is only weakly attributable to within-country differences (Heiskala et al., 2024).

These results challenge assumptions that regional disparities, including urban-rural divides or housing costs, are primary drivers of child poverty. Instead, they affirm that national governments retain the most significant influence and must be held accountable for systemic change.

Nonetheless, this does not diminish the importance of local implementation or the role of civil society organisations. It also does not ignore differences in rural and urban settings, with decreases in child poverty in the EU being largely driven by improvements in rural Europe (Eurofound, 2023). Rather, it underscores the need for strong national frameworks to be complemented by context-sensitive, locally tailored delivery mechanisms. As participants in this meeting emphasised, the effectiveness of policy often depends on its responsiveness to local needs, demographics, and institutional capacities.

## The Role of Parental Resources and Intergenerational Inequality

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Intergenerational inequality also emerged as a key theme during the meeting. A Mapineq study confirmed the critical influence of parental economic resources – particularly during critical developmental stages – on children's educational outcomes and long-term prospects. Financial hardship during childhood leads to lasting disadvantages that are hard to overcome later in life (Jäntti & Karonen, 2025).

In Sweden, for example, children from low-income families who were affected by the 1990s economic crisis were significantly less likely to attain higher education than their peers. This illustrates how structural shocks can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities, highlighting the need for resilient welfare systems that anticipate such vulnerabilities (Jäntti & Karonen, 2025). In Norway, evidence from low-income households indicates that there are mental health disparities between children from immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds, with native children exhibiting higher psychological difficulties across multiple indicators (Bøe et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in many countries – including Spain and the UK – a significant number of children living in poverty come from households where at least one adult is employed. This disconnect between employment and adequate living standards points to the prevalence of low wages and weak social protection. Labour market participation alone does not guarantee economic security; contributing factors include insecure employment, part-time or underpaid work, and limited access to additional support. These findings

are consistent with broader evidence showing that high levels of inequality hinder social mobility.

## Limitations of Current Policies and Gaps in Service Delivery

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Although many high-income countries (and most of European countries) offer a mix of income support and in-kind services for families, these measures frequently fall short due to inefficiencies and fragmented service delivery. This is particularly critical in terms of take-up of benefits. Evidence suggest that countries providing unconditional and automatic transfers typically see higher benefit uptake and improved child outcomes (Bennett, 2024), in contrast to those relying on targeted schemes such as Spain. Where universal benefits are absent, take-up is often hindered by complex administrative procedures, lack of information, or stigma linked to means-testing.

To improve access, governments should consider implementing digital one-stop portals – a single online platform through which families can access childcare, housing assistance, family counselling, and more. Estonia provides a leading example in this regard, as its integrated digital government system enables citizens to manage everything from medical records to child benefit claims online.

Another significant shortcoming is the weak coordination between adult- and child-focused services. For instance, job centres, health services, and housing programmes often fail to consider the needs of children within family units. This siloed approach leaves families facing hardships, such as unemployment, illness, or housing instability, without receiving consistent support for their children.

It is also vital to prioritise prevention over a reactive response. Even interventions in early childhood are sometimes too late to have a transformative impact. To ensure interventions are timely and effective, greater attention must be paid to upstream drivers – what Michael Marmot terms “the causes of the causes” (2018).

## Local Approaches to Integrated Family Support

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While national policy remains critical, the meeting also highlighted the value of local innovation. Promising initiatives illustrate how integrated, multi-agency service models

can provide families with a more holistic support. These efforts involve cooperation between schools, health centres, social workers, and NGOs to deliver coordinated support that is tailored to families' lived experiences and children's well-being (Eurochild, 2024).

In Finland, early childhood educators in selected cities received training to recognise and respond to broader family circumstances. By collaborating more closely with adult services, these educators were able to intervene more effectively and prevent negative outcomes such as neglect or disengagement from school. In England, a government-backed pilot supported alternative provision schools to hire teams of seconded specialists from local services and agencies, who worked together to provide joined-up assessment and support to vulnerable children and their families (Picken et al, forthcoming).

Other notable examples include the “House of the Child” centres in Belgium, which have now been widely adopted in Brussels and Germany. These centres integrate early childhood education with family support services. Estonia's family centres, supported in part by the European Social Fund, offer universal and targeted support for families with young children. These models share several features: universal, stigma-free access; proactive outreach; and place-based delivery that responds to local needs.

However, participants cautioned against over-reliance on local responses without adequate national investment. In Spain, for example, extensive decentralisation without sufficient funding risks creating severe disparities between regions. This reinforces the importance of balancing national guarantees with local flexibility.

## Policy Recommendations

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The discussions produced a strong consensus on the need for structural reforms, particularly in countries that lack universal child benefits. Temporary or fragmented measures are insufficient; countries must instead adopt long-term strategies that combine income support, integrated services and child rights-based frameworks. The European Child Guarantee offers a promising basis for such reforms.

- Maintain and expand universal child benefits. These must be adequately funded, fairly generous and based on automatic enrolment mechanisms using existing data systems to ensure that no child is excluded. Where targeted, means-tested additional support is

necessary, it should complement, not substitute, universal entitlements.

- Invest in child-centred services. Cross-sectoral coordination involving government agencies and civil society organisations is essential to improve access to benefits such as affordable housing, early education, healthcare, and school meals. These services should be designed using a family systems approach to support those already experiencing hardship.
- Address in-work poverty. Labour market policies should tackle the growing issue of working poverty. Key to improving families' financial security is ensuring decent employment, raising minimum wages, and promoting work-life balance.
- Invest in the workforce supporting children and their families. Rising demand must be met with adequate resources. Shortages in professions such as social work, education, and child psychology reduce the quality and availability of support. Improvements in training, working conditions, and funding are essential.
- Enhance data availability. More effort is needed to make NUTS3-level and sub-NUTS3-level data accessible, to enable more precise monitoring of the impact of policies at both national and local levels.

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